"The Bombardment of Fort Moultrie, November 16, 1863" By Conrad Wise Chapman

By Ben Bassham*

In 1982, a large battle picture, *The Bombardment of Fort Moultrie, November 16, 1863* (Fig. 1), painted in Rome by a young American artist for a client in England, finally came "home" to Charleston, South Carolina, where it may now be seen in the Gibbes Art Gallery. It is arguably the finest-known work of Conrad Wise Chapman (1842-1910), one of the South's most important painters of the Civil War era.

Unknown to scholars of American art until its sale at auction in New York in 1975, the canvas may now be regarded as the largest and most accomplished work in a group of paintings in which Chapman recorded the complete system of Charleston's harbor defenses. Today, thirty-one small oil paintings of this series form the core of the collection of the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, and three more depictions of defensive works and numerous studies for the series in oil, watercolor, and pencil are housed in the nearby Valentine Museum. Finally, one more small panel in the Gibbes Art Gallery and one in a private collection in Charleston complete the series. Taken together, with the *Fort Moultrie* the recently emergent centerpiece, this group of paintings factually records detailed evidence of southern military ingenuity. It celebrates a Confederate moral victory: the long, emotionally charged, and nearly successful resistance to a prolonged siege by the odds-on favorites in the struggle, the combined naval and land forces of the North.

A short but significant chapter in the history of that siege is presented in the *Fort Moultrie* painting. In glowing, brilliant hues of blues, yellows, and reds, and in meticulously rendered detail, the artist has represented the exchange of fire between Moultrie's gunners and a column of Union monitors steaming into the harbor. Viewed from the north wall of the fort, the scene spreads out panoramically under a cerulean dome of sky. The artist has dramatically captured a sense of the dominant horizon line of this South Carolina coastal "low country." Only a structure in the left middle-ground, the old "Moultrie House" summer hotel, a signal and lookout tower, and a flagpole, on which flutters the Confederate "Stainless" banner, penetrate into the sky above the horizon. In the foreground, Chapman depicted with textbook accuracy the application of revolutionary new

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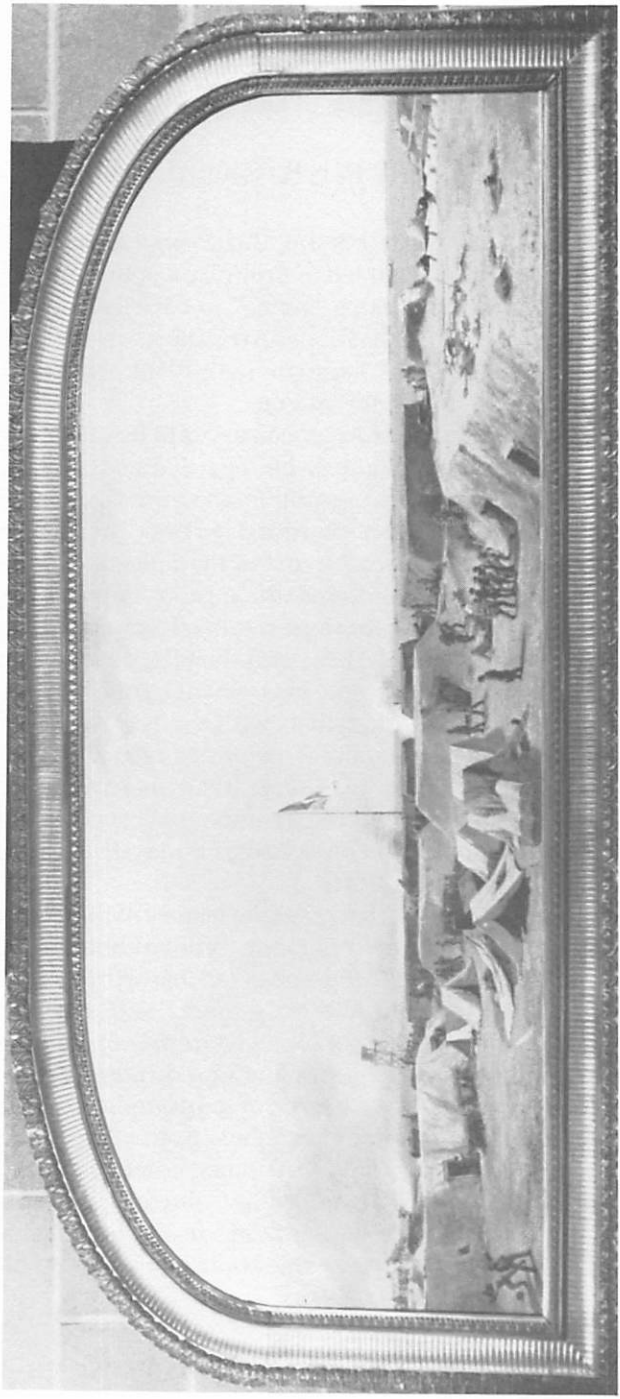

