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## GENERAL BEAUREGARD AND THE COLONEL RHETT CONTROVERSY

H. NEWCOMB MORSE

An interpretation was placed upon a letter published by General P. G. T. Beauregard in 1872 by R. B. Rhett, Jr., formerly the editor of the Charleston *Mercury* but then the editor of the New Orleans *Picayune*, as critical of the conduct of Rhett's brother, Colonel Alfred Rhett, at the Second Battle of Fort Sumter nine years earlier in that the Colonel was overly anxious to abandon the Fort. Colonel Rhett had remained in command of Fort Sumter until September 4, 1863. If this construction of the letter had credence, it was a serious allegation as it implied cowardice on the part of an officer in the face of the enemy.

Of this incident historian T. Harry Williams of Louisiana State University in his 1955 book *P. G. T. Beauregard—Napoleon in Gray* remarks: "The officers of Sumter were disagreed as to how long it could be held, with Rhett more pessimistic than the others." Propositions proposed for consideration at a council of officers held at Fort Sumter on August 24, 1863, and Colonel Rhett's responses thereto are recounted in Colonel Alfred Roman's 1884 work *The Military Operations of General Beauregard*. One proposition was "The present offensive condition of the fort." Colonel Rhett's assessment was "In action would be *impracticable* to use but one gun—the 11-inch—and that would soon be disabled." Another proposition was "Can offensive power still be given to these guns by additional cover and change of location?" The Colonel's evaluation was "Would like to see it carried out, but consider it *impracticable*." (Emphasis supplied.)

Editor Rhett wrote to General Beauregard on June 2, 1872, protesting the latter's letter. The General answered Rhett's letter. Then Rhett wrote to General Beauregard again from Huntsville, Alabama, on June 12, 1872. The General penciled a notation at the foot of the letter—"My Dear Col. Don't you think it would be better to let it slip? My regards to you. Yours truly G. T. Beauregard"—and returned the letter to Rhett.

° Professor of Law at Pepperdine University, Anaheim, California. He holds a J. D. degree from Tulane University, LL.M. from the University of Wisconsin and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences.

whether they are to become the willing instruments of an unhal-  
lowed despotism. In such a sacred cause, South Carolina will feel  
that she is not striking for her own, but the liberties of the Union  
and the RIGHTS OF MAN.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Marshall to Story June 3, 1833, quoted in Beveridge, *Life of John Marshall*,  
4: 476; Hayne quoted in *ibid.*, p. 565.

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## QUERIES

*Inquiries are published upon advance payment: members: \$2.50 for first fifty words, ten cents each additional; non-members: \$5.00 for first fifty, ten cents each additional.*

George Trask, 1200 Standard Federal Building, Atlanta, Georgia 30303, seeks letters, photographs, etc., about Tabby Manse (circa 1786), his residence on Bay Street, Beaufort, South Carolina. Information is also desired on the pre-Civil War family of Thomas Fuller (1760-1830) and his wife Elizabeth Middleton (1761-1811), and the post-Civil War family of Mansfield French (1810-1876) and his wife Austa Winchell (1810-1880), who owned Tabby Manse. Especially sought is a copy of Thomas Fuller's manuscript autobiography.

Need anc of John JENNINGS b 1730s Camden Dist SC. Also son John b ca 1761 Camden Dist, Patriot, m ca 1797 to Mary GRUBBS Fairfield Co SC mov GA TN. She d ca 1816. Some desc mov MO ca 1820 TX ca 1847. Her f Enoch GRUBBS, Patriot, b ca 1755, m ca 1775 d 1832 Fairfield Co SC. J. Bland Pope, 8107 East Court, Austin, TX 78759.

Miss Mena Hazzard, 9125 S. W. 72nd Ave., Apt G-2, Miami, Fl. 33156, requests information on Cecilia Inglesby, (nee Smith, 1803, Eutaw Area) Daughter of Henry Smith and Miriam Bealer; decended from Landgrave Thomas Smith. Any other pertinent information would be appreciated.

Huntsville, Ala., 12 June 1872

Dear Sir:

For your prompt reply to my request of the 2nd inst., please accept my thanks—

It is proper for me to say, my letter to you was written without consultation with Col. Alfred Rhett and without his knowledge. He is living on So. Carolina off in the country, and to refer to him must necessarily consume time. I myself, though cognizant of much that took place, have no recollection of the official communication you mention. Col. Rhett, however, is the last man to disavow any act of his, or to avoid the legitimate force of facts, and I shall, as you suggest, refer to him. Yet, before writing to him on this subject. I would be pleased to understand from you, whether the communication you speak of, in which he informed you officially in his name and that of his principal subordinate officers that the fort was no longer tenable, was made by him in the shape of a written report or a telegram.

In reference to myself, if the private letter from Col. Rhett to me, brought to you without his knowledge or consent at Mr. Mills' house (at midday), be held as ground for your published statement, I wish to know it; and, since nine years have nearly elapsed, I should like to refresh my memory as to the terms in which it is couched—its entire scope and effect. I, therefore, request, as a matter of justice to me, that, if the language be in your possession or within your reach (which your quotation leads me to infer) you will oblige me with a copy of that private letter.

