"WHEN ONCE THE BALL IS COMMENCED...":

A PENNSYLVANIA IRISHMAN AT FORT SUMTER

Edited by ROWLAND T. BERTHOFF*

A mong the hundred-odd defenders of Fort Sumter during the spring of 1861 was a Pennsylvania Irishman with a fluent pen and time enough to write two letters home describing conditions in Charleston harbor in the months before the bombardment which started the Civil War. The writer was Private Samuel Millens of Company E, First Artillery, born in Ireland and enlisted from the mining village of Summit Hill in the Lehigh anthracite coal region. His two letters home, printed in the Mauch Chunk Gazette, give a spirited account of the beleaguered but far from disheartened garrison awaiting attack.¹

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Fort Sumter, S. C., Jan. 25, 1860 [sic].

My Dear Parents,—Times are so very stirring here, in consequence of the South Carolina rebellion, that it is with great difficulty I can snatch a moment to reply to your letter, which I duly received. I had almost given up hopes of being able to write to you until the present difficulty is settled, as our mail facilities were stopped by the State authorities; but they have moderated their views considerably on that subject, as our mail arrives with its wonted regularity.

Doubtless our letters are subjected to espionage, so I must

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²Mauch Chunk Gazette, February 7, March 14, 1861. After Samuel Millens' enlistment expired in September, 1861, he joined Company H, Eleventh Pennsylvania Volunteers, which was raised at Mauch Chunk. He was wounded at Second Bull Run and fought at Fredericksburg, where he gained a reputation for rashness. He was again wounded at Gettysburg; the Gazette last reported him at home and en route for the hospital at Baltimore. Ibid., July 16, August 13, 1863. See Abner Doubleday, Reminiscences of Forts Sumter and Moultrie in 1860-61 (New York, 1876), 180, where he is listed as Private Samuel Miller.
be careful in what I say, as I have no anxiety to change, even at a remote period, Uncle Sam's *honorable* uniform, for the usual dishonorable suit invariably presented by the gallant sons of South Carolina, to all suspected of loyalty to the "Red White and Blue."

Our position here might certainly be more comfortable, but then at the same time it might with as much certainty, be much worse. Our little garrison was never more cheerful and contented than they are now.

The rumors, circulated by the newspapers that mutiny and disaffection prevail among us, are utterly false in every particular. There is not a soldier here, who will not jump to the duty, whatever be the danger, at the beck of our gallant commander. In fact, although our numbers are few, still every one is anxious for the onset, and confident of the result. We are certain we will whip them; at least we will all go into action with the determination to do it, having erased the word *surrender* from our vocabularies altogether. The Carolinians have been since our arrival at this place, exerting themselves to the utmost in hastening forward their preparations for attacking our position. They have got us pretty well hemmed in here. Our old post, "Moultrie," the guns of which once recognized us as their masters, now frowns a sullen defiance at us, over the time honored battlements of the fort.

Castle Pinckney is also in a state of defence, and may be able to do us some injury. A battery has been planted at fort Johnson, and two or three other redoubts, almost within point-blank range of us, and opposite our weakest point at that. They no doubt intend bombarding us at no distant day with the hopes of being able to break the work. They will find "'Tis a hard road to travel over Jordan," I reckon. Inside our preparations are, I may say completed. We have all the guns mounted (by the way more than we can man) that will be necessary for the defence of the place—and a plenty of ammunition. In the "grub" line—(although some newspaper reporters positively state otherwise) we are not stinted. Every one has plenty now, and in the prospective at least for months to come; and what is better, every one would willingly, relinquish three-fourths of his daily rations, before they would consent to surrender to the Carolinians. I can scarcely tell you our actual number—I think 75 with about 20 laborers. These
latter have not been paid off yet, and may probably be retained through the siege. We can distinctly see our opponents constructing their batteries directly opposite us, and our sentries can easily hear the hail of theirs on a calm night, the distance not being much over 1200 yards. Their numbers are considerable—two or three thousand at the least. We hear that sickness prevails in their camp. I guess the counter-jumpers have found a slight difference between feather-bed soldiering, and the stern realities of actual warfare. Oh—by the by—they took pity on us a few days ago, laboring under the idea that without doubt we were in a starving condition, kindly or contemptuously sent us some fresh meat, but we deeming it inconsistent with our honor to eat their meat to-day, and cut their throats (if forced to it) to-morrow, returned it untouched. It is evidently the intention of our government to act strictly on the defensive, and give South Carolina no just cause of complaint against us. But when once the ball is commenced. God only knows where or when it will end.

With Respect,
Your affectionate son,
SAMUEL MILLENES.

Fort Sumter, South Carolina,
February 27th, 1861.

My dear Father,—Your letter, dated the 18th inst., has been received. I am glad to hear of your welfare, and to learn that so much interest is taken around your "diggins" in the affairs of Sumter.—Well, we are still here and, as yet, unmolested; the Charlestonians, however, are vigorously pushing their works around us, all of which are nearly completed. Morris Island, directly opposite us, has been converted into one enormous battery of several miles in length—at least I may so call it, for the batteries are so numerous and at such short intervals apart, that from our point of view they cannot be distinguished but as one

See the commanding officer's explanation: "I can only have my troops furnished with fresh beef in the manner prescribed by law," i.e., from the regular contractor in Charleston. Permission to resume regular dealing must be founded on a recognition of right, not on "courtesy and civility." Robert Anderson to D. F. Jamison, January 19, 1861, in The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, 1880), Series I, vol. I, 144-145.
enormous continuation. Entrenchments have been dug, making a covered way from the nearest battery to a point beyond the reach of our guns, so that detachments on duty in these works can be reinforced or relieved without any loss. Their master machine—the Floating Battery—for the reduction of this place, for several weeks past in course of construction in Charleston, has been completed, and was to be launched yesterday. Until such time as I can get a peep at this machine, I shall not attempt to describe it; from accounts it must be a rather formidable affair, but at the same time clumsy and unmanageable. They intend to have this battery towed to a convenient point on our weakest side, within 600 yards of our walls, and from that point breach the fort with their heavy guns, (42-pounders,) four of which they will have on board. Whether or not they will be allowed quietly to take this position remains to be seen; they evidently expect that they will, but in my opinion it looks too much like cutting a stick to break our own head.

We expect to live peaceably until March 4th. As to what may occur after that is more than I can tell; everything depends on the line of policy adopted by the incoming Administration.

We are getting short of firewood, but the weather is becoming warm, so that, except for cooking, little is required. Drift logs and old timber has supplied us thus far, and will suffice for some time.

I shall be able to give you more interesting news in my next, so for the present I will say good by.

I am, very affectionately yours,

SAM. MULLEN [sic].