

## The Creation of Fort Sumter

The War of 1812 demonstrated glaring inadequacies in the United States coastal defenses. As a result, Congress set up the Board of Engineers for Seacoast Fortifications. Brig. Gen. Simon Bernard, a French engineer, was assigned to the board. The entire U. S. coastline was surveyed under his direction beginning in 1817.

The Charleston coast was surveyed in 1821, however, a report of that survey was not presented until 1826. That report stated, "the shoal opposite Fort Moultrie may be occupied permanently."

Plans for Fort Sumter were drawn up in 1827 and on December 5, 1828 the plans were adopted. The fort was to be named "Sumter" in honor of South Carolina's hero of the American Revolution, Thomas Sumter, who was still living at that time. (He died in 1832 at age 88)

Work on the Fort began in 1829 with Lt. Henry Brewerton, U. S. Corps of Engineers, in charge of the project. The 2.4 acre Island that the fort was to be built on, was constructed from 10,000 tons of granite brought in from New England, along with about 60,000 tons of other rock.

By 1834 the fort was still just a hollow pentagonal rock "mole" only 2 feet above low water and open at one side permitting supply ships working on the island to pass to the interior.

In autumn of 1834, construction was halted when ownership of the site came into question. Mr. William Laval had secured from the state of South Carolina a vague grant to 870 acres of "land" in Charleston Harbor. Acting on this odd grant, Laval made claim to the site of Fort Sumter. This also raised a question in the South Carolina legislature as to what authority the government had acted upon to begin construction, despite the fact that South Carolina's representatives had been voting on appropriations for construction of the site for years. There seems to have been a severe lack of communication between Federal politicians and

state politicians.

Laval wrote to the engineer in charge at Fort Johnson, Charleston Harbor, November 3, 1834.

"Sirs: You are hereby notified that I have taken out, from under the seal of the State, a grant of all those shoals opposite and below Fort Johnson, on one of which the new work called Fort Sumter, is now erecting. You will consider this as notice of my right to the same; the grant is recorded in the office of the secretary of state of this State, and can be seen by reference to the records of that office.  
W. Laval"

Laval's claim was presented to Robert Leibly, who was superintending the building of fortifications at Charleston Harbor, in the absence of Lt. T. S. Brown of the Corp of Engineers. Leibly forwarded the claim to Brigadier General Charles Gratiot the next day.

On November 19, 1834, General Gratiot notified Lt. Brown that he should obtain information from the district attorney regarding the laws and this claim in particular. On December 8, 1834, Lt. Brown made the following report to General Gratiot;

"Sir; In obedience to the requirements of your letter of the 19th ultimo, I have the honor to submit the following report in relation to the foundation of Fort Sumter, and to the claim advanced by W. Laval. The accompanying papers, numbered 1 and 2, were handed me by the district attorney for South Carolina, and consist 1st, of a copy of the grant taken out by W. Laval esq. for 870 acres of low land.

2d. Of copies of the law under which the grant was made, and of various other laws of South Carolina relating to land, and which are supposed to have some bearing upon the question, and to be embraced by the general clause in your letter requiring copies of 'all laws of a general nature relating to the subject.'

The following charts also accompany this communication viz'

No. 1 A map of Charleston harbor, intended to exhibit the situation of Fort Sumter with relation to

the channel, the other works for the defense of the harbor &c.

No. 2 A chart exhibiting the situation of the shoal on which Fort Sumter is placed, before the work was commenced.

No. 3 A drawing intended to show the actual condition of the foundation of Fort Sumter.

An inspection of map No. 1 will show that Fort Sumter, which is supposed to be embraced within the limits claimed by W. Laval, is nearly in the center of the lower part of Charleston harbor, by which however the tract is said to be bounded on the north and west. What is designated as "Morris's Island

creek" must refer to a small blind channel on the northwest side of Morris's Island; and as to James Island creek, which is said to form part of the southern boundary, nothing can be discovered, either on the

map or the ground, to which the name can, by any degree of latitude of construction, be applied. No boundary is designated on the eastern side from which it may be reasonable to infer that if found at some future period to be convenient, the limits in that direction may be extended quite across the channel...

With reference to the question whether the position occupied by Fort Sumter has ever, at any time, appeared above water, I have made diligent inquiries, and the conclusion to which I have arrived is that it would be easy to prove, by testimony as direct as the nature of the question admits, that that spot was never left dry previous to the commencement of the work..."

The plat accompanying the grant to William Laval bears, as will be perceived, no resemblance to the actual shape of the shoal which it purports to represent. It resembles, however, a delineation of the shoal on the chart of Charleston harbor, which is drawn in a large scale on a map of South Carolina constructed and drawn from the district surveys ordered by the legislature, by John Wilson, late civil and military engineer of South Carolina, from which it was probably copied. An actual survey, with chains and compass, of the 870 acres of low land which L. Laval claims was of course impracticable, as over much of the water is at all times 8 or 10 feet deep, and it is doubted whether the ceremony was gone through with of carrying surveyors' instruments to the nearest sand bank to the "plantation" in

question..."

Work on Sumter was halted for 3 years due to Laval's claim.

The South Carolina State Attorney General invalidated Laval's claim on December 20, 1837, but, other issues, including the resumption of funding, continued to keep construction halted. South Carolina's Committee on Federal Relations had questioned the Federal government's authority for a project in Charleston harbor. The government had assumed that a deed to "land" covered by water was not necessary, and had begun without a title to the "land."

Work resumed in January of 1841, under Captain A. H. Bowman, with a number of changes having been made in the construction plan. Originally, a grill work of timbers was to have been placed over the circular stone foundation. It was determined that to avoid the infestation of the timbers by worms, and to insure the proper support for the structure, granite blocks would be used to fill in the foundation.

The fort itself was of masonry construction, five sided, with 12 to 8 foot thick outer walls built nearly 50 feet above the water. The interior of the fort covered about an acre. Four of the walls had two tiers of gun rooms. The fifth side, the longest at just over 316 feet, was the officers quarters and was armed only along the top parapet. The barracks for the enlisted men paralleled the gun rooms on the flanks. The fort had a 171 foot long wharf.

On November 22, 1841, all issues regarding ownership of the fort were cleared up as the Federal Government was granted title to 125 acres of harbor "land" recorded in the office of the Secretary of State of South Carolina.

Construction during 1858 and 1859 was minimal due to lack of funds. It had taken over 10 years and \$500,000 to complete the island. It took another 10 years and another \$500,000 to complete the fort.

In November of 1860, about 150 masons from Baltimore arrived at Fort Sumter to complete the masonry work.

In December of 1860, While the outer fort was complete, only about 80 % of the interior work and the mounting of guns had been completed. Of the 135 guns planned for the gun

rooms and the open parapet, only 15 had been mounted by the time of Major Anderson's occupation of the fort.