Fig. 1. "The Bombardment of Fort Moultrie, November 16, 1863." (Courtesy of the Carolina Art Association)

principles of seacoast fortification, in which massive sloping walls of earth and sand replaced the stone and brick of traditional defensive works (Fig. 2). It is an impressive performance by a young man who brought not only artistic talent but first-hand knowledge to the task, for Chapman served in Charleston in a Confederate uniform for seven months during the siege.

Conrad Wise Chapman grew up in Italy and possessed an artistic background — and accent — more European than American, but he began his work in Charleston with all his southern credentials in order. He was born in Washington, D.C., in 1842, the son of the American artist John Gadsby Chapman and his wife Mary Elizabeth (born Luckett), of Alexandria, Virginia; both parents came from old, upper-middle-class Virginia families. Conrad's paternal great-grandfather, John Gadsby, owned and operated prosperous hotels in Alexandria, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. In 1850, the elder Chapman — ill, worn-out, and still smarting from the harsh criticism heaped on his painting for the Capitol rotunda, *The Marriage of Pocahontas* — took his family to Rome where he hoped to work in peace and raise his two sons and daughter among the community of expatriate American artists and writers in an environment less hurried and materialistic than that of the United States. Conrad and his brother, John Linton, studied art with their father, and by the late 1850s they were both painting pictures of the city's landmarks and its environs for sale to American tourists.[1]

When the news reached Rome of Lincoln's call for volunteers to march on Virginia, Conrad and his brother asked their father's permission to enlist in the Confederate army. When his father refused, Conrad painted several pictures for quick sale and then ran away from home. Unable to reach Virginia by sea because of the Federal blockade of southern ports, he took a British ship to New York and from there made his way to Kentucky where he enlisted in September 1861 in a regiment of the famous "Orphan Brigade." He served in the West for about a year, but for much of that time he was ill and was shuttled from one dismal hospital to another. He recovered long enough to take part in the battle of Shiloh, where he suffered a severe head wound on the second day's fighting. After more hospitalization and further participation in the declining fortunes of the Confederate army in Mississippi, he sought and was granted a transfer to a regiment in Virginia commanded by Brig. Gen. Henry A. Wise, his father's friend and

[1] See Georgia S. Chamberlain, "John Gadsby Chapman: A Reappraisal," *Antiques* (June 1958), pp. 566-569; William P. Campbell, *John Gadsby Chapman* (exhibition catalogue), (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1962); and Edward F. Heite, "Painter of the Old Dominion," *Virginia Cavalcade* (Winter 1968), pp. 11-29.

