

THUNDER IN THE HARBOR

Fort Sumter in the Civil War

Richard W. Hatcher, III



Savas Beatie
California

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This book honors all those who served at Fort Sumter,
both military and civilian. Of special note are the following:

Private Daniel Hough, Co. E, 1st U. S. Artillery,
the first soldier killed in the war, April 14, 1861;

Private Edward Galway, same company,
mortally wounded April 14, died April 15;

Private John Doran, Co. H, 1st U.S. Artillery
(my wife's third great uncle);

Private Edward Hatcher, Co. K, 1st South Carolina Artillery Regulars
(a distant relative), wounded August 19, 1863, died November 19, 1863.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Adm.	Admiral
B&L	Battles and Leaders of the Civil War
CA	Coastal Artillery
CAC	Coastal Artillery Corps
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CSR	Confederate State Records
CSS	Confederate States Ship
Dept.	Department
FMMR	Fort Moultrie Military Reservation
FOSU	Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie National Historical Park Research File
GAR	Grand Army of the Republic
HDCP	Harbor Defense Command Post
HECP	Harbor Entrance Control Post
LOC	Library of Congress
NA	National Archives
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer
OAG	Office of the Adjutant General
OR	Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies
ORN	Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies
Pdr.	pounder
RG	Record Group
ROTC	Reserve Officer Training Corps
SHC	Southern Historical Collection
USMA	United States Military Academy
USS	United States Ship

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It would be a grievous oversight if I failed to thank the staff at Savas Beatie for taking this book from rough manuscript to finished product: Tom Schott for his editing expertise and deep well of patience; Veronica Kane for her keen eye in designing the layout; Elise Hess who painstakingly assembled the people, places and things associated with Sumter's story into a comprehensive index; and Ian Hughes whose artistic choices for the book's cover invite readers into the history of the fort. Finally, I deeply appreciate Ted Savas's commitment to publishing historical works and for recognizing the importance of Fort Sumter's story and bringing it to press. Thank you all.

Introduction

Three ships carrying sea-worn British colonists approached a wide harbor in April 1670. They navigated between two barrier islands, passed a shoal at the harbor's mouth, and continued beyond the confluence of two large rivers, sailing up the left waterway. The vessels continued upriver several miles of what they named the Ashley River before stopping along the shore. They declared the new land the Colony of Carolina, in honor of King Charles II, and established the settlement of Charles Town on Albemarle Point. It soon became apparent that the peninsula between the Ashley and the other river, the Cooper, was more suited to settlement, and by 1680 the new colony took root on the Cooper River side of the peninsula. The new location provided what the other site did not: cooling sea breezes, a deeper ship channel, and crucially, an unobstructed view of ships entering the harbor.

Within just twenty years, Charles Town was walled and well-fortified in anticipation of attack. Spanish, French, native peoples, and pirates posed an ever-present danger, and for that reason, the colonists constructed a fort beyond the city. In addition to conflicts with the locals and the presence of pirates, wars in Europe also threatened to involve the small settlement. Spanish colonial expansion in Florida and specifically Queen Anne's War (The War of Spanish Succession, 1702-13) pointed to the need for a more effective defense, and thus Fort Johnson on James Island was completed by 1709. This fortification, about halfway between the city and the harbor's mouth, presented a significant obstacle to enemy ships entering the harbor. By 1712, the enormous colony had been divided into North and South Carolina.

Foreign and regional conflicts, including King George's War (The War of Jenkin's Ear/War of the Austrian Succession, 1740-48) and the French and Indian War (The Seven Years' War, 1756-63) threatened Charles Town's security. City leaders proposed a stronger defense in the 1750s and called for the construction of a line of earthworks across the peninsula and the erection of a new bastion on the Cooper River. The works were largely vacated within ten years. After another decade Charles Town had abandoned its walled city plan entirely.

A sustained period of peace between 1762 and 1775 encouraged tremendous growth in the area. New streets, businesses, and houses were constructed over the sites of former fortifications, and by the mid-1700s an enslaved African-based economy built on rice and indigo replaced the earlier economy reliant on the export of deer skins, timber, and naval stores. Charles Town rose to prominence as the fourth most populous city in the 13 colonies with the highest per capita income. The city, which had swelled to 12,000 souls, welcomed more shipping trade than the larger cities of New York, Boston, or Philadelphia.

The outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775 forced city leaders to address Charles Town's lapses in fortification maintenance and construction. Militias enlisted new members, new units organized, and work on the city's defenses began in earnest. Old defenses were repaired and new works were constructed. Chief among these was a fort on Sullivan's Island. Begun in February 1776, the site was chosen for its strategic location on the primary shipping channel. Southward, the Main Channel paralleled the shorelines of Folly and Morris islands and turned into the harbor within a few hundred yards off Sullivan's.

The fort, though incomplete and unnamed, mounted 31 cannon when a fleet of nine Royal Navy warships with more than 260 guns attempted to sail past Sullivan's Island into the harbor on June 28, 1776. The ensuing battle lasted nearly 10 hours. At the opposite end of the island, Patriot forces defeated British attempts to cross from Long Island (Isle of Palms). The resounding American victory on Sullivan's Island, a week before the issuing of the Declaration of Independence, was one of the first in what would be a long and bloody war. The fort was soon completed and named after Col. William Moultrie, the island's commander and the hero of the battle. Charles Town remained under Patriot control until 1780, when a six-week siege by the British forced its surrender on May 12.

After the Revolution, the city was renamed Charleston. Its defenses once again suffered neglect, this time in the afterglow of postwar peace. Yet another war between England and France in 1793 underscored the need for coastal fortifications, and the nascent American government selected Charleston as one of 21 sites for a "Second System" of fortifications. Ultimately, four installations were constructed. Fort Johnson on James Island, which had been destroyed during

the Revolution, was rebuilt; an imposing installation named Fort Mechanic was erected near the tip of Charleston's peninsula, along with another fortification, Fort Pinckney, on Shute's Folly across from it. Engineers completed a new Fort Moultrie on the site of the first fort on Sullivan's Island.

The Quasi-War between the U.S. and France (1798-1800) refocused interest in seacoast fortifications. When an 1804 hurricane left Forts Moultrie, Johnson, and Pinckney in ruins, Congress appropriated funds to reconstruct the defenses. The third (and final) Fort Moultrie was completed in 1809—the only fortification at the mouth of Charleston Harbor. A new Fort Johnson was finished that same year. By 1811, the new brick fortification on Shute's Folly was completed and named Castle Pinckney.

The War of 1812 was a stark indicator of the insecurity of the American coastline. British troops landed with little opposition, marched on Washington, and burned the White House and other government buildings. After the war, Congress appropriated money for the construction of additional defenses, known as "Third System" fortifications on the nation's shores. Once again they recognized Charleston Harbor's economic and military significance and approved a new defensive work there.

The result was a masonry fort that became the political flashpoint that would trigger the onset of civil war 45 years later.¹

1 Walter Edgar, ed., *The South Carolina Encyclopedia* (Columbia, SC, 2006), 146-149; Jim Stokely, *Fort Moultrie, Constant Defender* (Washington, D.C., 1985), 1-41.

Chapter 1

On a Shallow Shoal in Charleston Harbor

1829–1860

On January 4, 1829, from Charleston, South Carolina, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Lt. Henry Brewerton informed the commander of the Corps, Col. Charles Gratiot in Washington, D.C., of his arrival. Brewerton, the first engineer appointed for the project that would become Fort Sumter, established his headquarters at Fort Johnson, on James Island just over a mile west of the construction site. He served as “the superintending engineer of the construction of the defenses of Charleston harbor” until 1832. Brewerton was born in 1801 in New York City and was orphaned at an early age. He nevertheless secured an appointment to the United States Military Academy; in 1813, three months short of his twelfth birthday, he became a cadet. Despite his youth, Brewerton did well at West Point but was furloughed from February-September 1815 until he turned 14, the official minimum age for admittance. At 17, Brewerton graduated fifth in the class of 1819 and was assigned to the Corps of Engineers.

Six years before his arrival in Charleston, the U.S. Topographical Engineers surveyed the harbor and selected the construction site. At the Engineers’ headquarters in Washington, plans for the fort had been prepared, and in 1827 Secretary of War John C. Calhoun approved the construction of a “pentagonal, three-tiered, masonry fort with truncated angles that was to be built on the shallow shoal extending from James Island.” The site stood in the mouth of Charleston Harbor across the shipping channel about a mile west of Fort Moultrie on Sullivan’s Island. In 1829 the fort’s plans were approved and \$25,000 was appropriated for its construction.

