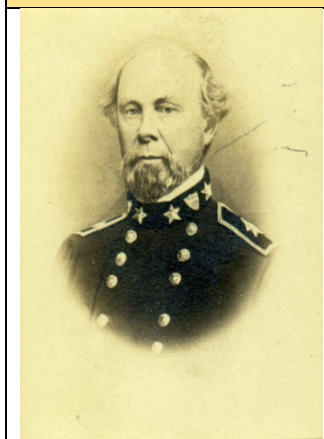


## Chapter 298 – South Carolina Secedes And Demands Control Over Federal Forts



**Dates:**  
December 17-22, 1860

- Sections:**
- South Carolina Secedes!
  - South Carolina Demands The Surrender Of Federal Property Including The Charleston Forts
  - Secretary Of War John Floyd Is Implicated In A Scandal

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Date: December 17-20, 1860

### South Carolina Secedes!



While Congress debates, the nation’s eyes turn toward South Carolina where the state convention opens in Columbia at the local Baptist Church on December 17, 1860.

Roughly 170 delegates appear, including members chosen from many of the leading families in the state, men such as James Chestnut, R.B. Rhett, James Orr, Lawrence Keitt, William Gist and others.

Judge David F. Jamison, a former member of the local legislature, is chosen to preside, and a series of grievances are debated and agreed to. They include:

- The 1820 Missouri Compromise banning slavery south of 36° 30’
- Disproportionate taxation levied on the region to run the federal government
- Denial of slaveholder access to western land they fought for in the Mexican War
- Persistent lack of Northern enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law
- Admission of the entire territory of California as a Free State
- Repeated attacks on Southern settlers in Kansas by abolitionists

Robert Barnwell Rhett (1800-1886)

But before the delegates agree by 159-0 to draft an Ordinance of Secession, the convention is interrupted by rumors of a potential outbreak of smallpox in Columbia – possibly the result of a plot originating in New York.

To avoid the risk, the delegates board a train on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> for a 120 mile ride southeast to Charleston, where they reconvene at the Institute Hall to resume business. The next day they move to a smaller and more secret venue at St. Andrew’s Hall, with representatives from Mississippi and Alabama joining in.

The climax of their work comes at 1:07pm on December 20 when an Ordinance of Secession is read:

*We the People of the State of South Carolina, in Convention assembled, do declare and ordain...that the union now subsisting under the name of ‘The United States of America,’ is hereby dissolved.*

Voting on the motion is perfunctory at this point, and it carries 169-0.

After the delegates sign the declaration back at the Institute Hall, President Jamison intones:

*I proclaim the State of South Carolina an Independent Commonwealth.*

Upon hearing the news, the entire city of Charleston breaks out in celebrations. Bands play, militia units parade, bonfires are set, adults and children sing out.

No one knows what will happen next, but the heroic slogans and feelings of the 1776 revolution fill the air.

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Date: December 21, 1860

### **South Carolina Demands The Surrender Of Federal Property Including The Charleston Forts**

Governor Francis Pickens wastes no time in taking charge over his “independent commonwealth.” He sets up four committees, assigned to deal with engaging other slave states, finalizing a constitution, overseeing commercial matters and preparing to deal with foreign governments.

On December 21 he also names three envoys to negotiate with Washington over transferring all federally owned property in South Carolina to state control – including the customs house, post office, armory and forts in Charleston.

Prior to their departure, Pickens has already forwarded a letter on the matter to Buchanan that comes as an *ultimatum*, demanding that South Carolina troops be allowed into Ft. Sumter, and giving the President 24 hours to reply.

This letter not only shocks Buchanan, but also Senators Jefferson Davis and John Slidell and congressman Milledge Bonham. Together they apply pressure on Pickens to withdraw the letter, and he grudgingly agrees to do so.

However, by the time a conciliatory telegram from the Governor reaches Buchanan, he has already drafted a reply, consistent with his State of the Union principles, but delivered now with undisguised temerity:

*If South Carolina should attack any of these forts, she will then become the assailant in a war against the United States.*

The President is greatly relieved by withdrawal of the ultimatum, responds by pocketing his response, and indicates his willingness to hold meeting with the South Carolina party, but only as “private citizens,” not as official envoys of a foreign government.

He also convenes a meeting of his revised cabinet to discuss the military situation in Charleston. This results in a vague and waffling message to Major Anderson, drafted by new Secretary of State, Jeremiah Black and signed by Secretary of War, John Floyd:

*Exercise sound military discretion...It is neither expected nor desired that you should expose your own life or that of your men in a hopeless defense of these forts.*

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Date: December 22, 1860

### **Secretary Of War John Floyd Is Implicated In A Scandal**



John Floyd (1806-1863)

Buchanan’s relief over the withdrawn *ultimatum* is short-lived, as he learns on December 22 that \$870,000 worth of bonds held in trust for Indian tribes have disappeared due to mismanagement in John Floyd’s War Department.

The President asks for Floyd’s resignation, but he requests time to clear his name. This lasts for six more days, during which he issues military orders which move both arms and troops into Southern states, and are regarded as treasonous by his critics.

Floyd exits the cabinet on December 28, under the face-saving guise that his advice on managing the situation in Charleston is no longer being followed.

While a DC court exonerates him on charges of fraud and conspiracy in March 1861, the taint of the scandal and his final directives bleed over onto Buchanan, who is accused even more vocally of being a puppet for the South.

When the war breaks out, Floyd will be named a Brigadier General in the Confederate Army, and given command of Ft. Donelson, a critical garrison on the Tennessee River. There he demonstrates his ineptitude as a military man, and, when the fort falls in February 1862, he is permanently relieved of field duty.