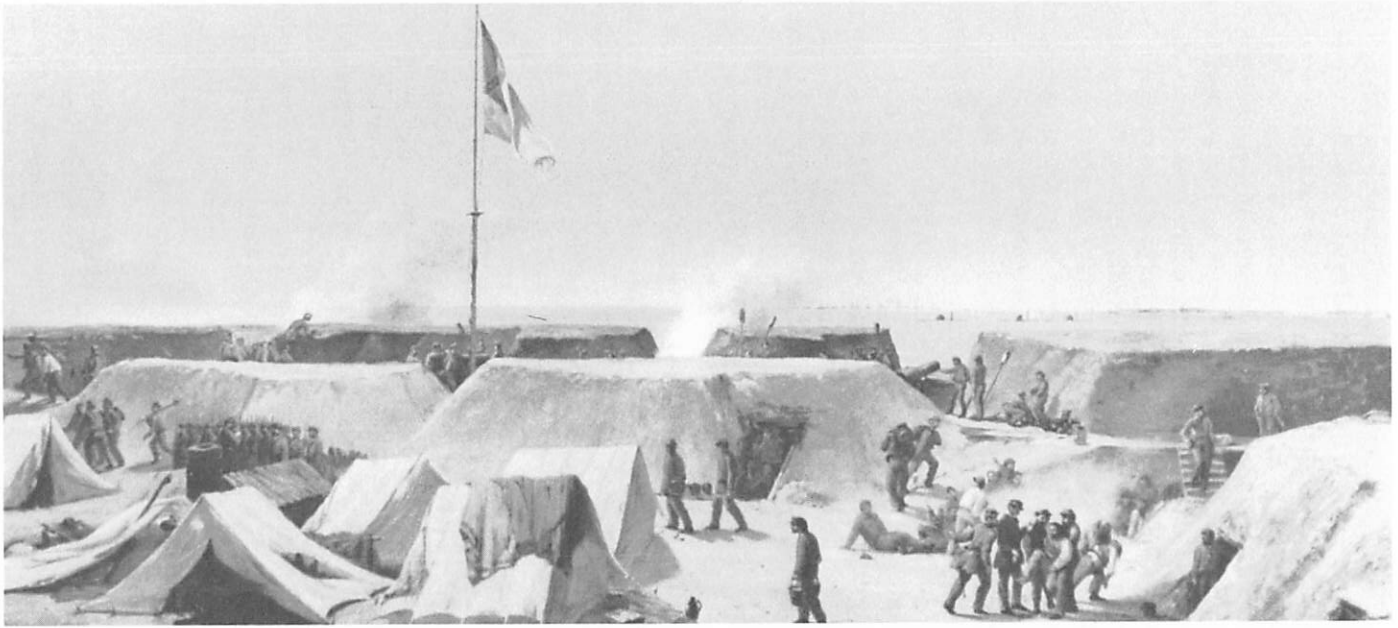

Fig. 2. Detail of "The Bombardment of Fort Moultrie, November 16, 1863." (Courtesy of the Carolina Art Association)

the former governor of the state, after whom Conrad had in part been named.[2]

During the winter of 1862-1863, Chapman's unit took part in the defense of Richmond and saw some action around Williamsburg. There he continued his practice, begun in the West, of sketching portraits of his friends and recording scenes of camplife in his sketchbook. While dividing his time between fighting and drawing, he gained a reputation for daring in the first pursuit and for great descriptive skill in the other. His commanding officer praised his daring in a skirmish at Whitaker's Mill, saying "that he could not restrain the impetuosity of Cooney [Conrad] Chapman and that the fellow fairly reveled in fighting."[3]

In September 1863, Chapman was given further opportunities to display both talents when his regiment was sent to Charleston to take part in the city's defense.

Few engagements in the Civil War generated more public attention on the two opposing home fronts and none was more prolonged than the siege of Charleston, which began in 1863 and ended when the small force of Confederate defenders left the city in February 1865, their position having been made untenable by the advance northward from Savannah of Sherman's army.

With the defeat and the departure of the defenders of the United States forts in the harbor in the first week of the war, the South laid claim to Fort Sumter, Fort Moultrie, Fort Johnson, and Castle Pinckney. But when Maj. Gen. Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard returned to Charleston to assume command in September 1862, he found the harbor's defenses and the preparedness of the forces frighteningly inadequate to resist the anticipated Federal assault. Enlisting the aid of Col. David Bullock Harris, an expert at military engineering who had served with him at Centreville, Virginia, and in the West, he set about strengthening and extending the harbor's defenses with the aim of making them impregnable. Today, it is possible to examine a comprehensive record of Beauregard's preparations because he formed a board in 1864 to compile a history of the siege to be comprised of documents, maps, and drawings.[4] As early as September 10, 1863, however, Brig. Gen. Thomas Jordan, Beauregard's chief of staff, had

[2] Ben Bassham, "Conrad Wise Chapman, Artist Soldier of the Orphan Brigade," *The Southern Quarterly* (Fall 1986), p. 40-56.