The 28-year-old Brewerton faced a tremendous task. He placed a buoy on the site and drove stakes into the shoal forming an outline to mark where to place the mole for the five-sided fort. As most stone quarries were located in New England, he placed ads in about two dozen of the region's newspapers for 30,000 tons of irregular stone weighing from 50 to 500 pounds or more each. A New York firm submitted the low bid at an average of \$2.45 per ton.¹

Due to the shallow water at the construction site, when the ships arrived laden with their heavy cargos, the stone was offloaded at Fort Johnson. From there lighters were used to transport and place the stone on site. Problems with the supplier, however, resulted in only 1,000 tons being delivered by the middle of 1830. These challenges persisted and in 1831 only 7,000 additional tons were brought to the site. The contract was rescinded and purchases were made on the open market. During the following two years 38,500 tons were added to the construction site. The mole now resembled a five-sided donut; the artificial island had broken the surface.

In 1832, Brewerton was transferred and Capt. W. A. Eliason assumed the supervision of the fort's construction. On April 18, 1833, the adjutant general's office issued Order No. 33, naming the nine forts then being built. One of those was the "new work now constructing in the Harbor of Charleston—South Carolina." It was named Fort Sumter in honor of Thomas Sumter. Born in Virginia, by 1764 Sumter had moved to South Carolina and during the Revolutionary War had risen to the rank of brigadier general in the state militia. Nicknamed "Gamecock" for his daring and tenacious fighting, after the war he served in the state's general assembly and the U.S. House and Senate. When he died in 1832, two months short of his 98th birthday, Sumter was the last surviving general officer from the American Revolution.²

Lieutenant T. S. Brown replaced Eliason in 1834. That fall Brown faced a situation that halted work on the project until 1841. With \$220,000 already expended and 46,500 tons of stone in place as of November 3, 1834, Charlestonian William Laval notified the lieutenant that he had "taken out, under the seal of the state, a grant of all those shoals opposite and below Fort Johnson." The grant totaled 870 acres, including the fort's construction site. With this notification all work was halted. Laval's claim was vague concerning its boundaries, however, and

1 National Archives, Record Group 217, 1817-1850, 1829 Files, hereafter cited as NA/RG. Heath L. Pemberton, Jr., "Fort Sumter: Chorological Construction History With Architectural Detail," *Fort Sumter Historical Structure Reports*, 1829-1899, Sept. 1959, 1-4, hereafter cited as Pemberton, "Chorological Construction History."

2 1817-1850, 1830-1850 Files, NA/RG 217; Walter Edgar, *The South Carolina Encyclopedia* (Columbia, SC, 2006), 940-941.

