

FOUR YEARS UNDER FIRE AT CHARLESTON

BY W. F. G. PECK

Originally published *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1865

FIVE years ago Charleston sat like a queen upon the waters. With the Ashley on the west and the Cooper on the east, her broad and beautiful bay covered with the sails of every nation, and her great article of export affording employment to thousands of looms, there was no city in the broad South whose present was more prosperous or whose future seemed more propitious. Added to its commercial advantages were those of a highly cultivated society. There was no city in the United States that enjoyed a higher reputation for intellectual culture than the metropolis of South Carolina. With this high intellectual culture were associated a refinement of taste, an elegance of manner, and a respect for high and noble lineage which made Charleston to appear more like some aristocratic European city than the metropolis of an American State. Combined with the English cavalier element which originally peopled the State there has always been a strong admixture of the descendants of old Huguenot families, who fled to this part of the world upon the revocation of the edict of Nantes. Some of these families, tracing their descent even back to a prior emigration from Italy into France, claim as their ancestor one of the Doges of Venice. The Huguenot element has always been strongly evinced in the society of Charleston, not only in peculiarity of taste and of feature but likewise in ecclesiastical organization. The present Huguenot Church is the third which has stood upon the site—the first organization of the congregation occurring about 1690—and is distinguished by a liturgy which for beauty of expression and simplicity of style is unsurpassed by that of any other religious body.

The general appearance of the city was in keeping with the historical precedents of the people. Its churches, especially those of the Episcopal denomination, were of the old English style of building, grand and spacious but devoid of tinsel and useless ornament. Its libraries, orphan asylums, and halls of public gathering were solidly constructed, well finished, and unique as specimens of architecture. Its dwellings combined elegance with comfort, simplicity with taste. The antique appearance of the city and its European character was the remark of almost every one who visited it. Mr. Gilmore Simms has in this Magazine* described the Palmetto City as it was before secession.

But all this is now changed. Except to an occasional blockade-runner the beautiful harbor of Charleston has been sealed for four long years; its fine society has been dissipated if not completely destroyed, while its noblest edifices have become a prey to the great conflagration of 1861, or have crumbled beneath the effect of the most continuous and terrific bombardment that has ever been concentrated upon a city.

The act which ushered in this momentous change was the passage of the ordinance of secession on the 20th December, 1860. No one living in Charleston at the time that event occurred can ever forget the scenes by which it was accompanied. No sooner had the bells of St. Michael's announced the fact than the wildest frenzy seemed to seize the whole population. The air was rent with huzzas; the national ensign was every where supplanted by the emblem of State sovereignty; palmetto branches were borne in triumph along the streets; bales of cotton were suspended on ropes stretched from house to house, on one of which was inscribed in large letters, "THE WORLD WANTS IT;" while the stirring notes of the Marseillaise, afterward exchanged for those of Dixie, met the ear at every corner. When the night had set in the sky was lurid with the glare of bonfires, and the ground fairly shook beneath the double-quick of all the young men of the city under arms and apparently eager for the fray.

Some there were who viewed all this with tearful eye and deep though suppressed emotion. Notwithstanding the confident assertion of Mr. Rhett, of the *Mercury*, that he would drink all the blood that would be shed, they saw the future lurid with all the horrors of civil strife. Among these was the venerable Judge Pettigrew. Walking along the streets of Columbia when the secession furor was at its height, and being accosted by a stranger with the inquiry "Where the insane asylum" was to be found? his reply was, "My friend, look around you; the whole State is one vast insane asylum."

The first overt act of hostility which followed the passage of the ordinance of secession was the firing upon the

*Harper's New Monthly Magazine, June, 1857

Star of the West. It is true that, previous to this, Major Anderson had been compelled through threats of violence to evacuate Fort Moultrie, and that it had been taken possession of by the South Carolina Militia; but no gun had yet been fired, no act had been committed which might be regarded as a direct and open defiance of the United States Government. This was reserved for the following 9th of January. The resident in the lower part of the city, looking out of his window that morning, at first saw nothing particularly noticeable in the bright blue bay which lay stretched out before him, flanked by the low, shelving shores of Sullivan's and Morris islands, and embracing the grim, gray walls of Sumter. Soon, however, the top-masts of a vessel were seen to rise slowly above the horizon. As it approached every eye was strained to catch its form, and every ear opened to hear the reception which its arrival might evoke. Soon a white puff of smoke was seen arising over the gray sands of Morris Island, and the ear caught the faint report of a gun. Another, and then another, till the farsighted of us could see the balls ricocheting over the waves in the direction from which the steamer was approaching. Had it kept on its course Sumter, whose ramparts were now glistening with bayonets, and whose shotted guns were protruding from every port, might have made the attempt to protect her, and there would have been enacted, though doubtless with greater honor to the United States Government, the combat which occurred three months later. But the *Star of the West* turned its prow and sped back to the open sea whence it came.

There is a little incident connected with the discharge of that first gun of the war which I have upon the testimony of one of the first ladies of the city. When ordered to fire, the cadet who held the lanyard of the gun was seen to hesitate. "How can I," he exclaimed, "fire upon that flag which I have been taught to respect and reverence from my youth? But a stern duty compels me;" and with that the iron messenger went speeding on its course.

Just three months after the firing upon the *Star of the West* occurred the attack upon Fort Sumter. The whole previous night the people of Charleston had spent in anxious expectation. It had been rumored that the opening of the contest would take place within the next twenty-four hours, but whether it would occur at midnight or at the early dawn it was impossible to conjecture. At just four o'clock

in the morning, before the gray light had begun to break in the east, we were all aroused by the report of a heavy gun fired from one of the adjoining islands. It was the signal to open, and in five minutes the air was filled with the whizzing of shot and the explosion of shell. The famous iron battery on Cumming's Point, constructed by Stevens, the cashier of one of the city banks, belched forth flame and smoke at an interval of every three minutes, and sent its shot crashing against the very walls of the defiant fort. This was continued till the day broke, and the sun was up before Major Anderson saw fit to make any reply. Having, like a discreet commander, first refreshed his men and put every thing about the fort in fighting trim, he opened alike from barbette and port batteries. There was not a man who witnessed that scene who was not struck with admiration at the regularity and precision of Sumter's fire. Gun for gun and volley for volley, the heroic Major paid the rebels back in their own coin. Had the fort contained a supply of mortars as well as cannon, and a full complement of men, well provided with the necessaries of life, the strife might have continued for weeks instead of days, and the fort never passed into other hands than those of its rightful owners. But the hostile mortar-batteries, inaccessible to mere shot, first drove the Union soldiers from the use of the barbette guns, then set the fort on fire and compelled its surrender. Let me here state positively that in this combat there was not a single rebel, as there was not a single Union soldier, killed. The only destruction of life which occurred took place at the bursting of the gun with which Anderson saluted his flag upon the evacuation of the fort. It was the remark of Judge Huger, made in my hearing, that "Providence seemed determined to accomplish his decrees in regard to the South without the shedding of a single drop of blood."

When the old State flag, riddled with shot, was brought from the Stevens battery up to the city and carried through the streets, the excitement was tremendous. Church-bells rang out their peals of joy; handkerchiefs waved from every window; friend embraced friend in a wild delirium of delight; while the whole mass of the population, believing that the North must yield to such a display of Southern valor, pressed upon the heels of the horseman and



General McGowan addressing the Abbeville Volunteers in front of the Charleston Hotel—*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 23, 1861

actually did homage to the ensign which he bore aloft.

Let us now pass over the time which intervened till the occupation of Morris Island by the Union troops. It was a time of varied sorrow and gladness. Now the news of some victory, like that of Bull Run, would stir the whole heart of the city, and cause it to beat high with hope. Then some defeat, like that of Port Royal, would equally depress it. But, upon the whole, there was the most confident assurance in regard to the result. "Whatever drawbacks we may meet with," remarked one of the first citizens of the State, "there is not the least doubt in my mind about our eventual success." "We may have reverses," said the Rev. Dr. Palmer, "but the policy of Providence from the time of the dispersion at the Tower of Babel has been the disintegration of nations. He allows them to grow large and unwieldy, as this nation has grown, and then, to promote the interests of civilization and of His kingdom, He breaks them asunder, as He will eventually break asunder this mighty people."

The dread of the Monitors, which made their appearance about this time, was very general throughout the city. None had seen one except at a great distance, but every one had heard the most fabulous accounts of their formidableness and power. So lively was then apprehension created by them that batteries went up like magic on the shores around the bay. Sullivan's Island became one vast line of earthworks, the most formidable of which was Battery Bee, on its extreme western point. Earthworks were also thrown up along the shores of James Island. Fort Sumter was immensely strengthened. Castle Pinckney received a new armament. Fort Ripley, an entirely new fort, was constructed of palmetto logs in the centre of the bay. The beautiful Battery walk, the favorite promenade of the Charleston ladies and gentlemen, was partially torn up, and bristled with heavy guns. Then followed the submersion of torpedoes in the harbor and the organization of a company of men called "*Tigers*," who, in spite of shot and shell, were to board the Monitors as they came up the bay, and planting ladders against their smoke-stacks, to throw bags of powder and other explosive compounds into the furnaces beneath. So numerous were the preparations for defense, that it was certain no vessel could come up to the city without running the gauntlet of at least three concentric circles of fire.

