If These Walls Could T

Part 2: From Victory Over Great Britain to Victory Over Spain

Story and photo by Maj. Scott Bell, S.C. National Guard Historian
Archival photos provided by The National Park Service

Editor's Note: *As our state commemorates the bicentennial of the completion of Ft. Moultrie on Dec. 19, 1809, the "Swamp Fox History" pages of this magazine will showcase South Carolina's epic service at the fort in a personified three-part series called "If These Walls Could Talk."*

Hey ya'll! Welcome back to Ft. Moultrie! Thanks for dropping by to celebrate the 200th anniversary of my completion. Since your last visit, a lot of folks have stopped in to see me. The S.C. National Guard's 246th Army Band performed for me on June 30th. Sure glad they didn't have to march here from Columbia like our Guardsmen use to have to do! Others have visited dressed the same way our National Guard did in the 1800s. All of these gestures mean a lot to me and bring back some very exciting memories.

Since I mentioned the 1800s, let me share a few thoughts following our victory over Great Britain through our victory over Spain in 1898. You might think when my job in the American Revolution wrapped up in April 1784, they would have put this ole' war horse out to pasture. Let me share a secret with you, they did give me about a 10-year vacation. Now, how would you school kids like to have a summer break last that long?

Unfortunately, the lasting peace our great Citizen-Soldiers hoped for after the Revolution didn't last. By June 1794, the British were up to their old tricks again and my boss – Governor William Moultrie – ordered his folks to give me a facelift. Just two months later a British squadron sailed right up within my view, boarded our ship *Norfolk* and took four of our country's Seamen. Wish I'd been in fighting form by then to give those bullies the same kind of whipping we gave Parker's squadron in 1776! Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and several months later the Jay Treaty was signed.

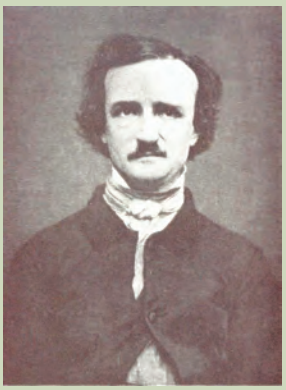
Needless to say, despite King George III of England's reassurances, the folks here in Charleston still didn't trust him. They pitched in over $12,000, more than a few hundred thousand dollars in today's money, to help our nation pay for my second new look. When I went back to work on Nov. 1798, I was 17-feet tall, had six 12-pounder cannons and 10 26-pounders.

Like the ancient warrior Achilles, I felt impenetrable but secretly, I too had an "Achilles heel," so to speak. Mine was a new 50-foot-wide glacis, or sloping wall of ground facing Charleston harbor. When the hurricane we call the "Tremendous Storm" of Sept. 7, 1804, rolled through here, it nearly wiped me out. But, we S.C. folks are resilient and my friend Alexander Macomb, who later became the commanding general of the U.S. Army, came in here and finished me up on the third try. After a five-year vacation, I was back to work protecting Charleston on Dec. 19, 1809. Although my 15-foot-high brick walls have taken a beating many times since, I think the saying "third time's a charm" proved true for me.

The next couple of years reminded all of us in S.C. that in order to have peace, you must have a strong military. Unprovoked British attacks on U.S. shipping occurred and more and more Citizen-Soldiers began joining S.C. militia units. When war was finally declared against Britain in 1812, militia units were here preparing me for another British invasion. Fortunately for the Brits, they never came within firing distance of me during the War of 1812. I guess they learned their lesson on June 28, 1776! Peace between our two countries came on Christmas Eve 1814. We've pretty much been friends ever since.

For the next 36 years, a variety of Guardsmen from our state and others in the southeast occasionally marched down here to do their annual training with the U.S. Army. Most of the time, the barracks were full so they'd set up tents around me, drill and work on their artillery skills. I also got to meet some famous folks during this time.

One of them was a feller by the name of Edgar Allen Poe. He was stationed here with Company H of the 1st U.S. Artillery from 1827 to 1828. Back in those days, a lot of people worked on farms and didn't have time to get an education. But he did. And while he was here, he wrote a lot. In fact, Moultrieville, now the town of Sullivan's Island, was the inspiration for "The Gold Bug," his famous buried pirate treasure tale. He even mentions me in the story!



Edgar Allan Poe served at Ft. Moultrie from 1827 - 1828.

