

Mason and Slidell Seized by Federal Navy **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

In early November, 1861, Confederate agents James Mason and John Slidell left Havana, Cuba as passengers on the British mail ship *Trent* bound for England. The two men had been commissioned by Confederate President Jefferson Davis to travel to England and France to make the case for those nations to support the Southern cause. They had eluded the Union naval blockade, sailing from Charleston on October 12 on the blockade-runner *Theodora* to Havana and there transferring onto the *Trent*.

The imminent travels of Mason and Slidell were no secret to observers on both sides as the trip had been well publicized. However, being a diplomatic venture on the vessel of a neutral nation gave Mason and Slidell confidence they would be undisturbed on their mission.

A Union navy captain, Charles Wilkes, had other ideas. Commanding the 13-gun sloop *San Jacinto*, Wilkes learned from the U.S. Consul in Havana the time of the *Trent's* departure and then set his ship up in a narrow part of the Bahama Channel to intercept the British ship. When the *Trent* appeared, Wilkes fired two warning shots over the bow, bringing the *Trent* to a halt. He then sent a boarding party to the *Trent*.

After a brief scuffle, both Mason and Slidell were brought aboard the *San Jacinto*, leaving family members and their rest of their stunned entourages on board the British ship. A number of days later the *Trent* docked in St. Thomas and telegraphed the news of the seizure of the Confederate ministers to England.

Arriving in Boston on November 23 with his captives, Wilkes was at first accorded a hero's welcome. The US House of Representatives passed a resolution honoring him. However, it quickly became apparent that the British were very unhappy with these events and considered it a serious breach of diplomatic protocol and an affront to their national honor. A statement demanding the release of the diplomats to continue their journey was delivered on December 19 in Washington from Lord Lyons, British ambassador, to William Seward, US Secretary of State. France indicated that it would be willing to side with Britain in retaliatory military action against the United States. Abraham Lincoln realized that the seizure of the diplomats was probably illegal as well as ill-advised. As he told his cabinet: "One war at a time."

After discussing the matter with Lincoln, Seward managed to extract the US from this diplomatic nightmare by telegraphing a message to England indicating that Wilkes had acted without permission or orders from the government. On January 1, Mason and Slidell were released into British custody and finally made their trips to England and France. As it turned out, their ventures to gain European support proved to be failures and the resolution of their incident may have actually even strengthened US and British ties.

During the same week that Mason and Slidell were captured, another adventure on the water proved costly to the Confederates. In an assault similar to that a few months earlier at Hatteras Island, a US amphibious force used a combination of naval gunfire and army troops to capture Forts Beauregard and Walker that guarded Port Royal Sound between Charleston and Savannah. The capture of this vital area allowed the Union to begin the long-lasting siege of Charleston shortly thereafter.