Brig. Gen. Thomas Sumter

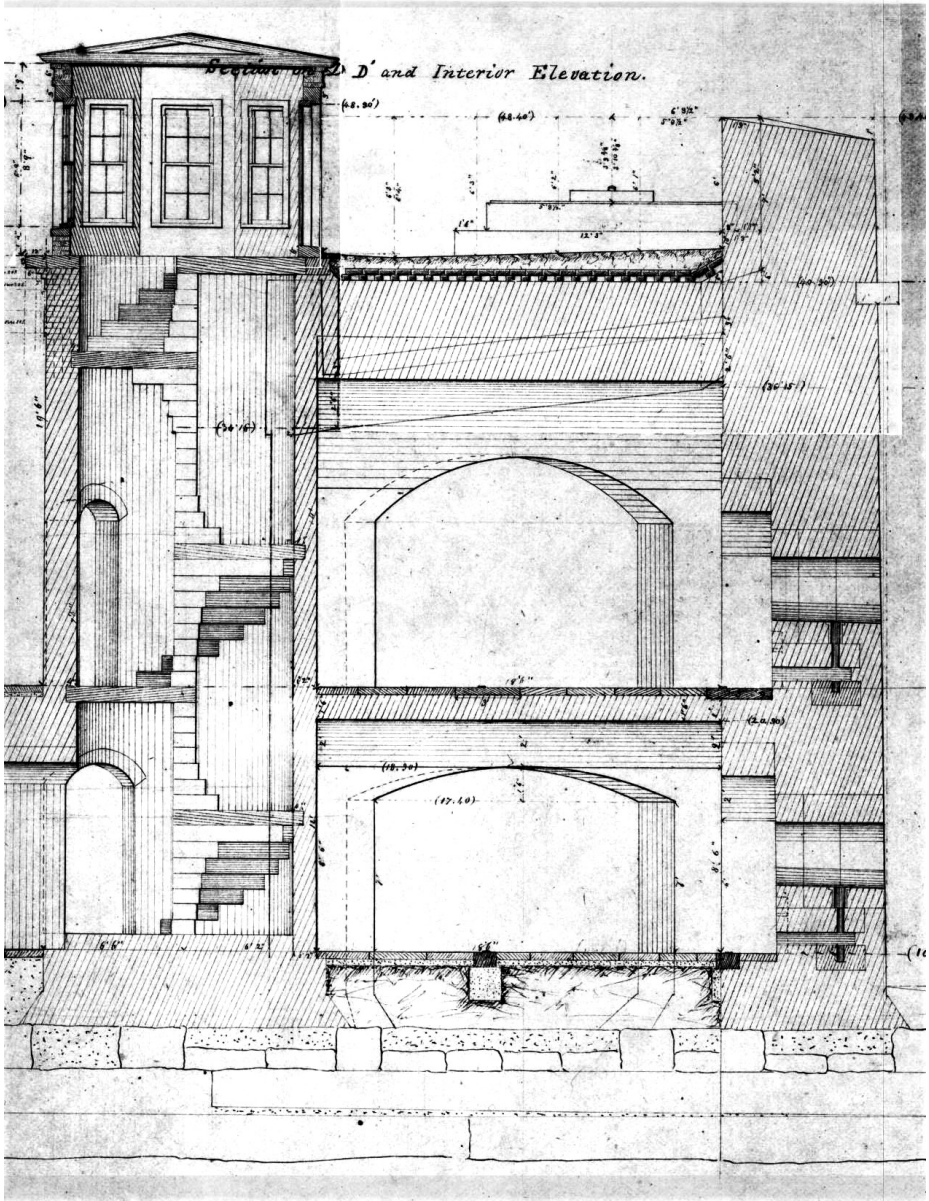
New York Public Library, hereafter NYPL

the shoal generally fell under 8 feet of water at low tide. Its legality would be determined by the state of South Carolina, and not until December 1837 was Laval's claim invalidated. In December 1840 a joint resolution of the legislature recommended that the governor cede the site and additional acreage to the Federal government, and the next year Gov. John P. Richardson ceded 125 acres to the United States. That year work on the fort was resumed under the direction of Capt. Alexander H. Bowman.

By 1845 the foundation was completed, with approximately 70,000 tons of material in place. Courses of cut stone blocks were placed on the foundation on top of which the brick would be laid. Including the esplanade and wharf a total of 109,000 tons of stone and granite had been placed at the site. At high tide the foundation stood 5 feet above the surface. The project now entered a new phase, with the construction of masonry scarp walls, casemates, two barracks buildings, the officers' quarters, five cisterns, four powder magazines, two hot shot furnaces, and 135 gun emplacements. Also, the mole was filled with sand and shells. Once filled the artificial island was about two and a half acres, with one acre comprising the parade ground.

Over the next 15 years the imposing brick fort rose from the stone and granite foundation. The five scarp (exterior) walls were seven feet thick and composed of a brick shell with the interior filled with rammed concrete. The first- and second-tier support piers, though not as thick, were constructed in the same manner. The gorge wall extended 321 feet in length. On its exterior the esplanade was 25 ½ feet wide and 290 feet long. From the center of the esplanade the wharf extended over 140 feet. But storms and strong tides had caused about 45 feet of the end to become unusable. The sally port, the fort's principal entrance, rested in the center of the gorge.





1846 construction drawing of a stair tower, three-gun tiers, and scarp (exterior) wall. National Archives and Records Administration, hereafter NARA

At the gorge's angles, the left and right flank walls ran for 171 feet then joined the 192-foot-long left and right face walls that met at the salient angle. The five walls rose to a height of just over 48 feet above the foundation. The flank and face walls were built to mount three tiers of gun emplacements. The first and second were composed of casemates and the third, the barbette tier.

Beneath the center of the floors of the face and flank walls and the sally port were cisterns. Rainwater collected from the terreplein through a drainage and gutter system and drained into each wall's cistern. A similar system collected rainwater for iron tanks in the officers' quarters and enlisted barracks. The overflow from the tanks was conducted to the cisterns. The flank and face cisterns each held 5,200 gallons and the one at the gorge approximately 4,200 gallons.

