

## Mary Boykin Chesnut's Civil War Diary {Excerpts}

**Mary Boykin Chesnut was a Southern lady in the purest tradition**, born into South Carolina's political elite and educated at one of the finest boarding schools in Charleston. Her husband was the son of a successful plantation owner and an upwardly mobile politician himself. Following Lincoln's election in 1860, James Chesnut helped write South Carolina's Declaration of Secession and during the Civil War served as an aide to President Jefferson Davis and eventually became a General. Women in such circumstances were expected to be well-educated, but not given much opportunity to *use* their fancy brains. So Mary read, observed, and wrote.

**The diary of Mrs. Chesnut is one of the essential primary sources of the Civil War.** The best-known passages describe events in and around her household as the tensions between North and South first led to shots fired in anger, thanks in large part to the stubbornness of Union Colonel Robert Anderson, in command of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor.



**April 12th.** - Anderson will not capitulate. Yesterday's was the merriest, maddest dinner we have had yet. Men were audaciously wise and witty. We had an unspoken foreboding that it was to be our last pleasant meeting... Mrs. Henry King rushed in saying, "The news, I come for the latest news. All the men of the King family are on the Island," of which fact she seemed proud.

While she was here our peace negotiator, or envoy, came in - that is, Mr. Chesnut returned. His interview with Colonel Anderson had been deeply interesting, but Mr. Chesnut was not inclined to be communicative. He wanted his dinner. He felt for Anderson and had telegraphed to President Davis for instructions - what answer to give Anderson, etc. He has now gone back to Fort Sumter with additional instructions.

When they were about to leave the wharf A. H. Boykin sprang into the boat in great excitement. He thought himself ill-used, with a likelihood of fighting and he to be left behind! ...

I do not pretend to go to sleep. How can I? If Anderson does not accept terms at four, the orders are, he shall be fired upon. I count four, St. Michael's bells chime out and I begin to hope. At half-past four the heavy booming of a cannon. I sprang out of bed, and on my knees prostrate I prayed as I never prayed before.

There was a sound of stir all over the house, pattering of feet in the corridors. All seemed hurrying one way. I put on my double-gown and a shawl and went, too. It was to the housetop. The shells were bursting. In the dark I heard a man say, "Waste of ammunition." ...

Do you know, after all that noise and our tears and prayers, nobody has been hurt; sound and fury signifying nothing - a delusion and a snare.

**April 13th.** - Nobody has been hurt after all. How gay we were last night...

Fort Sumter has been on fire. Anderson has not yet silenced any of our guns. So the aides, still with swords and red sashes by way of uniform, tell us. But the sound of those guns makes regular meals impossible. None of us go to table. Tea-trays pervade the corridors going everywhere. Some of the anxious hearts lie on their beds and moan in solitary misery. Mrs. Wigfall and I solace ourselves with tea in my room. These women have all a satisfying faith. "God is on our side," they say. When we are shut in Mrs. Wigfall and I ask "Why?" "Of course, He hates the Yankees, we are told. You'll think that well of Him."

Not by one word or look can we detect any change in the demeanor of these negro servants. Lawrence sits at our door, sleepy and respectful, and profoundly indifferent. So are they all, but they carry it too far. You could not tell that they even heard the awful roar going on in the bay, though it has been dinning in their ears night and day. People talk before them as if they were chairs and tables. They make no sign. Are they stolidly stupid? or wiser than we are; silent and strong, biding their time?