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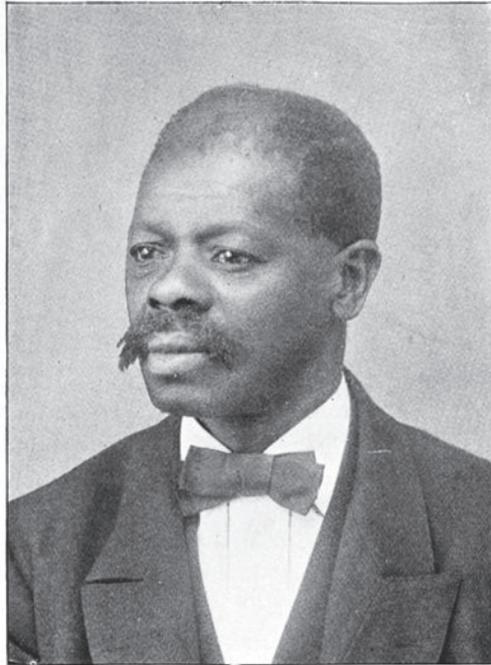
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“THE SENSE OF THAT CRUSH I FEEL AT CERTAIN TIMES EVEN NOW”:
JACOB STROYER AND THE DEFENSE OF FORT SUMTER¹

by *Susanna Ashton*



JACOB STROYER.

*Compliments of the
author —
Jacob Stroyer.*

In the summer of 1864, fourteen-year-old Jacob Stroyer was sent to work in Fort Sumter. He did not go willingly. Stroyer was a slave owned by the wealthy Mrs. Matthew R. Singleton and was sent from the large Kensington plantation outside Columbia, SC to labor for the Confederate cause. The Confederate Corps of Engineers called upon slave owners to contribute their enslaved people’s labor to the problem of construction and fortification of roads, bridges, and key defensive sites. Stroyer explained that fifteen slaves from his plantation “were sent to work on fortifications each year during the war.”²

Today Fort Sumter looms large in the memory of our nation—whether it be as a symbol for the valiant defense, pained surrender, and eventual reclamation by Federal forces, or as a reminder of the triumphant and strategic hold on it by Confederates for much of the War. For Stroyer, however, the memory was fraught with a conflicted sense of what his role had been. Indeed, in 1879, when he initially wrote the story of his life he glossed over the entire experience with just a few sentences. Only six years later, when he rewrote his life story as *My Life in the South* (1885), did he try to explain at length what he could not forget about that place. And perhaps it is a troubled record such as Stroyer's that can tell us more than any military historian about what was truly at stake in those battles over the Charleston Harbor.

Being tithed out in 1864 for war service was actually the second time Stroyer had been so used. He must have thought he knew what to expect. In the previous summer of 1863 he had been impressed into a two-month service and had been, as he explained, “freighted” to Sullivan’s Island outside Charleston. From the island the slaves could wistfully observe Union gun boats, knowing full well that the fleet was “part of the means by which the liberty of four and one-half millions of slaves was to be effected.”

The work of the slaves on Sullivan’s Island was generally to repair forts, build batteries, and mount the guns, while young boys such as Stroyer, then only thirteen, waited on officers and acted as messengers and water carriers. There was no significant fighting on Sullivan’s Island during his weeks there and although Confederate forces skirmished with Union troops camping nearby, young Stroyer saw little actual combat. However, more poignantly, some of the conflict that did arise came from acts of self-emancipation: Stroyer reported that there were slaves who managed to swim across the inlet to Union lines on an adjacent island and that Confederate scouts who set out in pursuit were fiercely repulsed.

Despite the acute proximity of the freedom promised by the Union troops (much less the proximity of the black Massachusetts 54th Regiment, which made its heroic charge on the Fort at Battery Wagner across the harbor in that July of 1863) and Stroyer’s painful awareness of what his service to the Confederates represented, the youngster reported some glee at the adventure and comparative freedom of serving the army instead of doing field work back at the Singleton plantation. He even reported an “exalted pride” in having gained some knowledge of a world beyond their own plantation: “I thanked God that it afforded me a better chance for an education that I had at home and so was glad to be on the Island,” he wrote.

Stroyer’s brief experience encamped on Sullivan’s Island did not, however, prepare him for what was to come. For, by 1864, the walls of Fort Sumter still held by the Confederates were in desperate need of repair. Stroyer was assigned to Fort Sumter as part of a team of slave laborers charged with repairing the fort as quickly as it had collapsed under Union assault. This second assignment promised to be far worse than his earlier one, although he recalled with the calm voice of the future minister and educator he was to become that: “I carried my spelling book with me, and although the Northerners were firing upon us I tried to keep up my study.” That memory of comparative quiet belied an experience of unrelenting terror and chaos in 1864, however.

The teenager had been sent into the heart of one of the most intense military sieges in modern warfare. Union Major General John. G. Forster launched a bombardment of

the Fort on July 7th of 1864 and for the rest of the month an average of three hundred and fifty rounds daily was shot at the besieged site. Many were shot from Forster's batteries on Morris Island, but attempts to destroy the fort with floating rafts of gunpowder were also made. Thanks to the enslaved men's endless work of repairing the walls, the fort held fast. While the most intensive assaults ended by September when Union supplies of ammunition began to run low, historians with the National Parks Service at Fort Sumter estimate that an estimated seven million pounds of artillery projectiles, about forty-four thousand in all, were fired at Fort Sumter before the fort was evacuated on February 22nd of 1865.