An examination of extant construction documents from 1843-48 and 1857 reveals that most of the bricks for the project were made by skilled slave labor at brick kilns on plantations along the Cooper and Ashley rivers near Charleston. According to these records almost four million bricks were purchased. The grey or brown bricks (9 x 4½ x 2¼ inches) cost \$8-9 per thousand.

The number of workers and their skills varied. Among the civilian employees the supervising engineer hired were crews to operate lighters and barges transporting building materials and workers, masons and carpenters (white, slave, and free), stone cutters, blacksmiths, clerks, overseers, and cooks. The largest number were laborers, crews of which ranged from a dozen or so to 70 at any one time. While most of the workers were white, some were African American, both slave and free.

Fort Sumter was built to mount 135 guns with a garrison of 650 officers and men. The first- and second-tiers held 41 casemates each and the barbette tier held 53 gun emplacements. The three-story officers' quarters was located in the center 290 feet of the gorge wall's interior. The sally port was on the first floor at the building's center. To its right were the apartments for 50 officers and their families. The area to the left of the sally port housed the ordnance, commissary, quartermaster, and medical operations. At each end of the building sat two powder magazines, one on the first-tier and one on the second. Of note, the windows along the first two tiers of the gorge were narrow and served as loopholes for firing muskets to help repel an amphibious assault. As it was too shallow for warships to move into position to bombard this wall, only the third-tier was built to mount cannon.

The 128-foot-long enlisted barracks, three stories tall, were located along the center of the left and right flank walls. The first floor of each contained a kitchen and mess hall, while the two upper floors held living quarters for 300 non-commissioned officers and enlisted men. The tops of the roofs of all three

buildings towered almost 10 feet above the parapet, and proved inviting targets on April 12-13, 1861.³

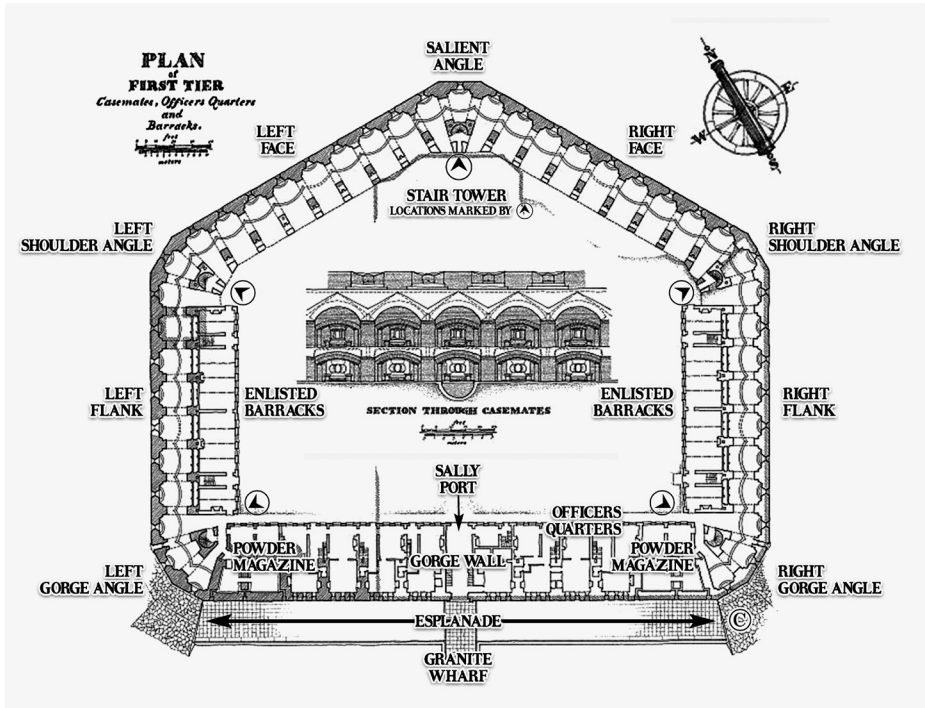
From 1841 to 1858 several Corps of Engineers officers were assigned to supervise Fort Sumter's construction, including Capts. Alexander H. Bowman, Jeremy F. Gilmer, and George W. Cullum. All were West Point graduates and career officers. Both Bowman and Cullum had long careers, and each served as the superintendent of their alma mater. Bowman had 40 years' service and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. Cullum served 41 years and attained the rank of brevet major general. Gilmer, a North Carolinian, resigned his commission in 1861 and served in the Confederate Corps of Engineers. He rose to the rank of major general and chief engineer of the Confederate Engineer Bureau in Richmond. From August 1863 to April 1864, he served as second in command of the Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, with headquarters in Charleston, before being ordered back to Richmond.

