

Secession Expands

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As the new year of 1861 began, the secessionist movement began to actively move beyond the environs of Charleston, South Carolina. The seizure of Charleston's Fort Johnson on January 2 was quickly followed by Georgia authorities taking over Fort Pulaski outside Savannah on January 3. The following day, state authorities in Alabama took control of Fort Morgan and Fort Gaines in Mobile Bay. On January 6, Florida officials seized the United States Arsenal in Apalachicola and on January 7 Fort Marion in St. Augustine fell under their power.

In Pensacola, Florida, Lieutenant Adam J. Slemmer, was in command of the various fortifications surrounding the harbor. Both of his commanding officers were away on leave and Slemmer found himself in a position similar to that of Major Anderson in Charleston: Most of the various fortifications were indefensible from attack on the land side. The only exception, similar to Fort Sumter, was Fort Pickens, a five-sided fort on Santa Rosa Island in Pensacola Bay.

At the time of the secessionist stirrings across the South, Slemmer and his troops were stationed in Fort Barrancas on the mainland, about a mile and a half from Fort Pickens. Slemmer and his men had received word of the other seizures around the country and by January 7 they were hearing disturbing rumors that the U.S. fortifications in Pensacola were next. Slemmer realized that Fort Pickens was more easily defensible than Fort Barrancas, but was hesitant to change his station without authority to do so.

Slemmer did, however, take the precaution of securing his gunpowder reserves. These had been kept in a small ancient Spanish fort next to Fort Barrancas and on January 8 Slemmer had the powder moved over to Fort Barrancas. This was a wise action on Slemmer's part as that night a group of about twenty Southerners approached the Spanish fort with the intention of seizing the gunpowder. Slemmer had posted a small party to protect the Spanish fort as his charge was to do his best to protect all United States property in the harbor. These men yelled for the Southerners to halt and were ignored. They then fired upon the Southerners, who fled apparently without casualties. Many historians believe these shots to be the first of the Civil War.

Secession conventions were ongoing during this first week of January 1861 in Florida, Alabama and Mississippi and their ordinances of secession would be passed in the coming days. Meanwhile, far to the north, the Buchanan administration was trying to figure out how to resupply Anderson's men at Fort Sumter. The original plan was for the warship *Brooklyn* to bring the men and supplies to Sumter, but Buchanan's administration was concerned that sending an armed ship might provoke the secessionists.

Instead, the civilian side-wheel steamer, *Star of the West*, was used. To maintain secrecy, the *Star of the West's* manifest showed that it was to head to New Orleans. Once out of New York's harbor, it was anchored in darkness and approximately 250 soldiers boarded. Both troops and supplies were to be kept below decks as the boat entered Charleston's harbor. On January 5, the boat set its course for Charleston.

Just after the *Star of the West* departed New York, Anderson sent word that he could hold out with his current supplies for longer than originally anticipated. Federal authorities sent

orders to stop the ship from leaving, but the orders arrived too late. The *Brooklyn* was sent after her to intercept her before arriving in Charleston but could not catch up. During this same time, two southern men still in Union office, Louis Wigfall, senator from Texas and Mississippi's Jacob Thompson, Secretary of the Interior, both dispatched telegrams warning South Carolina officials of the *Star of the West's* intentions. As the ship approached Charleston harbor on the night of January 8, the stage was set for conflict.