[3] John S. Wise to Mrs. Joseph Bryan, June 7, 1906. Chapman File, The Valentine Museum, Richmond.

[4] *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies.* Series 1, Part 2, Volume 35 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), p. 477. Hereafter *O.R.*; also John Johnson, *The Defense of Charleston Harbor* (Charleston, S.C.: Walker, Evans and Cogswell Co., 1890), p. 3.

requested Gen. Wise to release Chapman to his office to make sketches for the ordnance bureau in Richmond; on October 9, Jordan promoted the artist to ordnance sergeant, perhaps in an effort to boost his prestige among the men as he went about his assignment. Clearly, Chapman was proud of this promotion for he recorded his rank along with the title and date of the painting in the lower right corner of the *Fort Moultrie.* Later in the year, official orders referred to Chapman's assignment as that of executing drawings to make up a "Journal of the Siege of Charleston," a suggestion that Beauregard had conceived the idea for a pictorial and written record of one of his proudest achievements before he appointed an official board to carry it out.[5] Writing long after the war, Beauregard recalled that it had become evident to him while at Charleston "that a well-prepared and authentic history of the operations was due as well to the brave forces of the South engaged as to the claims of military study and experience everywhere."[6] But Beauregard also simply liked and recognized the power of pictures. Drawings of Fort Sumter, for example, were photographed and the prints mounted and inscribed by the general with accompanying testimonials to several of its defenders.[7]

From September 16 to March 5 of the next year, Chapman went about his task of collecting material for the projected series of pictures. It proved to be especially dangerous work that fall, as the Federal land batteries on Morris Island and the heavy guns of the ironclads unleashed an almost continuous bombardment unprecedented in the history of war. A friend later recalled that Chapman often sat "on the ramparts of Fort Sumter and other forts under the heaviest kind of artillery fire. Chapman held cannon balls and shells in great contempt."[8]

During this period, Chapman sketched Fort Moultrie three times, including a view of its walls in the background of *Battery Rutledge* (Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond); his first sketch is dated September 16, 1863, his last November 11, less than a week before the engagement depicted in the Gibbes picture.

The Fort Moultrie that Chapman visited in mid-September was a defensive work in transition; it was, in fact, the third Fort Moultrie on the Sullivan's Island site, rapidly being transformed into its fourth form.

From the earliest moments of the Revolutionary War, Sullivan's Island was thought to be the key to Charleston's uniquely shielded harbor, since a fort placed near its southern beach could command the main

[5]"Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers," National Archives, Washington, D.C.

[6]Johnson, p. 187.

[7]Ibid., p. 3.

[8]John S. Wise to Mrs. Joseph Bryan, June 7, 1906. Chapman File, The Valentine Museum, Richmond.

shipping channel into the city. The first Fort Moultrie, named for William Moultrie, its first commander and later governor of South Carolina, was constructed in the summer of 1776. Although only partially completed, this palmetto log and sand fort was strong enough to turn back a large British fleet and keep Charleston free until 1780, when it fell to a brief land siege.[9]

After the second Fort Moultrie, a five-sided earth and timber structure that was completed in 1798, was destroyed by a hurricane in 1804[10], work on the third fort began as America prepared for a second war with Great Britain. Polygonal in plan, its 15-foot-high brick walls are sharply angled into bastions on the northern, or landward, side, and present three broad faces, or curtains, along the sea front. Cannons were placed *en barbette* to fire over a low parapet. Inside the walls, barracks for enlisted men, officers' quarters, a magazine, a hot-shot furnace, and other buildings were constructed.[11]

The third Fort Moultrie underwent only a few changes prior to the outbreak of the Civil War: the walls were repaired, a ditch was dug around the work, and strong traverses — sloping walls to shield batteries from flank or enfilading fire — were put in place.[12] In late December 1860, with hostilities growing imminent, the Union garrison abandoned the fort and transferred to Fort Sumter.