On April 28, 1858 Brevet Capt. John G. Foster relieved Captain Cullum and assumed the duties of the chief engineer in Charleston Harbor, plus Forts Macon and Caswell in North Carolina. A New Hampshire native, he stood fourth in the famous West Point class of 1846. His fellow graduates included George B. McClellan, Jesse L. Reno, Thomas J. Jackson, Samuel D. Sturgis, George Stoneman, George E. Pickett, and Cadmus M. Wilcox. Assigned to the Corps of Engineers, in 1847 Foster found himself attached to a company of "Sappers, Miners, and Pontoniers" in the Mexican War. The brevet second lieutenant would earn two brevet promotions, the first for "gallant and meritorious conduct" in the battles of Contreras and Churubusco, where he was promoted to brevet first lieutenant. His promotion to brevet captain came in the battle of Molino de Rey, where a musket ball tore into his lower left leg, breaking both bones. The war was now over for the young officer, who went to the family home in Nashua to recover. He returned to duty in 1848 with a permanent limp. For the next 10 years Foster performed duties at various locations, including service as the principal assistant professor of engineering at West Point.⁴

Foster arrived in Charleston in late April 1858 but was neither at Sumter nor in the city itself when a heart-breaking chapter in the fort's history occurred. On August 21, the USS *Dolphin* seized an illegal slave ship, the *Echo*, bound for Cuba, where the "human cargo" was to be sold. It had departed Angola with 450 men,

³ Pemberton, "Chorological Construction History," 5-18; 1830s-1850 Files, NA/RG 217.

⁴ George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy* (Boston and New York, 1891), 2: 256-260, hereafter cited as Cullum, *Biographical Register*; John C. Waugh, *The Class of 1846, From West Point to Appomattox: Stonewall Jackson, George McClellan, and Their Brothers* (New York, 1994), *passim*.



Identification of Ft. Sumter's first-tier walls, angles, and other features. Each arrow within a circle designates a stair tower location. *Author's Collection, hereinafter AC*

women, and children crammed below decks, and during the passage more than a quarter of them died from malnutrition or disease. A naval officer's report referred to the "cargo" as "poor wretches" who looked "half starved . . . some of them . . . mere skeletons." The *Echo's* captain, arrested for violating the 1820 Federal law abolishing the trans-Atlantic slave trade, sailed on the *Dolphin* to Key West. An officer and a detachment from the U.S. ship were placed on board and with its crew sailed the ship to Charleston, arriving on August 27. Charleston's U.S. Marshal ordered the crew jailed and the Africans sent to Castle Pinckney. Shortly thereafter they were relocated to Fort Sumter. Thirty-five more people died during the quarantine at the two fortifications. At one point a boat captain sold 50 cent tickets to those Charlestonians who wished to visit the fort and gawk at the human misery on display there.

President James Buchanan ordered the USS *Niagara* to take the suffering Africans to Liberia, and on September 21 they were ferried to the *Niagara*. The ship sailed the next day with 271 former slaves aboard. When it arrived at

Monrovia six weeks later, only 200 of these people disembarked. Many of the original complement had died in the months-long nightmare.⁵

* * *

In the late 1850s Captain Foster was doubtless aware that for many South Carolinians possession of Charleston Harbor's fortifications might become an issue of states' rights. And certainly by 1860 it had, but politics had no bearing on his mission. He performed his duties within budget, with workers, artisans, and materials available during three seasons of the year—yellow fever, typhoid, and cholera, so prevalent in the summer months, slowed the work significantly during that time. But the six months between November 1860 and April 1861 were probably the most demanding of his career, and completing the unfinished work amid unprecedented political upheaval had become an urgent matter.

5 Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., and Gordon D. Whitney, *Jefferson Davis In Blue* (Baton Rouge, 2002), 30-31; "Slaver in the Bay" and "Arrival of a Slaver," *Charleston Courier*, Aug. 28, 1858, and "U.S. District Court-The Slaver Case," Sept. 7, 1858; Anonymous, "The Echo," Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie National Historical Park, July 22, 2020, Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie National Historical Park Research File, hereafter cited as FOSU Research File.