As Stroyer reported it, the black men leaving Fort Sumter warned the new ones being ferried over in the dark of night that they might well die before even reaching the fort, as crossing itself was so perilous. Daniel Castlebury, an elderly slave who was being returned for a second tour of duty at Fort Sumter was so terrified that he tried unsuccessfully to hide under boards on the transport sloop, rather than be forced back to the fort.

Even if they could successfully avoid the mines in the Charleston Harbor, Union sharpshooters from Morris Island would shoot at the boats as "oars dipping into the salt water at night made sparks like fire." Another boy from the Singleton plantation was struck by a shell while climbing from a boat before he ever made it into the fort.

Once inside the Fort, Stroyer entered a nocturnal existence of terror and toil. The slaves were locked in during the day and only allowed out at night to work on the fortifications. Parrot shells and mortar came at all times, but the Union sharpshooters who shot at anyone who "showed their heads on the rampart," worked best in the daylight. The slaves were to use cotton bales, loose rubble, timbers, sandbags, and basically whatever they could lay their hands on to build and rebuild the walls. Thousands of bags of sand were brought in from the city at night.

Not surprisingly, it was the slaves who were exposed to the greatest dangers. Stroyer wrote that "the only time the few Confederate soldiers were exposed to danger was while they were putting the Chevaldefrise [wooden spikes pointed with iron] on the parapet at night."

When not passing heavy sandbags up and down the walls, slave laborers were still not safe. Whereas Confederate soldiers took shelter in the relative safety of the bomb-proof section of the fort, slaves were locked into a section known as the "rat-hole" on the eastern side of the fort, facing Morris Island. It was so airless and suffocating that despite the increased danger when they were outside of it, Stroyer wrote that they were nonetheless "glad to get into the fresh air."

Unprotected slaves also died from the constant rain of shells simply when they lined up to receive their daily rations of hard-tack biscuits and raw salt pork. And death from mortar explosions, collapsing rubble, and exploding parrot shells was common, but conditions were exacerbated by gratuitous cruelty of the overseeing officers. Stroyer speculated, for example, that an officer, who at one point ordered Stroyer and his fellow slaves outside of the fort to a small stone projection where they were fully exposed to Union missiles could have done it for "no other reasons...than that we might be killed off faster."

Similarly, when bombs burst above the fort the slaves were directed to huddle in the open middle, while Confederate soldiers hunkered down in protected spaces. The shells would supposedly burst in the air and scatter widely, sparing the center, but Stroyer reported that when shells exploded, though, slaves would scatter in confusion, trying to find

cover. Afterward the air would clear to a scene of severed black bodies.

One time, warned by a sentinel that a mortar shell was aloft, Stroyer ran to hide among some timbers but was followed by other slaves who frantically piled atop of him. He nearly died from the weight: "The sense of that crush I feel at certain times even now."

In another assault a mortar shell landed upon the lime house where Stroyer and others had fled for safety and, as he recalled it, the explosion that ensued killed twelve or thirteen of the men hiding within. Stroyer survived but sustained a severe facial injury from the incident and was, perhaps luckily, then removed to a hospital on shore. Having survived that, he was sent back to the Singleton plantation for the duration of the war.

Out of the three hundred and forty men who Stroyer reports served in slavery on Fort Sumter, he claims only forty-one including himself survived. These numbers were the recollection of a man writing twenty years after the event and do not jibe well with the military dispatches from the Confederate commanders at the time, who seem to indicate a dozen or so deaths of black workers and perhaps forty-five to fifty injured during the summer of 1864. Yet new sources and voices offer us new ways to understand not only history but the scars of memory and while we might never be able to reconcile these accounts, perhaps reconciliation is really beyond the point.

After the War, Stroyer went to schools in Columbia and Charleston and eventually made his way to Worcester, Massachusetts, where he continued to study and became an African Methodist Episcopal minister and pastor of the Salem Colored Mission for twenty-five years.

Stroyer never saw himself as a veteran for any cause, but the wounds he incurred at Fort Sumter and the horror he witnessed there, defined his life. He died in Salem in 1908 and was buried in Salem's Greenlawn Cemetery with a carefully phrased tombstone. It reads, in part:

BORN A CHATTEL OF COL. MR. SINGLETON NEAR COLUMBIA S.C. 1848
 WOUNDED BY THE BURSTING OF A SHELL
 WHILE AT WORK WITH OTHER SLAVES
 REPAIRING THE DAMAGE DONE BY THE
 UNION GUNS DURING THE THIRD
 BOMBARDMENT OF FORT SUMTER
 IN THE CIVIL WAR.
 EMANCIPATED BY THE PROCLAMATION
 OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN.
 EDUCATED BY HIS OWN LABOR...

Stroyer's emancipation may have technically turned upon a legal proclamation, but those who knew him, knew that it was endurance and hard labor that earned him his freedom. His life was not marked by irony or shame for his service at the hand of his oppressors. Instead, Stroyer chose to commemorate the misery of that summer of 1864 with an account that would surely destroy any sense of romanticism over the symbolic or actual battles over Fort Sumter from the North or the South. He survived to embrace his freedom, but he forever was troubled by the sense of that crush.

Notes

1. Special thanks to Russell Horres, volunteer, and to Rick Hatcher, historian, both with the Fort Sumter National Monument, for help with research for this piece.
2. This and all subsequent quotations are from Jacob Stroyer (1885), "My Life in the South," in "*I Belong to South Carolina*" *South Carolina Slave Narratives*, ed. Susanna Ashton, Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010, 155.

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