When the Confederates took over the fort, they salvaged most of the guns and, in mid-January 1861, built "high and solid merlons, formed of timber, sand bags, and earth ... between the guns" on the southwest front facing Fort Sumter; on that same side an earthen parapet in front of the scarp wall was finished by the end of the month. During the exchange of fire between Moultrie and Sumter on the first day of the war — April 12, 1861 — shot and shell from the Union gunners across the bay did heavy damage to the barracks and officers' quarters — and they were subsequently demolished and removed by the Confederates — but the batteries suffered no damage at all.[13] Perhaps because Moultrie had come through this action so well, and because the threat of a major Union siege did not become apparent until late 1862, little more was done at the fort during the next two years.

[9]Edward Bearrs, *The First Two Fort Moultries: A Structural History* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1968), pp. 4-12.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Jim Stokeley, *Fort Moultrie, Constant Defender* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1985), pp. 34-35.

[12] Ibid., pp. 43-44.

[13] Edward Bearrs, *Fort Moultrie No. 3* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1968), p. 167.

When Beauregard resumed command in Charleston in September 1862, he ordered Harris to undertake the conversion of Moultrie from an exposed masonry structure into a powerful earthwork by banking more sand against the scarp-wall and by constructing even more traverses.[14] The strengthening of Moultrie was part of Beauregard's plan to prepare for the inevitable reduction of Fort Sumter by heavy Federal siege guns placed at the northern tip of Morris Island across the bay. As soon as Sumter was neutralized, Beauregard assumed, the Union land batteries would turn their attention to Fort Moultrie, the last remaining obstacle of any significance.[15] By September 6, ten days before Chapman made his first sketches of the fort, this strengthening was largely completed.

Chapman's painting, assumed to have been executed in Rome two years after the war[16] and based on those sketches, is a faithful record of the changes wrought at Fort Moultrie during the late summer and fall of 1863. Huge "bombproofs," shelters built of palmetto logs piled high with sand and earth and held in place with sandbags and turf, form the eastern and western flanks of the fortress. Clustered around the old hotshot furnace is a small group of tents — the barracks were long gone by then — and two smartly-dressed ranks of riflemen standing rather incongruously at attention while their comrades scurry about serving the batteries. Two huge polygonal traverses shelter the parade ground and the batteries from shell fire that could, and did, come in from a variety of directions onto this exposed fort. The centrally situated traverse doubled as a powder magazine. Six of the eight heavy guns on Moultrie's harbor-front faces are engaged; they are separated from one another and shielded by thick sand and earth traverses built and repaired in the lulls between bombardments by gangs of slaves borrowed from nearby plantations. This was truly defensive warfare with the pick and shovel, and Chapman painted a

[14] Bearrs, *Fort Moultrie No. 3*, p. 172.

[15] T. Harry Williams, *P.G.T. Beauregard: Napoleon in Gray* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955), p. 196.

[16] Although Chapman's painting of Fort Moultrie is dated 1867, recently discovered evidence points to an earlier date. On May 27, 1865, his father, John Gadsby Chapman, wrote from Rome to a family friend in New York: "The pictures which [Conrad] painted while here would astonish you, as they did every one. One, a Bombardment of Fort Moultrie with 150 figures (now in England) would do credit to any one...." (John Gadsby Chapman to William Kemble, William Kemble Papers, Bedford Hills, New York.) In March 1864, Conrad Wise Chapman left Charleston to rejoin his ailing mother in Rome; by January 7, 1865, he was on his way back to the South to rejoin his unit (John Gadsby Chapman to William Kemble, January 7, 1865, William Kemble Papers). If the Gibbes picture is the one referred to by the artist's father, its date must now be set at 1864.

prominent symbol of this new era in the "still life" of shovels and wheelbarrow on top of the western bombproof.

Harris's modifications to the then-55-year-old fort were prompted by a revolution in military technology: adequate to protect its garrison and armaments from even large shot from smoothbore cannon, the masonry walls of Moultrie would have been reduced to rubble and brickdust by the gigantic, rifled artillery recently developed and brought to bear by Federal forces. Some of the monitors fired shells from fifteen-inch cannons. Weapons such as these had breached the walls of Fort Pulaski in Savannah in less than two days, and were in the process of wrecking Fort Sumter, a contemporary work which, like Pulaski, had been built as part of this country's "permanent system" of seacoast defenses. The Confederate commander and his engineer recognized that masonry forts were obsolete; they abandoned traditional theory and practice and took the necessary steps in order to survive. Because of a greater experience brought on by necessity, the Confederates surpassed Union engineers in adopting new defensive measures, here at Charleston and elsewhere.