Some time after all these vast preparations had been completed, on a bright sunny day, about the hour of noon, Colonel Rhett telegraphed from Fort Sumter to the city that "*The turrets are coming*" and over the low fiat land of Morris Island we could see the smoke-stacks of the Monitors moving slowly along. One after another they came in solemn file, followed by the long black hulk of the *New Ironsides*, and took their stations near the fort. Then followed discharge after discharge from the heaviest guns which had ever been brought into naval warfare, answered by long, reverberating peals from the batteries on Sullivan, James, and Morris islands. The very earth and sea shook under the terrific din. At one time the *Ironsides* floated directly over a submarine torpedo, and must inevitably have been blown up, had not the apparatus by which it was to have been fired failed to elicit the necessary spark. After some hours the Monitors withdrew, having made but a slight impression upon the walls of the fort. The result of this combat inspired the Charlestonians with great hope. It relieved them of those fearful apprehensions which they had entertained in regard to the Monitors, and convinced them that they were by no means irresistible.

In anticipation of a conflict with the Monitors, great numbers of military men had flocked to the city from all parts of the South. As a consequence, the hotels and public promenades were crowded with officers, and the greatest dissipation prevailed. Balls and parties followed each other in rapid succession; gambling saloons were opened and drove a thriving business; loose women frequented the streets, impudently accosted passers-by, and filled the hotels with their presence. Nor were these evil influences encouraged and promoted by officers of inferior rank alone. Military men, high in station, and regarded as the principal supports of "the Confederacy," by their immoral bearing, succeeded in bringing themselves into disgrace; and tainting with suspicion the character of heretofore reputable women. At no time during the war have those high moral influences which have been brought to bear upon the Union soldiers, by means of the Christian Commission and other religious associations, pervaded the armies of the South. Both officers and men were swept away by the same current of dissoluteness and vice, till in many cases whole armies became pest-houses of immorality and irreligion.

The Charlestonians at this time also began to experience trouble with their slaves. Many were induced to follow the example of Robert Small, and in small boats running the gauntlet of the rebel batteries, to join the enemy. So frequent did this become that negroes were finally forbidden to occupy boats in certain parts of the harbor for fishing purposes, and the inhabitants of the city were deprived of one of their principal articles of diet. These runaway servants, it was well known, carried with them to the enemy much valuable information which would be made use of in case of an attack on the city.

Thus affairs went on till the early part of July, 1863, when just at daybreak one morning the people who lived

on the Battery were aroused by a sharp, rapid fire of musketry. So sudden was it and so in contrast with the quiet of the preceding days that it took every one by surprise. It was soon discovered to proceed from the neighborhood of the southern extremity of Morris Island, and later information developed the fact that the Union troops had opened a masked battery on Folly Island and seemed determined to force their way across the narrow strait which separates it from Morris Island. How they contrived to elude the rebel generals in the erection of this battery was a mystery.* The surprise, however, was complete. The solitary company of artillerymen which had been stationed there were soon driven back, and thus an entrance effected through the only door by which an approach to Charleston could have been made. In vain had an attempt been essayed over James Island; in vain had the Union gunboats endeavored to force the Stone; in vain had Sumter been assailed by the powerful armament of the Monitors. The Charlestonians began to exult over their secure and impregnable position, and avow their belief that all the armies of the world could not force their way to their metropolis, when the action of the 10th of July suddenly convinced them of their error and filled them with the gravest apprehension. There was no one so blind but could perceive that the charge of great negligence must be laid at the door of some one of their generals; but whether Beauregard, who had supreme command, or Ripley, who acted as his subordinate, and was intrusted with the particular supervision of the batteries, should be arraigned was long a matter of dispute. The feeling of recrimination eventually ran so high between the two generals that Ripley was forced to resign, and the Charlestonians were thus deprived of the services of one of the best artillerists in the Southern army.

It may not be amiss just here to relate the impressions formed in regard to the character of Beauregard, who during most of this eventful period held command in the city. By all the Charlestonians he was held in high respect, even admiration. He was gentlemanly in his bearing, fluent and affable in conversation, remarkable in his military capacities as an engineer (as the fortifications around Charleston testify), and versed as a strategist. But he was greatly deficient in moral courage, and in the power to enforce discipline among his troops. This was manifest in the battle of Shiloh where, after virtually achieving a great victory, he lost its results in the dispersion of his soldiers to secure the plunder which the Northern troops had left behind them. It was also exhibited in the shameful and execrable conduct of many of the soldiers under his command which were stationed within the precincts of the city. All the disasters which he experienced may apparently be traced to this deficiency. But Beauregard likewise labored under great disadvantages from the inveterate prejudice which existed in the mind of Jefferson Davis against him. So strong was this prejudice that it was exhibited even in the most trivial military arrangements, and served to increase that sentiment of hostility toward Davis which began to be evinced in the minds of the people of Charleston soon after the commencement of the war. Like General Jo Johnston, Beauregard had the malignity and power of the administration pitted against him.

Having obtained a foothold on Morris Island, the Union troops slowly advanced by a system of parallels till they arrived within gun-shot of batteries Wagner and Gregg, which the rebel troops had erected on the extreme northern point of the island, and nearest to the city. With their Parrott guns they could even command the walls of

* General Gillmore thus explains the manner in which this was effected: "Between the middle of June and the 6th of July, ordnance and ordnance stores were quietly accumulated at Folly Island. The following armament [10 batteries with 41 guns and mortars] was secretly placed on the north end of Folly Island, complete masked from the enemy's view by sand-ridges and undergrowth. It was necessary that the attack on Morris Island should be a surprise in order to insure success. Secrecy was therefore an essential element in the preparations. Most of the work on the batteries, and all the transportation to them, was accomplished at night, and in silence. Moreover, all signs of work had to be carefully concealed by day. One fortunate circumstance favored these operations. A blockade-runner had been chased ashore just south of the entrance to Light-house Inlet, within point-blank range of our batteries, and while the enemy on Morris Island were industriously engaged in wrecking this vessel by night and day (an operation which we could easily have prevented) our batteries were quietly and rapidly pushed forward to completion. They were ready to open fire on the 6th of July. The fact that forty-seven pieces of artillery, with two hundred rounds of ammunition for each gun, and provided with suitable parapets, splinter-proof shelters and magazines, were secretly placed in battery in a position within speaking-distance of the enemy's pickets, exposed to a flank and reverse view from their tall observatories on James Island, and to a flank view at pistol-range from the wreck, furnishes by no means the least interesting and instructive incident of this campaign."— EDITOR HARPER'S MAGAZINE.]

Sumter. And now commenced that long artillery contest which will make the siege of Charleston eventful in all subsequent years. Night and day the air was filled with shrieking shell and whizzing shot. Standing on the Battery promenade in the darkness of the evening, I have counted no less than eight bombs in the air at one time. This bombardment was almost daily participated in by some portion or by all of the Union fleet, and then the thunder of artillery would be so great that every house in the lower part of the city trembled to its base. It was interesting also to witness the effect of the Parrott guns upon the walls of Sumter. They accomplished with ease what the heavy eight, ten, and even fifteen-inch balls of the Monitors had in vain essayed. Every shot sent the brick and beams and mortar high into mid-air, and in some cases went through and through the solid walls. Soon one could see the light shining through its grim, dark ramparts. Then followed great breaches; then fragments would topple down into the water below. The Southerners worked incessantly to repair these damages. Vessel-loads of sand and other materials were nightly sent down, and large forces of negroes were kept constantly at work. At one time a portion of the wall fell, burying beneath it a number of the garrison. At another time a Federal shell caused the explosion of a quantity of ammunition, and destroyed many valuable lives. Captain Harleston, a very promising young officer, who was intrusted with the command, was struck down while inspecting the injuries done to the fort, a loss which was felt to be irreparable.

But notwithstanding these apparent calamities, it was eventually ascertained that the enemy's guns, so far from materially injuring the work as a fortification, were actually making it stronger. The loose debris heaped up afforded a far more efficient protection against solid shot than the massive brick walls. It was only necessary that the soldiers should be protected from the fragments of shells which were continually bursting over the fort, and this was accomplished by erecting vast "rat-holes," or bomb-proofs, and by excavating long subterranean passages which connected one part of the fort with another. When the signal was given by the sentinel on the lookout of the discharge of a gun, it was amusing to see how the area of the fort, just before filled with men, would suddenly become as solitary as if never trodden by a human foot.

The superiority of a fortification of debris or sand over brick and stone, as opposed to heavy artillery, was particularly conspicuous in the instance of Battery Wagner. Day after day, and week after week, that simple sand-work withstood the whole Union fleet and all the land batteries which could be erected against it, and fell only through the close approach of the Federal parallels, whereby their sharp-shooters effectually prevented the Confederates from using their guns.*

The successful defense of Wagner and of other points of attack about the city was also owing to the possession by the Confederates of the Union code of signals. From the walls of Sumter they could decipher with ease every communication which passed between the army and the fleet, and thus became cognizant of intended movements on the part of the Northern troops in time effectually to resist them.

Just previous to the bloody assault on Wagner I was sitting upon one of the seats of the Battery promenade in the city when a colonel passed by who had been in command of a battery on James Island. Upon inquiring of him the news, he informed me that an assault on Wagner would be attempted at a certain time, and that the Southern generals were making busy preparations to meet it. When I asked him how the information was obtained, he confidentially told me of the possession of the Union code of signals by the Confederate officers. Upon further inquiry as to how the Southerners were fortunate enough to obtain this code, he said that some days previous a Union signal-master had been captured on the beach, and when he had been locked up in prison the services of a clever fellow were secured, who was to array himself in Federal uniform and feign himself a cap-

