

BE BACK 'FORE BREAKFAST



“When the war come on, the old man Hawkens was dead. The widow Hawkens had three sons. One son went to the war, but he didn’t want to go. He asked his mother if she’d rather free the Negroes or go to war. She said, ‘Go fight . . . you’ll be home for breakfast.’”

Slave Narrative

1861

Nicholas Biddle is a sixty-five-year-old fugitive slave who makes his living in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, selling beverages in the summer and oysters in the winter. Two days after President Lincoln’s call to arms, he attaches himself in an unenlisted capacity to a company under the command of Captain James Curtin. His goal is to bring freedom to those who are still living in bondage.

Now he is on his way to Washington to take a stand. The company passes through Harrisburg. There, blacks are delighted to see one of their own in uniform going “to strike a blow for freedom.” They wave white handkerchiefs and shout joyfully when they see Biddle.

When the troops stop for the night, several whites are curious about Biddle. One soldier says playfully, "Did you ever think that if a rebel catches you, you might be taken to Georgia and sold?" to which Biddle answers, "I go to Washington, a-trustin' in the Lord, and the devil himself and the other Plug-Uglies [rebels] can't scare me. You the one better look out."

Arriving in Baltimore, Maryland, at noon on April 18, 1861, the troops prepare to go from one railroad station to another. Seeing Biddle among the white soldiers causes an unruly mob to gather. Unlike the shouts of praise and joy in Harrisburg, now there are jeers and curses. Biddle continues to march, looking straight ahead. The mob throws things and swears at all the white soldiers, "Welcome to a Southern grave, N—— Lovers."

Suddenly Biddle is struck in the face. "Kill that b—— brother of Abraham Lincoln." Biddle staggers and almost falls, but an officer supports him. Other troops hurry to the train station, protecting Biddle against the mob as they go. Surely the mob will do Biddle harm if they get their hands on him. The troops — with Biddle among them — arrive in Washington in the early evening.

Days later there is a full-scale riot in Baltimore against the 6th Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteers, resulting in the death of four soldiers and six civilians.

What happens to Biddle after this is unknown, but his friends place the following inscription on his tombstone:

HIS WAS THE PROUD DISTINCTION OF SHEDDING THE FIRST BLOOD IN THE LATER WAR FOR THE UNION, BEING WOUNDED WHILE MARCHING THROUGH BALTIMORE WITH THE FIRST VOLUNTEERS FROM SCHUYLKILL COUNTY, 18 APRIL, 1861.

Fort Sumter unarmed.

Waiting like a sitting duck.

Rebel cannons blast.

The South viewed Fort Sumter, located in Charleston Harbor, as the property of a foreign power on Southern soil. Major Robert Anderson, commander of the fort, notified President Lincoln that he needed to be resupplied. Lincoln knew that if he sent a ship it might be misunderstood as an act of war. If he failed to service the fort, then he wouldn't be fulfilling his responsibility as commander in chief of the military. Lincoln decided to inform Jefferson Davis that an unarmed supply ship would relieve the soldiers and their families who were housed at Fort Sumter. The next move was up to President Davis.

Davis and other Southern leaders felt Lincoln's action was an affront to the Confederacy and responded by ordering the attack

on federally occupied Fort Sumter at 4:30 A.M., April 12, 1861. Thirty-three hours later, the Union commander, having no casualties but lacking supplies, surrendered. One person was killed accidentally afterward.

Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Virginia had joined the Confederacy by May 1861, and North Carolina was the last state to secede. Missouri, Maryland, Kentucky, and Delaware were slave states that remained loyal to the Union.

On the day that Fort Sumter was captured by the Confederates, President Lincoln drew up a proclamation calling for 75,000 Northern volunteers to build up the standing Union army, which stood at only 16,367 officers and soldiers. The response was over-

Soldiers of the First New York Engineers at Fort Sumter. (Massachusetts Historical Society)

