

Crossing the Bar

Crossing the Bar, the *Star of the West* encountered surprisingly clear weather on January 8 as it made its way toward its destination. However, the officer in charge, Lieutenant Woods, was unaware that the mission had been canceled, and he distributed guns and ammunition to the troops, preparing them for action. As the ship approached Charleston around midnight, Captain John McGowan ordered all lights to be extinguished, aiming to prevent the ship from being detected. Despite the darkness, enhanced by the new moon, the soldiers were allowed on deck, awaiting further instructions. This moment underscored the tension and uncertainty surrounding the operation as the crew proceeded without full knowledge of the mission's cancellation.

When they reached the Charleston Bar, McGowan observed that the harbor lighthouses were dark, and a key navigational buoy was missing. To navigate safely, he resorted to sounding, an ancient method where a weighted line was lowered into the water to measure the depth, allowing them to move forward cautiously. As dawn approached, the crew spotted a light, which McGowan identified as coming from Fort Sumter, signaling that they were on the right course. Woods later reflected on their journey, describing their approach as “groping in the dark,” a vivid portrayal of the uncertainty they faced in unfamiliar waters. With the ebb tide complicating their navigation, they waited for daylight before attempting to cross the bar, fully aware of the dangers lurking in the surrounding waters.

As daylight broke, McGowan noticed a nearby steamer, evidently on watch, prompting him to ensure that the *Star of the West's* flag remained visible. The steamer responded with blue and red lights, signaling a demand for identification. When McGowan chose not to respond, the steamer fired rockets and crossed into the harbor. As they neared the entrance, both Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie came into view, with

the American flag clearly visible at Fort Sumter. This sight further intensified the sense of foreboding, as the presence of military defenses indicated that the situation was becoming increasingly precarious. The flag's presence signaled that the Union's hold over the fort was still intact, but tensions were running high as the *Star of the West* moved closer to its destination.

Lookouts on board soon spotted a large red palmetto flag flying on Morris Island, signaling the presence of a hidden battery of five cannons, manned by cadets from a nearby smallpox hospital. Captain Abner Doubleday, stationed at Fort Sumter, was aware of the cannon's purpose: not to attack Fort Sumter directly but to guard the shipping channel from possible threats. Despite hearing rumors about the *Star of the West's* mission, Doubleday was skeptical that the government would send only a transport ship in such a delicate situation. He believed that the presence of such a vessel in the midst of rising tensions was highly improbable, making him hesitant to act immediately on the growing rumors.

As he scanned the horizon, Doubleday saw the steamer approaching, displaying the United States flag. Just as the *Star of the West* drew nearer, a cannon fired from the battery on Morris Island, landing in the water ahead of the ship, seemingly intended to deter its advance. Nevertheless, the *Star of the West* continued its course, its large United States garrison flag raised high. This prompted Doubleday to urgently notify Major Anderson about the unfolding events. Doubleday's quick response highlights the escalating tension between the Union forces and the growing Southern resistance, marking a pivotal moment in the lead-up to the Civil War. The *Star of the West's* mission, now known to involve significant risk, set the stage for further confrontations as the Union and Confederate forces braced for what would soon become an open conflict.

The chapter vividly illustrates the precarious situation faced by both the Union and Confederate forces, each maneuvering within a delicate balance of power. The *Star of the West's* journey, fraught with uncertainty and challenges, symbolized the fragile state of the nation, where both sides were preparing for what seemed like an

inevitable clash. The presence of the cannons on Morris Island and the visible flags at Fort Sumter revealed that military forces on both sides were already anticipating conflict. As tensions mounted, every decision, from the steamer's response to the actions of the soldiers aboard the *Star of the West*, contributed to the unraveling of the Union's position in Charleston and the South's resolve to assert its independence. This chapter exemplifies the intricate military and political maneuvers that set the stage for the Civil War.

