



The Bellicose and Artistic Life of Conrad Wise Chapman

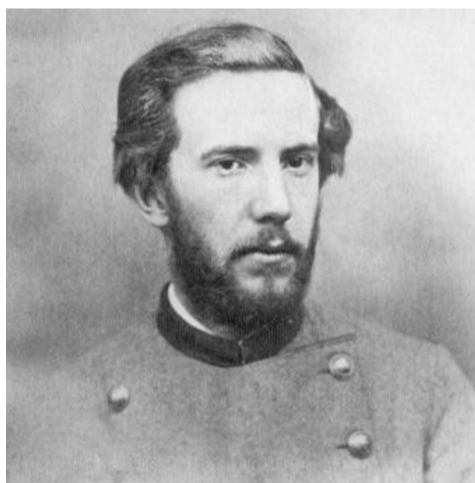
June 1, 2020

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The Flag of Sumter, October 20, 1863 | American Civil War Museum

Many artists fought for the Confederate States of America, and perhaps the most famous was Conrad Wise Chapman. Born in Washington, D.C., in 1840, Chapman started his life as an apprentice to his itinerant father, John Gadsby Chapman, who was traveling Europe in search of artistic patronage. By the time war broke out on the American continent, Chapman had returned to the United States, where he had enlisted in the 3rd Kentucky Infantry. The unit was organized in Montgomery, Tennessee, since Kentucky was still formally a part of the Union with many Kentuckians joining the Confederate cause. Under the command of Leonidas Polk, Chapman was wounded at the battle of Shiloh, where his regiment experienced intense fire at the infamous Hornet's Nest. Following the loss at Shiloh, he saw action in Mississippi and Louisiana, but at the request of his father John Gadsby, Gen. Henry Alexander Wise moved him to the 46th and 59th Virginia Infantry regiments. In 1863, his regiment moved to Charleston, where he fought in the Second Battle of Fort Sumter, where he sketched the bombardments that he witnessed.



Conrad Wise Chapman in uniform, ca 1862 | Virginia State Library and Archives

Chapman's painting style focuses on polished detail and poignant, almost romantic portrayals of the American Civil War. One of his most recognizable illustrations, *The Flag of Sumter, October 20, 1863*, embodies much of his formalistic predilections and is an excellent case study in understanding his unique style. In the background, we see a Federal blockade, preventing the soldiers and citizens of Charleston from receiving much-needed supplies. The water shimmers with an almost brackish glow as the Ashley and Cooper Rivers flood into the Atlantic. Union ironclads penetrate the white-capped water, retreating to the ocean following the day's engagement. Standing alone, underneath the torn and battered Confederate flag, a single soldier ponders his existence and role in such devastating combat. The destruction of battle looms behind him, as a cannon, split at the

breach, has experienced the real power of shot and shell. Its dilapidated state alludes to the lonely soldier and the partially destroyed fort that surrounds him. All hope seems lost, but empowering the scene, the flag waves with an illustrious aura of victory. It stands resolute while everything seems to have fallen to defeat around its position.

The iconography of the "resilient flag" was an all-too-familiar motif in the Civil War, portrayed by both Northern and Southern artists. The flag's presence, colors, and insignia were more than simple cloth and stitching. They embodied the ideals of the Confederacy and the men—allegorically placed below the flag—that fought for the South. Here in this scene, Chapman brilliantly pulls our attention to this monument of battle, calling upon its allegorical meaning, championing the Confederate cause, and providing added motivations behind the impetus of secession.

By the end of the war, Chapman left the South in 1864 to visit his sick mother in Rome, Italy. He later returned to the South some years later. He was one of the few artists who actually painted on sight during engagements. Other artists of the Civil War finished their compositions following the conclusion of the war, some waiting up to 20 years before completing a commission. Today, Chapman's paintings constitute the nucleus of works at the American Civil War Museum in Richmond, Virginia, where visitors remember him for his artistic and military contributions to the Southern effort in the American Civil War.



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