The engagement that took place on November 16, 1863, was yet another demonstration, like the more dramatic repulse of Rear Admiral Samuel F. DuPont's fleet of monitors and ironclads on April 7 of that year, of the superiority of the Confederate defenses and their gunners over the persistent, but tactically limited, gunboats of the North. Chapman did not arrive in Charleston until September and could not have seen that stirring earlier battle, an epic entertainment which was viewed by nearly everyone in the city.[17] He was probably an observer of the November 16 fight; indeed, the dates of his preparatory sketches for the paintings indicate that he spent much of October and November on Sullivan's Island.

Here, briefly, is an account of the events that surrounded the moment Chapman depicted: on the night before, Fort Moultrie opened up a heavy bombardment on the Union positions at the tip of Morris Island across the mouth of the harbor. The Federal commander there asked the navy to send in vessels to prevent an anticipated Confederate boat attack. Accordingly, the monitor Lehigh steamed in to take up station between Fort Sumter and Cummings Point in the early hours of the sixteenth. However the tide was going out that morning, and the *Lehigh* came to rest solidly on a sand bar.

At first light, Moultrie's garrison, the First Carolina Infantry, commanded by Captain J. Valentine, caught sight of the *Lehigh*, dead in the water. They opened up on her at 6:45 a.m. and, joined by other Confederate batteries, kept up a steady fire for about the next four-and-one-half hours. Early in the action, three other monitors, the *Passaic*, the *Nahant*, and the

[17] E. Milby Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861-65* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), p. 140.

Montauk, came in to attempt to tow the *Lehigh* off the bar and to answer the fire from Sullivan's Island. These four monitors, with the *Lehigh* presumably located on the right, may be seen in Chapman's painting as virtual specks in the water above one of Moultrie's massive corner traverses. The fort was hit several times: a rifled thirty-two pounder was struck and dismounted and a shell exploded in the north entrance, fatally wounding one man and injuring three others seriously. In Chapman's painting, these men are shown being carried, with a tenderness akin to that seen in depictions of the deposition of Christ, into the safety of the western bombproof.

Actually, Chapman's painting is mistitled, for the men of Fort Moultrie gave much worse than they received. While the Union naval commander later reported to Washington that the ship "sustained no real damage," the *Lehigh*'s captain must have had another opinion.[18] His ship, a tiny dot in the water when viewed from Moultrie 2,300 yards to the north, had been struck twenty-seven times. Her deck plates were buckled and she was leaking badly; although she saw further light action after the sixteenth, by the end of the month the *Lehigh* had to be sent to Port Royal for repairs.[19] Although the events of this day figured as only a minor episode in the history of the siege, the morning's battering of the *Lehigh* was a victory consistent with the southern conviction that a just and noble cause, combined with the courage, skill, and pluck of the Confederate fighting man, would ultimately triumph over the advanced technology and greater material wealth of the northern "invaders." Such a victory was especially sweet coming in the same year that had seen the depressing defeat at Gettysburg and the loss of Vicksburg.

The engagement depicted may well have had a special significance to the patron who commissioned the painting, the businessman Charles K. Prioleau, a member of one of Charleston's oldest and most distinguished families, who continued to have close commercial ties to the city after moving to Liverpool, England. Indeed, Prioleau was heavily involved in blockade running between Liverpool and Charleston and early in the war donated a cannon for the defense of the harbor.[20] Prioleau probably bought the painting because he wanted a memento of Charleston's part in the war; many years later, Chapman suggested that Prioleau would have purchased

[18] *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 15 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902), pp. 117-127, 145-146; *O.R.*, Series 1, Part 1, Vol. 28, pp. 739-742.

[19] May Spencer Ringold, "William Gourdin Young and the Wigfall Mission — Fort Sumter, April 13, 1861," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (Vol. 73), p. 29. See also Ethel S. Nepveux, *George Alfred Trenholm and the Company That Went To War, 1861-1865* (Charleston, S.C.: Comprint, 1973).