I have frankly approached you, to ascertain fully and exactly the grounds of your statement, with a view to a thorough understanding of the transactions of 1863 in Charleston harbor in their true bearing and complete significance; and, for your compliance with the requests of this letter, I shall be glad to render you further acknowledgements.

Believe me, dear sir.

Very truly yours,

R. B. Rhett, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

General Beauregard wrote to four of his former officers who had served at the Second Battle of Fort Sumter, soliciting their recollections of the Battle and their estimations of Colonel Rhett's performance:

<sup>1</sup> The originals of this letter and the four following ones are owned by the author.

Doctors J. Dickson Bruns and Sam Choppin; Colonel Alfred Roman, his former Inspector General; and General Thomas Jordan, his former Chief of Staff. Doctors Bruns and Choppin responded from New Orleans on June 6, 1872; Colonel Roman replied in French from St. James on June 23, 1872; and General Jordan responded from New York City on October 28, 1872. These letters are quoted below.

New Orleans, June 6th 1872

Dear Gen.:

I have just received your note, enclosing a communication to you from my friend Col. R. B. Rhett, Jr.

You asked me to tell you what I know about the subject referred to in Col. Rhett's letter, and I hasten, as far as memory serves, to comply with your wish.

I was in Charleston at the time Col. Alfred Rhett's command was withdrawn from Fort Sumter. My relations with Col. Alfred Rhett, and with his brother R. B. Rhett, Jr. (then Editor of the Charleston Mercury), were, as they have always continued to be, of an intimate and most friendly character.

It was impossible for me, at that juncture, to have any communication with Col. Alfred Rhett; but I was in daily and close intercourse with his brother, R. B. Rhett, Jr., and sympathized cordially with his anxiety.

The feeling in the City was one of deep gloom. The loss of Fort Sumter was looked upon as deciding the fate of Charleston, and the fears entertained concerning the fate of the garrison and of the city were very grave.

My feelings, personally, were of the gloomiest. I knew better than most men what the temper of Col. Rhett's courage and tenacity was. I had seen both tried more than once, and under the severest ordeal had found both proof. He had told me, before the first attack of the "Iron-clads"—April 7th, 1863, I think—when the problem of the capacity of masonry forts to withstand such armament was yet untried, that he "would fight the fort very low down." How he had kept his word the leveled ruins of Sumter, behind which he lay with his brave garrison, was a sufficient and glorious answer.

What his own views were concerning the tenability of the post I had no means of ascertaining, and I do not remember to have conversed with him on the subject since; but I remember distinctly that Col. R. B. Rhett, Jr. looked upon the attempt to hold Sumter as a hopeless one, involving almost certainly the sacrifice of the garrison—and I believe that, with a very natural solicitude, he urged these views upon you.

This belief I shared, at that time, fully, and it was with a feeling of deep relief that I soon after learned that Col. Rhett had been withdrawn, and infantry substituted in the place of artillerists who were deprived of their only natural weapon—their guns—by which they had gallantly stood until the last one had been silenced.

I am, dear Sir, with great respect,

Very truly yours

J. Dickson Bruns

N. O. June 6th 1872

My dear General:

Your vote of the 5th inst. is at hand and I hasten to reply—My recollections of the Memorable Circumstances in question are very clear and substantiate the views expressed by you in the N. O. Times of the 17th April 1872. After the Enemy had taken possession of Morris Island in July 1863, and had, by the combined efforts of their Land and Naval Batteries, reduced Fort Sumter to a mass of crumbling ruins, it was represented to you by the officers in command of the Fort, that it was no longer tenable. Your inner defenses of the Harbor not being completed you deemed it of the utmost importance that “Sumpter” should be held, at all hazards, until their completion. And you substituted an infantry force under the Command of Major Stephen Elliott, to the force of Artillery which had so gallantly defended the Fort to that Moment.

Yours truly

Sam Choppin

[a translation]

Saint Jacques, 23 June 1872

My dear General:

Your letter and the papers accompanying it have just reached me several days ago. I was awaiting such an occasion to answer you—which I find today—so that I may transmit my response.

