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When Old Glory Returned to Fort Sumter

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On the evening of April 13, 1865, the steamship Oceanus arrived in Charleston, S.C., after a three-day trip from New York City. Passing by Fort Sumter, the island fort where the Civil War had begun, the ship's nearly 200 passengers, most of whom were members of minister Henry Ward Beecher's Brooklyn congregation, broke out into song. "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow! / Praise Him, all creatures here below!" they bellowed.

As darkness settled in that night, Charleston looked "dead" to the Oceanus passengers, one recalled, "not the flicking of a taper was to be seen" beyond the wharves. The victim of an enormous fire in late 1861, the city subsequently had suffered from a lengthy Union siege that left "ghastly holes" in the buildings across the lower peninsula. Visitors compared Charleston to the ruins at Pompeii.

But the city quickly came alive as the New York ship brought welcome news, at least to those with Unionist sympathies: Gen. Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia had surrendered to Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House on April

9. “Oh! the shouts from the blue-jackets,” when they heard that the Civil War was finally coming to a close, wrote Theodore Cuyler, a Brooklyn pastor who came aboard the *Oceanus*. “How the dark, sullen city beyond gave back the echoes! How they rang through the ruined mansions of the man-stealers!”

The celebration lasted late into the evening and then began again the following morning, which happened to be Good Friday. American flags flapped in the breeze, making “a novel scene” in the city that many viewed as the cradle of the rebellion. New arrivals from Beaufort, S.C., Savannah, Ga., Boston and New York wandered the city triumphant, some claiming spoils from the vacant homes and offices.

Locals were up early too. “Negroes of every shade thronged the streets; gray haired ‘uncles’ and turbaned ‘aunties,’ grinning and giggling children, and ‘picaninnies,’ all manifesting joy to see us,” wrote one observer. Even some white Charlestonians found the scene irresistible, though they were drawn out by “curiosity” rather than “patriotism.”

It was a suitable warm-up for the day’s main event: an elaborate ceremony in which the United States officially returned the American flag to Fort Sumter. Four years earlier to the day, Maj. Robert Anderson had lowered Old Glory, surrendering the federal installation to Confederate Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard and inaugurating four bloody years of civil war. Now Anderson, accompanied by a host of dignitaries, had returned to raise the very same flag in the very same place.

President Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet understood the symbolic significance of the occasion. While the flag-raising ceremony itself signaled political and military victory, they made sure to include individuals who would underscore the

revolutionary social changes wrought by the conflict. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, for instance, had asked Henry Ward Beecher, a renowned orator and vocal critic of slavery, to give the ceremony's keynote address. At President Lincoln's request, Stanton had also invited William Lloyd Garrison — the most famous abolitionist in America, a man who had once publicly burned the Constitution — to attend the ceremony.

Several other prominent opponents of slavery joined Beecher and Garrison, such as the British abolitionist George Thompson; the black reformer and army major Martin Robison Delany; the newspapermen Theodore Tilton and Joshua Leavitt; and Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts. Homegrown abolitionists included Robert Smalls, a former slave who had dramatically seized his freedom by commandeering the Confederate ship the Planter in Charleston three years earlier, and Robert Vesey, son of Denmark Vesey, who was executed for leading a slave insurrection in Charleston in 1822.

At 10 a.m. on April 14, boats began ferrying people — Northern and Southern, soldier and civilian, white and black, all now free — out to Fort Sumter. Some made the short journey in steamships, while a number of the freedpeople ventured into the water in flats and dugouts, hoping that they might be picked up by a larger vessel, perhaps the legendary Planter. Still captained by Smalls, the ship ferried ex-slaves to the island fort under an overcast sky.

Like Charleston, the tiny man-made island at the mouth of the harbor was a bombed-out shell of its former self. “Fort Sumter is a Coliseum of ruins,” Tilton wrote. “Battered, shapeless, overthrown, it stands in its brokenness a fit monument of the broken rebellion.” More than 3,000 people, including a black regiment commanded by Beecher's brother James, crammed into the fort, some spilling out onto its crumbling walls. A new flagstaff

and a platform decorated with evergreens and flowers sat in the center of the parade ground.

Photo



The flag-raising ceremony at Fort Sumter, S.C., April 14, 1865.