* General Gillmore says: "Fort Wagner was found to be a work of the most formidable character—far more so, indeed, than the most exaggerated statements of prisoners had led us to expect. Its bomb-proof shelter, capable of containing from 1500 to 1600 men, remained intact after one of the most severe bombardments to which any earth-work was ever exposed. The attempt to form an opening into the bomb-proof by breaching failed from want of time. The heavy projectiles were slowly eating their way into it, although their effect was astonishingly slight. Indeed the penetration of rifle projectile, fired into a sand parapet standing at the natural slope, or approximately so, is but trifling. They are almost invariably deflected along the line of least resistance, or one departing slightly from it, scooping out is their progress a small hollow, the contents of which are scattered but a short distance. Under such circumstances the general effect produced by firing a large number of successive shots within a small area of say from fifteen to twenty feet square, is by no means commensurate with the necessary expenditure of ammunition." —ED. HARPER'S MAGAZINE.

tured Union officer. He was then to be surrounded by a guard, marched to the jail, and confined in the same cell with the signal-officer, where it was understood he was to obtain his confidence, and elicit from him the desired information. The device succeeded beyond the most sanguine anticipation!

The Union soldiers wounded and captured at the bloody assault on Wagner were brought up to the city on boats, and placed in a large brick warehouse in Queen Street, near to Church Street. It was in the month of July, when the heat is more intense than during any month in the year. The locality was close and confined, and the consequence was that they died by scores. I am not prepared to say that no other locality could have been obtained for them. I fear that the military authorities of Charleston will find it difficult, in this instance at least, to acquit themselves of the charge of a want of due consideration toward a prostrate and wounded foe. The high sense of magnanimity and honor, on the possession of which they were accustomed to pride themselves, was at this time entirely absorbed in feelings of resentment and vindictiveness.

There are events in a man's life which he never forgets; there are scenes which never fade from his sight, and sounds which are ever fresh in his hearing, though he attain a century of years. I can never forget, and there are many others who can never forget, the impression which the sound of the first shell thrown into Charleston made upon the mind. It was near midnight, and, with the exception of a few of the more wakeful ones, the whole city was buried in slumber. Suddenly, and without the least premonition, a whizzing, shrieking sound was heard above the roofs of the houses, which was conjectured by some to be a rocket sent up from one of the signal-stations in the lower part of the city. A few moments served to convince them of their error, for the sound was repeated, and this time with such unmistakable distinctness as to remove all doubt from the mind of even the most dubious. It was also noticed that the sound was each time preceded by the faint flash and reverberation of a gun located apparently on the southeastern extremity of James Island. The fact then became evident, and was soon corroborated by the shouts of the people in the streets, that the Federals were shelling the city. Had the advent of the final judgment been announced it could not have created greater surprise and consternation. The sidewalks were soon filled with flying women and children hurrying to secure in the upper part of the town a refuge beyond the reach of the deadly missiles. The excitement was increased by the breaking out of a fire reported to have originated by the explosion of one of the shells. These first shells, it was subsequently ascertained, were thrown from the Swamp Angel Battery, located in a marsh to the southeast of James Island, the erection of which had escaped the observation of the Southern generals. This marsh, it was calculated, was four miles from the nearest point of the city, and the shells were consequently thrown a distance of four miles and a half. And yet this was by no means equal to what the Union artillerists subsequently attained, for when they had taken possession of Battery Wagner they sent their shells three or four blocks above Citadel Green—a distance approximating to five and a half or six miles. The great difficulty which has always been experienced in throwing shells to such enormous distances consists in the great elevation which must thereby be given to the gun. When a horizontal shot is fired the retrograde motion of the gun caused by reaction is comparatively easy. It slides along the rail on which it rests until the force is spent, without the least injury to itself. But it is not so when the gun is elevated to a great angle. Then the concussion, instead of expending itself horizon-tally, drives the gun almost perpendicularly into the ground, and unless carefully guarded against will be certain to disable it. This was illustrated in the first attempts of the Union army to shell the city at such enormous distances. The guns at first almost invariably became disabled, and it required a considerable time to attain the perfection which they subsequently exhibited in the demonstrations made from Forts Gregg and Wagner.

Again, it is a well-known fact that a new gun will fire to a much greater distance than one that has been subjected to much use. This is owing to the grooves of the gun being sharp and unworn, whereby the shell fits the more compactly, and the whole blast of the powder is made available. We always knew in Charleston when a new gun had been mounted, by its length of range, and, however great the distance which it attained, always comforted ourselves with the reflection that the next shot would be sure to fall short.

