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CHARLESTON HARBOR, 1860-1861:
A MEMOIR FROM THE UNION GARRISON

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During the fateful days of 1860 and 1861 Major Robert Anderson's Union garrison in Charleston numbered among its officers an Indiana lieutenant named Jefferson C. Davis. Davis, born in Clark County, Indiana, in 1828, served as a volunteer in the Mexican War, and received a commission in 1848 as second lieutenant in the field artillery. For the next ten years he served in posts from New York to Florida, being promoted to first lieutenant in 1852. In 1858 Davis was transferred with his company to garrison Fort Moultrie at Charleston. The frail, bearded young lieutenant was known to his fellow officers as the "boy sergeant of Buena Vista."¹

Davis, regarded by Anderson as a "prudent and reliable officer," was charged with numerous responsibilities in the forts and the city.² In January when the *Star of the West* made its abortive attempt to relieve the garrison, Davis urged Anderson to join the action, but the major refused.³ In the final Sumter crisis Davis met the delegation which demanded surrender, and aimed the fort's first gun to answer the South Carolina attack on April 12.⁴ From April 1861, to January 1865, Davis rose from artillery lieutenant to major general commanding Sherman's 14th Corps. In January 1865, he returned to South Carolina as Union forces marched through the State.

At war's end, Davis felt he had not received the promotion he deserved, and he wrote his commanding officer a lengthy memoir of his war service in an unsuccessful attempt at advancement. The memoir included the following brief account of Davis's service at Charleston and told with pride of his role in the garrison's "cares and anxieties" during those days of national crisis.⁵

I have the honor herewith to submit for the information of the General commanding⁶ a short statement of my services in the Army since

¹ Abner Doubleday, *Reminiscences of Forts Sumter and Moultrie in 1860-'61* (New York, 1876), 22-23.

² *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, Series 1, I, 85, 157.

³ Roy Meredith, *Storm Over Sumter* (New York, 1957), 93; W. A. Swanberg, *First Blood: The Story of Fort Sumter* (New York, 1957), 148.

⁴ R. U. Johnson and C. C. Buel (eds.), *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York, 1887-1888), I, 59; Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (New York, 1932), 348.

⁵ The original of Davis's 47-page memoir, written January 4, 1866, is in the Jefferson C. Davis Manuscript Collection in the Indiana State Historical Library, Indianapolis.

⁶ "The General commanding" was General John M. Palmer of Illinois, commander of the Department of Kentucky in 1866.

group agreed that some paper money was necessary when the subject was being reconsidered late in the 1720's. In all probability the stand taken by the merchants in the late months of 1728 and early portion of 1729 was highly influential in bringing about the "new" policy in regard to paper currency in the province. This was, in a sense, a striking vindication of the long-held colonial contention. Perhaps the whole problem of the value of paper currency to South Carolina has been best summed up in a pamphlet appearing about this time:

And yet . . . South Carolina taken in a complex view, has been one of the most flourishing settlements, their capital stock increased in value to a prodigious degree; and this in a great measure owing to the bills of credit.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ "An Inquiry into The Nature and Uses of Money; More Especially of Bills of Credit", Boston, 1740, in Andrew Davis (ed.), *Colonial Currency Reprints in Publications of the Prince Society* (4 vols., XXXII-XXXV, Boston, 1910-1911), III, 464.

the breaking out of the rebellion in Charleston Harbor in the fall of 1860. As First Lieutenant in the 1st Regiment of United States Artillery, attached to Company "E" I was and had been since June, 1858 on duty at Fort Moultrie. On the receipt of the news of the election of Mr. Lincoln at Charleston the people flew to arms.⁷

On the night of the 7th of Nov[ember] I, as officer of the day, issued the first cartridges to the guards; loaded and manned the guns of the fort's "[nite?] battery" for the threatened emergency.

As the excitement increased and the determination of S. C. to secede from the Union became more and more demonstrative the efforts of the small garrison were increased accordingly in preparing the Fort for defence until the duties became very arduous to both officers and men. Shortly after the arrival of Major Anderson to assume command of the troops I was ordered to take charge of a party of government employees in the Engineer Department and to repair quietly to Castle Pinckney with instructions to prepare that place for the occupancy of troops, should reinforcements be sent us.

This work was accomplished in some ten days as desired, amid intense excitement and many threats from the South Carolina people. On being relieved from this duty I returned and reported to my company at Fort Moultrie. On the night of the 26th [of] Dec[ember] in command of the rear guard I covered the passage of Major Anderson and command from Fort Moultrie to Sumter. At the announcement by signal of the safe arrival of the main command in Fort Sumter I abandoned the batteries, resumed the muskets, repaired to the rowboats awaiting us at the beach; and made the transit across the channel in close proximity to the enemy's gun boats; which on this occasion, much of our surprise, seemed unconscious of our movements. During the siege of Fort Sumter, which terminated on the 14th of the following April I performed the various duties required of a subaltern without a day's intermission. The bee hive like industry and vigilance of this little garrison; its cares and anxieties, its gallant stand when driven to the sad alternative; are so well remembered and appreciated by the people that it affords me unusual pleasure to refer to my participation in those eventful scenes.

During the engagement I commanded a four gun battery on the

⁷ Davis undoubtedly refers to the situation described by Swanberg: "The news made Charleston boil with excitement. Citizens paraded with shouts of 'Hurrah for Lincoln!' giving the devil his due for assuring secession. A crowd of them went out to Fort Moultrie, sporting secession cockades and marching around the fort. . . ." Swanberg, *First Blood*, 15.

northwest face of the work opposing the then notorious floating battery.⁸ This formidable enemy was so completely disabled that it has never been used since.

After the evacuation of Sumter on my arrival at New York I received orders to repair to Indianapolis, Ind. to muster into service the Regiments of Vols. [Volunteers] then being raised in that state.⁹

⁸ The floating battery was 100 feet long and 25 feet wide. It was made of wood, reinforced with iron. The houseboat-like vessel carried four heavy siege guns, and proved to be a cumbersome weapon dubbed by some Confederates as the "Slaughter Pen." Swanberg, *First Blood*, 205; Doubleday, *Reminiscences*, 127.

⁹ Davis was named colonel commanding the 22nd Indiana Infantry Volunteers and began his service in Missouri.