Another colorful figure was Osceola, the great Seminole Indian chief who lived here during the Second Seminole War. To this day, I still feel sorry for the man. When he, 116 of his warriors and 82 women and children were

treacherously taken into custody under a white flag of truce, they were imprisoned here in January 1838. We tried our best to make them comfortable. In fact, Osceola became a celebrity and got to take in a show in Charleston before his death several weeks later. We gave him a full military funeral with honors. He and my dear friend William Moultrie are buried here.

Do any of you like baseball? I'm a huge fan! Abner Doubleday is another famous character who served here as an artillery officer in the 1860s. He's often credited for "inventing" baseball. Whether the legend is true or not, one thing's for sure, there's been a lot of great baseball played here ever since. Every time I see parents playing catch with their kids out here, I'm reminded of the brave, young captain I knew, who was here at the outbreak of our nation's tragic Civil War.

As someone who had friends on both sides of that conflict let me tell you, I hope our nation never has to go through that again. When S.C. became the first state to secede from the United States on Dec. 20, 1860, I again became the focal point for both sides in controlling Charleston harbor.

Soon after, a couple thousand S.C. troops stationed themselves about a mile or so north of me. The day after Christmas 1860, Maj. Robert Anderson, my commander, abandoned me and secretly sent his entire force to Ft. Sumter in the middle of the harbor.

The next day, I was under S.C. control. I kept hoping an all-out shooting war wouldn't happen but on Jan. 9, 1861, the first shots were fired. President James Buchanan didn't listen to S.C. Governor Francis W. Pickens' warning about any attempt to resupply Ft. Sumter. Buchanan sent the Union supply ship *Star of the West* anyway. As they watched the ship near Ft. Sumter, Citadel cadets on Morris Island (located across the harbor from me) fired into the vessel. My defenders then fired a couple of volleys forcing the ship's hasty retreat. Tensions continued to rise until April 12, 1861, when General P.G.T. Beauregard ordered all Confederate artillery batteries around Charleston harbor to open fire on Ft. Sumter. Two hours later, Doubleday fired the Union's first shots of the war at me in response. Hardly put a scratch on me. The cannon balls just bounced off my walls. I didn't take it personally. Doubleday was just doing his duty.

For the next four years, I did my duty and protected both Charleston harbor and my S.C. defenders through many battles. I got battered but I never broke. I reckon that's why both sides pitched in to fix me up after the war ended in 1865. Like me, our country was healing and by March 1869, Congress allowed S.C. to have a state militia again. A year later, they started calling themselves the S.C. National Guard. By 1876, I was as shiny as a brand new penny and people from all over the country began coming to visit me. It sure felt good to live in a united country again.

Soon after I became a tourist attraction, our nation entered the "modern era" of coastal defense and I had another growth spurt. Even though we were at peace, European nations began building a lot of huge steel sea monsters called battleships. Here's another little secret, those ships were stronger than anything I had ever had to fight. President Grover Cleveland decided to even the odds in 1885. A little more than 10 years later, I had Batteries Jasper and Capron helping me protect Charleston. Capron had 16, 12-inch mortars and could lob 16, 700-pound shells on an enemy ship at the same time. I couldn't imagine the weight of four cars falling on me at the same time! Battery Jasper had four, 10-inch rifles that could fire rounds about the weight of a refrigerator at a ship more than eight miles away! By the way, I have another secret to tell. I think Battery Jaspers rifles were magic. They would disappear after you fired them. Then, all of the sudden, they would just pop back up when you had to fire again.

Anyway, it's a good thing I got Jasper and Capron when I did because in February 1898, a fairly new U.S. battleship called the *Maine* blew up in Havana, Cuba. Everybody was sure Spain sank it, so two months later Congress declared war on them. Expecting Spanish Admiral Pasquale Cervera to sail into Charleston harbor at any time with his battleships, I was glad I had Jasper and Capron to protect Charleston.

Members of the S.C.N.G. camp outside Ft. Moultrie's walls during the Spanish-American War.

As in previous wars, the S.C. National Guard was "Always Ready – Always There" to man my guns. Fortunately, an attack never came and four months later, the Spanish-American War was over.

Well, friends, I hope you enjoyed your second visit today as much as the first. I think you'll agree, those years following our victory over Great Britain through our victory over Spain were memorable ones. I even got to share a few secrets with you! I'm looking forward to the next time you come. When you do, I'll share some stories about our Citizen-Soldiers who served here during World Wars I and II. I'll even reveal a few more secrets. See you next time!

Col. Roswell Ripley's 1st S.C. Artillery Battalion mans Ft. Moultrie's 32-pounder cannons pointed at Ft. Sumter during our nation's Civil War.