There was a great rush and crowd the next morning after the first shells were thrown into the city to see where they fell and the effect which they had produced. The fragments of one were discovered in the neighborhood of the store of G. W. Williams and Co., to the rear of the Charleston Hotel. It had shattered the building, and buried itself in the street just in front. Another had attained the distance of a square farther to the north, and fell at the corner of Anson and Hasel streets, scattering its fragments far and wide. It was soon positively ascertained that a residence in the lower part of the city was no longer safe. Even should the Confederate batteries succeed in silencing the "Swamp Angel," the energy and enterprise of the Northerners would soon command another station, where they might repeat the experiment, and perhaps with greater success. Houses in the upper part of the city, therefore, be-

gan to be in demand, and that exodus commenced which, upon the establishment of the Union batteries upon Morris Island, left the lower districts of the town a complete solitude.

It was ascertained when the Union troops had obtained possession of Morris Island that they trained their guns on the city by the tall, massive steeple of St. Michael's. About no one of the numerous churches of Charleston do such interesting associations cluster as about this time-honored edifice. It is reputed to have been built after a design furnished by Sir Christopher Wren, the architect of St. Paul's, London. Its organ was played at the coronation of one of the Georges; its chime of bells, by far the sweetest in the land, was originally brought from England, whither they were taken back upon the capture of the city in the Revolutionary war by the British. Here they were put up at auction, and bought in by a wealthy Englishman, who, after the war, returned them to the church. It was just in front of this church, at the corner of Broad and Meeting streets, that a statue of William Pitt used to stand, which was struck by a ball from the British batteries erected during the Revolution on James Island, and which threw their shot right into the streets of the city. The mutilated statue may still be seen standing in the grounds of the Orphan House.

During the whole of this present war the steeple of St. Michael's has been converted into an observatory. Near its top a room was constructed, fitted up with a stove to keep its occupant warm during cold weather, and furnished with a powerful telescope, through which all the movements of the Union army could be easily distinguished. Night and day the observer was kept at his post, transmitting not only frequent records of the various manœuvres of the enemy to the quarters of the general in command, but also making note of every shot fired at the city. There was imminent danger lest some one of these shot might strike the steeple and choke up the narrow passage by which alone a descent could be effected, and so a rope ladder was stretched on the outside from the observatory above to the ground beneath, by which, in case of such accident, an escape might be made. Strange to say, though the shells fell like a rain of iron all around, striking the guardhouse opposite, riddling the City Hall on the north, plowing up the graveyard on the south, and almost demolishing the Mansion House in the rear, yet this steeple was not once struck, nor was the body of the edifice injured till a short time previous to the evacuation of the city.



St Michael's Church (*Selected Civil War photographs, 1861-1865*—Library of Congress)

It was interesting to notice the varied effects of the shells in their descent into the city. Certainly one half failed to explode, the percussion shell being so arranged that it must fall at a particular angle in order to crush the cap which ignites the combustible material within. Failing to explode, they would simply drive a hole through the wall or roof against which they struck and bury themselves in the ground below. Many accidents occurred from digging up these unexploded missiles and attempting to extract the fuse. When a shell exploded on striking the noise was equal to that of a good sized piece of artillery, and it was certain to produce the greatest destruction for many rods around. I have seen almost the whole front of a two-story building torn off by a single shell. A large shell entered the loft of a warehouse on East Bay Street, and striking the joists of the roof at a particular angle, caused the whole roof to slide off to one side. A 30-pound Parrott exploded between the roof and ceiling of one of the churches of the city, made fifteen apertures of different sizes in the ceiling, demolished a bronze chandelier over the pulpit, broke the reading-desk, split the communion-table, partially demolished two or three pews, and made several rents in the floor beneath—all the effect of a 30-pound Parrott, the fragments of which were afterward collected and fitted together. Another shell tore open a Bible upon the pulpit-desk of a church, leaving a leaf upon which were conspicuous the words, "*An enemy hath done this.*" A large two-hundred pounder struck the Second Presbyterian Church in Charlotte Street just in the rear of the portico, and so seriously injured it that it was apprehended that the whole front of the church would fall in. But the percussion shells, though more destructive to property, were not so destructive of human life as the time fuse shells which were thrown comparatively late in the siege. The fragment of a shell one day entered a barber's saloon and took off the head of a negro while engaged in his work. Another negro

walking along one of the principal streets of the city, and hearing the approach of a shell ran into an alley to get clear of it, and crouched behind a door. The shell entered the alley, struck the door and killed the negro. A couple newly married were found one morning lying dead in each other's arms. A shell had struck the house during the night, penetrated to the chamber in which they were, and extinguished the life of both at the same instant. In a house in Queen Street a woman was sleeping in her bed when a shell penetrated the roof of the building, passed through the bed, just grazing her outstretched arm, and then sank through the floor into the cellar beneath.