[20] Burton, *The Siege of Charleston*, p. 40; Nepveux, *George Alfred Trenholm*, p. 23.

several more paintings if his business hadn't failed.[21]

Chapman's painting may have been modeled, perhaps on Prioleau's suggestion, on a highly-praised painting of the war, *The Bombardment of Fort Sumter* of 1865, long believed to be the work of Albert Bierstadt, but recently reattributed to John Ross Key, the grandson of Francis Scott Key.[22] Key's painting is strikingly similar to Chapman's in size — twenty-six by sixty-eight inches to Chapman's twenty-eight by seventy-two inches — and in panoramic format. Key, another of the Confederate artists detailed by Beauregard to compile a pictorial history of the siege, and Chapman knew one another and visited Fort Sumter together from December 7 to December 10 in 1863, only a few days after the last great Federal bombardment of the fort had ended.[23]

Although Chapman and Key were the best qualified to depict the Confederate defenses by virtue of their greater military experience, they were not the only artists in Charleston in those months. Historian Alfred C. Harrison, Jr., has found that Charleston, in addition to continuing a tradition of balls, banquets, and picnics, was also a beehive of artistic activity that season, with virtually all of the painters turning their attention to the stirring symbol of Fort Sumter.[24]

However of the paintings produced during this period, the subject of Chapman's monumental, luminous, and meticulously painted canvas in the Gibbes Art Gallery is unique. This painting alone pays homage to the designers of the "new" Fort Moultrie and to the astonishingly skillful men who manned its guns.

[21]Conrad Wise Chapman to Granville G. Valentine, February 23, 1899. Chapman File, The Valentine Museum, Richmond.

[22] Alfred C. Harrison, Jr., "Bierstadt's *Bombardment of Fort Sumter* Reattributed," *Antiques* (February 1986), pp. 416-422.

[23]Johnson, p. 187.

[24]For example, a Columbia, S.C. artist named A. Grinevald painted three pictures of major episodes in the siege (Charleston *Mercury*, August 7, 1863); William Aiken Walker had on display a depiction of the ruins of Fort Sumter (Charleston *Mercury*, October 20, 1863); Lawrence B. Cohen (Charleston *Courier*, January 15, 1864) and George S. Cook (Charleston *Courier*, Spetember 12, 1863) also made Fort Sumter their subject.

Alonzo Clifton McClennan: Black Midshipman from South Carolina, 1873-1874

Willard B. Gatewood, Jr.*

On September 22, 1873, Alonzo Clifton McClennan of South Carolina arrived at the United States Naval Academy to stand examination for admission. In appearance he resembled the other young men who would be examined at the academy. However despite his blond hair, blue eyes, and fair complexion, McClennan was, in fact, a Negro. Upon his successful completion of the entrance examination, he became the second black youth to be admitted to the academy. The first was James H. Conyers, also from South Carolina, who had matriculated a year earlier and was still a midshipman when McClennan arrived. A third black youth, Henry E. Baker of Mississippi, enrolled at Annapolis in 1874, a few months after McClennan's departure. Encountering even more difficulties than his predecessors, Baker resigned after a little more than a year. That the first three blacks to enter Annapolis failed to graduate resulted from a combination of academic deficiencies and discriminatory treatment accorded them by white midshipmen. McClennan, whose tenure was the briefest of the three, appears to have attracted the least public attention during his residence at the academy.[1]

Born in Columbia in 1855 and orphaned as a child, McClennan grew up in the home of Edward B. Thompson, his uncle and guardian, who was a prosperous barber in the city. As a child, McClennan apparently went by the name of Thompson on occasion. A man of some political influence, Thompson arranged for his ward to serve as a page in the state legislature during Reconstruction. Although McClennan for a time attended Benedict Institute, a Baptist school established in Columbia in 1870, his early educa-

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[1] "A Pace Maker," an eleven-page handwritten biographical account of Alonzo C. McClennan by his daughter, in the McClennan Family Papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana; Robert E. Greene, *Black Defenders of America, 1775-1973* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1974), p. 116; R. L. Field, "Black Midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (April 1973), pp. 28-30.