

Salute

Salute marked a turning point in morale and symbolism for the besieged soldiers inside Fort Sumter. The atmosphere inside the fort had grown increasingly grim, not just because of dwindling supplies but also from emotional and psychological exhaustion. Asst. Surgeon Samuel Crawford, who had once maintained an optimistic tone in his letters, now confessed to his brother that he felt physically and mentally drained. The intense stress and constant anticipation of attack weighed on every man stationed within those walls. Crawford likened the activity across the harbor to a hive of bees, where the Carolinians worked relentlessly on their fortifications, revealing their own nervous anticipation of what was coming. Despite the soldiers' strict rationing of ammunition and limited resources, what kept them moving was a quiet sense of pride in their position—even if they suspected they might be pawns in a much larger political chess match.

The lack of reinforcements was a particularly sore subject for many inside the fort, especially for Crawford. He criticized former President Buchanan's indecision and blamed his passive policies for leaving Sumter's garrison exposed and isolated. Crawford believed that Washington was delaying action intentionally, hoping the Confederacy would make the first move and thereby shift public opinion against secessionists. The soldiers were painfully aware of the political games being played beyond their walls, and many feared they were being used to provoke a reaction rather than defend federal authority. Even so, Crawford held out hope that if a shot were fired on the fort, it would unify the North in defense of the Union. That act of aggression could finally transform passive resistance into a call to arms, sparking a broader awakening in the public consciousness. There was a sense that history was about to pivot—and that they would be the ones standing at its center.

On February 22, Major Anderson made a bold decision: to fire a ceremonial salute in honor of George Washington's birthday. It was a subtle yet profound statement. Thirty-four cannons were fired—one for each state in the Union, including those that had already seceded. The gesture was deliberate and unapologetic, asserting that the Union still considered the seceded states part of the nation. Crawford, who oversaw the ceremonial act, noted how curious Confederate soldiers stationed in nearby batteries watched the event in silence. They did not fire back. The moment hung in the air, dense with unspoken questions—was this a provocation, a show of strength, or simply a reminder of unity that once existed? For the Union soldiers, it was a moment of dignity and defiance. It also demonstrated that morale, while strained, was not entirely broken.

However, not everyone saw the salute as a gesture of honor. Mary Chesnut, the Southern diarist whose husband served as a Confederate officer, expressed her dismay in her journal. She viewed the act not just as political defiance but as an insult to the legitimacy of the Confederacy. Her words conveyed the depth of animosity that now divided not only governments but neighbors and families. Anderson's choice revealed the complicated layers of symbolism at play—where a simple military tradition could be interpreted as an act of courage, an insult, or a cry for unity depending on one's perspective. While the guns at Sumter had not yet fired in anger, the ideological conflict was already in full swing. The salute became a flashpoint, embodying both the fort's resolve and the fragile line between ceremony and war.

The psychological strain on Fort Sumter's garrison grew more visible by the day. Supplies were running low, communication with Washington was sporadic, and reinforcements had yet to arrive. Yet there was something about that February 22 salute that lifted spirits, if only temporarily. It reminded the men that they weren't forgotten—that they were upholding a tradition, a cause, and a national identity that still mattered. Washington's birthday served as more than a historical anniversary; it became a rallying cry for those holding the line. Even the Confederates, watching from across the water, had to acknowledge the audacity of it. Anderson and his men stood

their ground, signaling not just with words but with the thunder of cannons that the Union was not ready to yield, even if it stood alone on a crumbling island in Charleston Harbor.

In the days following the salute, the calm before the storm persisted. The Confederate positions continued to grow stronger, with new guns being mounted and barracks reinforced. Inside the fort, routines became a means of survival—drills, maintenance, letters home. Yet the soldiers knew these tasks were temporary distractions. The salute had set a tone, and everyone sensed that it had pushed the standoff one step closer to conflict. For those inside Fort Sumter, loyalty had ceased to be just about flag or command—it had become a deeply personal choice to hold fast even when the odds were stacked against them. And in doing so, they etched themselves into the final, quiet hours before America would descend into civil war.