

## Chapter 293 – Major Robert Anderson Assumes Command In Charleston Harbor



**Dates:**  
November 20-21,  
1860

**Sections:**

- He Is Ordered To Defend The Federal Forts Without Provoking The Conflict

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### He Is Ordered To Defend The Federal Forts Without Provoking The Conflict



Robert Anderson (1805-1871)

As the threat of hostilities amplifies in South Carolina, the burden falls on Secretary of War John Floyd to avoid bloodshed, at least until Buchanan's term expires. But Floyd is hardly up to this task. At 54 years old, his career has been in politics, reaching a pinnacle from 1849-52 as the Governor of Virginia, before being invited by Buchanan into the cabinet. He is an affable man, but lacks any military experience and is famous for his administrative sloppiness within the department.

On November 20, 1860, Floyd makes his first move, naming Major Robert Anderson to replace Colonel J. L. Gardner as commander in Charleston harbor over Castle Pinckney and forts Johnson, Moultrie and Sumter.

Anderson is a Southerner who hails from Louisville, Kentucky, graduates from West Point in 1825, and begins his active career in the Blackhawk War of 1832, where one of his recruits is Abraham Lincoln. He serves on General Winfield Scott's staff in the Second Seminole War of 1833 and gradually earns his Captain's bars by 1841. His next promotion, to Brevet Major, comes after he is severely wounded during the battle of Molino del Rey, during Scott's assault on Mexico City in 1847.

Robert Anderson is 54 years old and serving as Major of Artillery in 1860. While also a slave owner and close friend of Jefferson Davis, he devotes his life to military service and stays out of politics. When Floyd summons him to Washington, he stops off on his way for advice from General Scott, now residing in New York City.

Scott, at 74 years of age, remains the most famous soldier in America at the time. He is a Virginian who joins the U.S. Army as a Captain in 1808, fights heroically in all the nation's conflicts from the War of 1812 through the Mexican War of 1846-47. After his battlefield victories, the Whigs run him in the 1852 presidential election, but he is handily defeated by Franklin Pierce, a subordinate of his in the Mexico conflict. Scott then resumes his role as Commanding General of the U.S. Army, and in 1855, by a special act of Congress, he becomes the second 3-star Lieutenant General in history, after George Washington.

When Anderson visits, Scott tells him that Floyd is running the military while he is currently on the sidelines. Nevertheless, he is very familiar with the Charleston harbor sites, and predicts that the only sustainable fort will be Sumter. He encourages Anderson to concentrate there should the threats continue.

Anderson moves on to meet with Floyd, who warns him of the "delicate situation" he will be facing, and orders him to "avoid confrontation" with South Carolina officials and the state militia.

He arrives at Ft. Moultrie on November 21, 1860, and relies on his artillery acumen to assess the situation. He sees that all four forts are designed to defend against incoming attacks from the sea, and that three of them – Moultrie, Johnson and Castle Pinckney – are likely to fall easily if attacked behind, from inland.

As Scott indicated, only Ft. Sumter appears sustainable to Anderson, although he also recognizes that he is woefully undermanned, with less than 100 U.S. troops available to him, including musicians. Clearly if fighting breaks out, he knows that concentrating in Sumter and receiving reinforcements and supplies will be required to survive.