Yet notwithstanding the occurrence of so many casualties, people soon became hardened to the idea of danger, and would not hesitate to take their walks in the lower part of the city even when the shells were passing overhead. One of the most amusing incidents of the bombardment was the eagerness exhibited by the boys of the city to obtain possession of the shells. The sound of the approach of one would no sooner be heard than a troop of them would be seen dashing through the streets to the spot where it was likely to fall. Arrived at the place they would immediately commence to excavate it with such instruments as they could command. The fragments of the shells they would sell for old iron and obtain a very good price for them, but the copper ring which banded the shell was especially valuable from the great scarcity of copper in the arsenals of the Confederacy. An unexploded shell was picked up one day near the bridge at the head of Rutledge Avenue, on which had been inscribed by the Unionists, "Find your way to the arsenal, old fellow!" When we reflect that the arsenal was only two squares distant, and lying directly in the line which the shell was pursuing when it fell, we must give to the Union artillerymen the credit of having been remarkably good shots. The accuracy of fire which was continually exhibited astonished the people of Charleston more than anything else. I had frequent occasion to notice this accuracy. A fire would break out in the lower part of the city and the Federals would train their guns with such exactness that the shells would fall directly into the flames. Upon one occasion one of the fire engines was struck while it was being worked, and some of the firemen severely injured. Recalling the fact that these shells were thrown from a distance of over four miles, the accuracy of aim will appear astonishing indeed.

More particularly was this accuracy of fire exhibited when directed to the blockade-runners that were unfortunate enough to get aground in running into or out of the harbor. They were generally discovered at daylight, and in the course of a few hours hardly a vestige of them would remain.

During those long wearisome days and weeks when the city was under fire almost the only event of joy which would occur would be the arrival of some one of these blockade-runners. The business was finally reduced to a science. Even in the darkest night the cunning craft would work their way in or out through the tortuous channels of the harbor. When outward-bound the captain generally went down to Sullivan's Island upon the evening of sailing to learn the disposition of the Union fleet and plan the course of his exit. Lights also were always prearranged along the shores of the island, or suspended from boats in the harbor, in order to indicate the channel. The most dangerous point, and that which demanded the exercise of the greatest skill to avoid, was a narrow tongue of land which ran out from Sullivan's Island just opposite Sumter, and which was known as the Breakwater Jetty. Here the channel is not only very narrow but takes a sudden turn, and it was in making this turn that the vessel was in danger of getting aground. The Union artillerymen after a while learned many of the cunning arts of the blockade-runner, and whenever they saw a light from the opposite shore of Morris Island, which they supposed was intended for the guidance of a vessel, they would immediately open fire. They had a way too of sending out picket-boats which would quietly allow the vessel to pass till it had rounded the jetty and return became impossible, and then by means of rockets would signalize the fleet outside.

The chase of a blockade-runner was the most exciting thing imaginable. Like a hunted deer it would speed through the water, its fierce avenger after it, every beam from stem to stern quivering through the violent pulsations of its great iron heart, and the dash of the paddles as in their lightning-like revolutions they would strike the water. Sometimes not only was one half of the cargo thrown overboard, but every combustible thing that could be laid hold of crowded into the furnaces to increase the steam. Some of these blockade-runners were very successful. I knew of one which had run the gauntlet no less than nineteen times, and had consequently proved a mine of wealth to its owners. When a vessel had once run the blockade it was considered to have paid for itself, and every subsequent trip was consequently clear gain. The captain generally cleared on each round trip ten thousand dollars in gold, and the pilot and mate in proportion.

To be at all connected with or interested in a blockade-runner was in those days esteemed in Charleston a signal piece of good fortune. It insured at least a partial supply of the comforts and luxuries of life; for the ladies an occasional new silk dress, the envy and admiration of the streets; for the gentlemen a good supply of Bourbon—a

box or two of cigars, or a larder filled with Stilton cheese or West India fruits. By-and-by came an edict from Richmond forbidding the importation of luxuries of this kind, and restricting the cargo of a vessel entirely to those articles which the country needed in its military operations, or which contributed to the supply of the actual necessities of the people. One half of the cargo of the vessel going out was also required to be devoted to government account, and one half of the cargo of the vessel coming in. This, of course, greatly curtailed the profits of the owners, but still immense fortunes continued to be made on both sides of the water.