I have only indistinct remembrances about the subject matter of your communication and I do not believe I should recall it in any manner under the present circumstances. As inclined as I am to support your viewpoint, it is no less true that I would be in ill grace to state it in writing and to furnish thus indirectly a testimony which would have the appearance of militating either against Mr. R. B. Rhett, Jr.

or against his brother Colonel Alfred Rhett. I know well that this is not what you desire of me. I know you well enough to entertain the same idea. I only see that the effect of the testimony which I would give you at your request would have this result in the eyes of my brothers-in-law<sup>2</sup> and that therefore it is my duty to remain strictly neutral. However, I take pleasure in saying and I am not afraid to proclaim it from the house tops that as heroic the defense of Sumter may have been by the officers and troops stationed there, before and after the evacuation of the heavy artillery, that it is only owed to Col. Harris, his indomitable energy and his proven perseverance that Sumter was not abandoned until it was nothing but a piece of smoking ruins and that under the murderous fire of the enemy (premorse but no longer biting) it rebuilt itself in a manner of speaking and became no longer a fort of bricks but one of rubble and iron. One of the officers whom I admired most during the War and whom I have often placed, with regard to his sphere of action, on a level with Jackson, and on your own level, was Colonel D. B. Harris. However, had not death come to steal him from the "Lost Cause," even when he began to believe in it himself and dared to inspire himself with his particular views, I believe that, late as it may have been at that time, he would have rendered great service to his country—I love to say of Col. Harris—and this is nothing but justice—that I have never seen a braver, calmer, and more sincerely modest man than he; and that few, very few, of the Confederate officers, no matter how highly placed, have shown themselves similarly capable and so worthy of their country's confidence as the one whose motto was: "The path of duty is the safest of all."

Were I with you at this moment I would chat more freely about all with you. But you understand my position; it is more than delicate to my feelings and imposes silence upon me. My advice, nevertheless, is that it would be better for you to write again to Mr. R. B. Rhett, Jr. and to calm his disquiet as much as can be done. Not to answer and "to let all this slip," as you suggest, would possibly be an acknowledgment that you have deceived yourself in your assertions. Indeed, here is my plain and clear thought: in the article in question, you have spoken of Sumter after the evacuation of heavy artillery, and not enough of Sumter before that. But, as for me, Sumter has been immortalized twice: both under Rhett as well as under Elliott. To declare, as you do, that you retired the artillery and that you evacuated the Fort, at the demand of the Commander of Sumter, without even alluding to what

<sup>2</sup> Roman's wife was Sally deSaussure Rhett.



this Commander had done or could have done for the defense of the Fort while the latter could defend itself and did defend itself like a lion—to declare all this I say, without any further comments—means to express in some manner that you have nothing complimentary to say of this Commander. In other words, you could extol Major Elliott as you please, and God knows that he deserves it—had you also, on the other hand, extolled the admirable conduct of Col. Rhett, when all sank, cracked, was scorched, tumbled around him, and that, *in spite of hell*, his banner still flying, prouder and prouder was still afloat, fiercer and fiercer, braver and braver. All that you write about the War will one day serve as a measure for real history and will be published sooner or later. Hence the anxiety, which seems natural to me, of those who appear forgotten by you when you talk about the events in which they have played an important role. Understand me well, meanwhile, my dear General: that I do not give you any advice, I tell you only my thoughts, frankly, as I owe it to you. I know in advance, whatever your intentions may be to publish the article about which we speak, your aim has not been to cast a shadow of a doubt on the courage, devotion, and intrepidity of Colonel Rhett. Do you remember what we thought and said about the speech of Mr. Davis in Charleston during his visit, at the time when Sumter laughed more and more at the rain of fire that flooded and burned it? We have cried at the injustice of it; we have done more than this—we have shrugged our shoulders—why?—because the President, forgetting Beauregard, Harris, and Rhett and many more, but above all Beauregard, had identified one name—one only—to the glory of Charleston—that of Major Elliott.

In such a category of ideas I look for the motive that caused my brother-in-law to write to you.

Always your friend

Alfred Roman

New York, Oct. 28th 1872

My Dear General:

Enclosed is the letter which you sent me so long ago, with my desired endorsement. As you will see it is not the copy you sent me and *you will have to sign it to make it like the one first sent me*. This new copy had to be made because the other was accidentally defaced immediately after I received it—or I would have made and transmitted my endorsement long ago. I hope this delay has subjected you however to no inconvenience.

Barnwell Rhett I see is now Editor of the "Picayune." I cannot understand from your note what point he raises. He certainly came to me personally to get his brother away from the post, as from an untenable position in which his brother's sacrifice would be of no possible advantage to the cause. That may not have been his direct language but the logical deduction from it—for Alfred Rhett was a thoroughly brave man, fearless of men and corporeal danger.

I write in great haste.

That Japan matter about which you wrote proved impracticable. The Japan officials here are in keeping of Grant and Co. and you or I can expect nothing from that quarter. They would oppose us.

I should like to hear what you have been doing this summer.

It sometime has occurred to me that I could be very useful to a man like Col. Tom Scott, the Railroad Magnate, as a sort of Adjutant General who might save him much of his time that could be better employed. What think you?

Could you aid me in having such business and administrative and other qualities as you believe I may possess made properly known to him?

I have not given up my Cuban relation but think it well to look out for something less precarious and dangerous.

Yours very truly

Thomas Jordan

Address care of Green and Randolph  
No. 42 Broadway

Since writing this I have seen Mr. Marvin and will give him all possible aid.

*Res ipsa loquitur!* In this case the letters speak for themselves. These letters constitute truly eloquent testimonials attesting to Colonel Alfred Rhett's dedication to military duty and devotion to the Confederate Cause.