Credit

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The ceremony opened with a song, a short prayer and recitations of several psalms, as well as Major Anderson's 1861 dispatch of surrender. Next, the former commander of Fort Sumter came forward. As Anderson and his old staff sergeant removed the enormous flag that had been taken down four years earlier from a leather mailbag, the crowd erupted with a long, "wild shout." Three sailors attached the flag to the halyards, and then Anderson began to speak. "After four long, long years of war, I restore to its proper place this flag which floated here during peace, before the first act of this cruel Rebellion," he said, before thanking God that he had lived to see this day. With the aid of a dozen men, including George Thompson, Anderson then "lifted the nation's symbol from the green turf."

As "the old smoke-stained, shot-pierced flag," rose, so, too, did everyone in the fort. Waving hats and handkerchiefs, the spectators erupted with shouts, laughter and tears when the flag reached its peak. Their noisy cries were quickly drowned out by the sound of six cannons fired from Sumter, and many more that answered from the forts and batteries surrounding the harbor. "It was the most exciting moment in my life when the flag went up," wrote Theodore Cuyler.

Beecher's keynote address, which followed soon after, failed to match the emotion of the flag-raising exercise. With an eye toward the future, the minister had decided to read formally prepared remarks, rather than talk extemporaneously, and so his hourlong address "lacked the peculiar magnetism of his less studied efforts," according to one eyewitness. Beecher "seemed deeply impressed with the consciousness that he was speaking, at least, semiofficially, and that his utterances would be regarded, not only as the voice of the authorities at the Capital, and of all the nation, but would pass from that hour into history."

Beecher was also determined to strike a magnanimous note, which disappointed some of the partisans in the audience. Laura Towne, a Pennsylvania abolitionist who had come up from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, where she taught ex-slaves, wondered why he had bothered to reach out to white Charlestonians when “there were not a dozen there.”

Although Beecher approached his address in a spirit of Christian forgiveness, he pulled no punches when it came to laying blame for the war — “the ambitious, educated, plotting political leaders of the South” — or to praising its radical results. “The soil has drunk blood, and is glutted,” he admitted, but the time had come “to rejoice and give thanks” for “one nation, under one government, without slavery, has been ordained and shall stand.”

That evening Brig. Gen. Quincy Gillmore hosted a banquet at the Charleston Hotel. Attendees marveled not just at the “sumptuous dinner” but also at the presence of Garrison and Thompson. The New York Times correspondent observed that the life of either reformer “would not have been worth, the price of the rope which would have served to hang him, if he had simply ‘put in an appearance’” in Charleston a few months earlier.

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After dinner, the guests offered up a series of toasts. President Lincoln was on the mind of many that night. Perhaps most moving were the words of Garrison, a longtime critic of the

president. “Of one thing I feel sure,” announced the editor, “either he has become a Garrisonian Abolitionist or I have become a Lincoln Emancipationist.” Whatever the case, Garrison concluded that Lincoln’s “brave heart beats for human freedom everywhere.”

Little did he, or anyone else in Charleston, know that the president’s brave heart would not beat much longer. For that very night, as abolitionists and Army officers in the Charleston Hotel cheered the maintenance of the Union and the end of slavery, John Wilkes Booth made it clear that for some Confederates the war was not over.

Lincoln’s assassination deprived the nation not only of the leader who had steered it through war but also of the symbolic closure desired by so many, including the slain president. “If Lincoln had lived,” the Charleston lawyer and historian Robert Rosen recently observed, “every textbook in American history would have shown the flag raising at Fort Sumter as the conclusion of the war. That’s what it was meant to be.” The Good Friday ceremony had been organized to mark a definitive and historic end to the war, as Henry Ward Beecher well appreciated. But in ways that were not yet apparent to the minister and the other celebrants in Charleston, April 14 also foretold the uncertainty of the future.

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Sources: The New-York Tribune, March 2, April 18 and April 20, 1865; The Independent, April 13, April 27 and May 4, 1865; The Charleston Courier, April 14 and April 15, 1865; The New York Times, April 18 and April 20, 1865; The New York World, April 21, 1865; The Liberator, May 5 and May 12, 1865; The Charleston Post and Courier, April 2, 2015; Justus C. French and Edward Carey, “The Trip of the Steamer Oceanus to Fort Sumter

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Blain Roberts, the author of the book “Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South,” and Ethan J. Kytle, the author of the book “Romantic Reformers and the Antislavery Struggle in the Civil War Era,” are associate professors of history at California State University, Fresno. They are currently co-authoring a book about the memory of slavery in Charleston, S.C.