It was about this time that a large number of Union prisoners were brought into Charleston from various parts of the South. They were sent here partly for security against the Federal raids, which were becoming very frequent through the land, and partly on account of the scarcity of provisions, which compelled their distribution through the various cities and towns of the country. The officers at first were crowded in with the men, and both were placed under fire in the lower part of the city. Upon a remonstrance, however, sent up from General Gillmore, on Morris Island, and a threat to retaliate, which was actually carried out, these prisoners were removed to a place of comparative security. Among the officers who were confined in Charleston at that time was General Seymour, whose frank and gentlemanly bearing won for him the high respect and admiration even of his enemies. Upon one day he sent for the Rev. Toomer Porter, rector of the church of the Holy Communion, with whom he had had a slight acquaintance before the war, to come and see him. Mr. Porter accordingly went, and in course of conversation the General remarked that he had sent for him to inquire whether arrangements could not be made whereby himself and his fellow-officers could enjoy the privileges of religious worship. If so, he was desirous that Mr. Porter himself should come the following Sabbath and preach to them. In reply to the General's request Mr. Porter immediately remarked that he "thought there would be no objection made to his coming, but that he would feel himself obligated to perform the whole service of his Church." "Certainly," replied the General, not at first comprehending his meaning; "I am sure that there is no service which will be more acceptable to myself, having been educated in your Church—and perhaps I may say to my fellow-officers." "But you do not understand me, General," continued the clergy-man. "I mean to say that there is in our service a prayer for the President of the Confederate States, which I could not deem myself at liberty to omit." "As for that," replied the General, "I myself care nothing. There is no one whom I consider so greatly to stand in need of being prayed for as Mr. Davis. However, I can not answer for the sentiments of my brother officers, and I will consult them and let you know our determination by the approaching Sabbath." The other officers were accordingly consulted, and the result was that Mr. Porter received a note from General Seymour, the following Sabbath, stating that, upon the whole, it would not be agreeable that the services should be performed under such conditions. A clergyman, however, was found who, though of the same denomination, consented to respect the scruples of the Union officers and to omit the prayer.

Every day, as the war continued, the currency became more and more depreciated. Four months before the evacuation of the city gold was selling as high as seventy for one. This, of course, greatly increased the price of provisions, and rendered living to those who were dependent upon annuities or salaries a serious matter. A piece of roast beef, adequate for a family of three or four, cost forty dollars; sweet-potatoes, a natural product of the soil, one dollar each; a barrel of flour five hundred dollars, and other things in proportion. A family of four could hardly live on rice and the ordinary cow-pea soup under one hundred dollars a week. Butter, coffee, sugar, and tea were among those luxuries about which the least that was said the better.

The effect of this low diet, combined with the great anxiety attendant upon the support of a family and the political state of the country, soon became apparent in the countenances of the people. Never have I seen men grow old so fast as the inhabitants of Charleston, from the time the shelling of the city commenced down to its occupation by the Union troops. Heads which were of raven blackness became silvered with gray during the interval of only a few months. Faces which were as smooth as an infant's became seamed and furrowed with wrinkles. Boys looked like old men, and old men speedily dropped away and died. Never has there been such a mortality among old people as among the old people of Charleston since the commencement of this war. The anxiety, change of diet, and circumstance, were more than advanced years could endure, and they went down by scores to the grave.

Among the calamities which befell the city not the least was the conduct of the troops who had been quartered in the city for its protection. One or two companies of them were stationed on the Battery, and of all the thieves, burglars, and highwaymen who were ever brought together, I may not hesitate to affirm these were the worst. They roamed through the lower part of the city perfectly unrestrained. There was not a house which they did not enter, plundering it of furniture, of carpets, of books, of every thing upon which they could lay their rapacious hands. Leaden pipes were dug up; copper pumps were carried off; even the locks and keys of doors were abstracted, sent

out of the city, and sold. By-and-by the lives of people who ventured into this part of the city to look after their abandoned property were not considered safe. The marauders prowled the streets, gun in hand, ready both to rob and murder any one who ventured within their power. For a season no one ventured out after nightfall, in any part of the city, without secreting a revolver about his person.

The lower portions of the city, thus given up to be a prey and plunder, soon began to evince the most unmistakable appearance of dreariness and desolation. Some of the streets became so covered with grass as to conceal the cobble-stones beneath. I have seen cows and goats quietly pasturing where for years the highway had been worn by the corrosion of passing vehicles; I have seen the crow and the owl roosting where for years the tramp of horses and the rattle of cart-wheels were almost the only sounds to be heard; I have seen rank weeds springing from the gutters of streets which were once busy with the tide of passing men, to such a height as almost to exclude from view the opposite sidewalk. The highways of Herculaneum and Pompeii never filled one with such a feeling of utter loneliness and desolation as some of the streets of the lower part of the city of Charleston.

At last the climax of all this misery and suffering approached. It became evident to the far-sighted that by the march of Sherman through the State the city must of necessity be evacuated. Military men, however, persistently refused to acknowledge this necessity; they refused to acknowledge it even while they were secretly transporting the large supplies of ordnance which the town contained. Finally, the truth was made apparent to all by the violent explosion of ammunition which it was found impossible to carry away. Then followed the heavy tramp of the retreating soldiery, and the bursting out on every side of the city of vast sheets of flame and clouds of smoke. The order from the commander was, as I know from unquestionable authority, that every building should be laid in ashes. Thanks to a merciful Providence, the iniquitous and barbarous edict was only partially consummated when the Union troops marched in and saved the city. The apprehension, tumult, and horror of that day will never be effaced from the mind, and can only be compared with the exceeding joy arising from the sense of relief produced by the entrance of the Union troops.



Library of Congress Civil War Photograph Collection