

Columbia, 17th December 1860

Strictly Confidential

My dear Sir,

With a sincere desire to prevent a collision of force, I have thought proper to address you directly and truthfully on points of deep and immediate interest.

I am authentically informed that the Forts in Charleston Harbor are now being thoroughly prepared to turn, with effect, their guns upon the interior and the city jurisdiction was ceded by this State expressly for the purpose of external defence [sic] from foreign invasion, and not with any view that they should be turned upon the State.

In an ordinary case of mob rebellion perhaps it might be proper to prepare them for such an outbreak, but when the people of the State, in sovereign convention assembled, determine to resume their separate and independent powers of sovereignty, the whole question is changed and it is no longer an Act of rebellion. I therefore must respectfully urge that all work on the Forts be put a stop to for the present, and that no more force may be ordered there.

The regular convention of the people of the State of South Carolina, legally and properly called under our constitution, is now in session, deliberating upon the gravest and most momentous questions, and the excitement of the great masses of the people is intense, under a sense of deep wrongs, and a profound necessity of doing something to preserve the peace and safety of the country. To spare the effusion of blood, which no human power may be able to prevent. I earnestly beg you immediate consideration of the points I call your attention to. It is not improbable that, under orders, either from the Commandant, or perhaps from the Commander in Chief of the Army, the alteration and defences [sic] of those Forts are progressing without the knowledge of yourself of the Secretary of War.

The Arsenal in the City of Charleston, with the public arms, I am informed, was very properly trusted to the keeping and defence [sic] of a State force, at the urgent request of the Governor of South Carolina. I would most respectfully, and from a sincere devotion to the public peace, request that you would allow me to send a small force, not exceeding twenty-five men and an officer, to take possession of Fort Sumter immediately, in order to give a feeling of safety to the community. There are no United State troops in that Fort whatever, or perhaps only four or five at present, besides some additional workmen or laborers, lately employed, to put the guns in order. The United States troops are stationed at Fort Moultrie. If Fort Sumter could be given to me as Governor, under a permission similar to that which gave the Governor permission to keep the arsenal, with the United States arms in the city of Charleston, then, I think, the public mind could be quieted, under a feeling of safety, and as the convention is now in full authority, it strikes me it could done with perfect propriety. I need not go into particulars, for urgent reasons will force themselves readily upon your consideration.

If something of the kind be not done, I cannot answer for the consequences. I send this by a private and confidential gentleman who is authorized to confer fully with Mr. Trescott and to receive, through him, any answer you may think proper to give to this.

I have the honor to be –
most respectfully –
Yours truly,
Signed. F. W. Pickens

To the President
of the United States.

Citation: Governor Francis W. Pickens to President James Buchanan. 17 December 1860. S511001. Letters, Telegrams, and Proclamations. Governor Francis W. Pickens papers. South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina.