
Loved In Trenton And Hated In Charleston

The Swamp Angel

By James Goldy

At 1:30 A.M. on August 22, 1863, an artillery shell exploded in the city of Charleston, South Carolina. Fifteen more shells followed. These shells came flying in from a single cannon in a marsh battery set up some 7,900 yards from the city's defenses. Yankee soldiers had christened the gun the "Swamp Angel."

The first gun to fire directly on the civilians of Charleston, the "Swamp Angel" was the brainchild of Union Major General Quincy A. Gillmore, an Ohio-born graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. Noted for his mastery of siege operations, in mid June 1863 he was called in to determine if the Union army could reduce Confederate-held Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor.

Once on the scene, Gillmore formed the opinion that the Federals should place heavy guns on the northern end of Morris Island in the harbor, a sandy heap of land claimed by the Confederates. Firing from this vantage artillery could destroy Sumter and Union ironclad warships could then steam in and pummel the city of Charleston into submission.

Gillmore's plan was approved and on July 10 he took a force of infantry and gunners across Lighthouse Inlet from nearby Folly Island and captured the lower three quarters of Morris Island. Although the Confederates still held Batteries Wagner and Gregg on Morris Island's Cummings Point, it mattered little to Gillmore. His can-

non were placed where they could do the most damage to Fort Sumter. He then turned his attention on Charleston.

On July 13 Gillmore ordered Lieutenant Peter S. Michie of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to examine Morris Island's surrounding marshland to determine if a battery could be constructed to fire on Charleston. Michie's report was positive. Three days later, while breakfasting with Colonel Edward W. Serrell of the volunteer engineers, Gillmore expressed his desire to establish a battery in a position to shell the harborside city. Would the colonel examine the ground, he asked, and report his findings?

After breakfast Serrell and Lieutenant Nathan M. Edwards began a survey. Paddling a board through the watery mud and walking where they could, they found an ideal location for a battery. Serrell's report to Gillmore contained these estimates: the gun should not weigh more than 10,000 pounds; it should be taken across the marsh on 100 square-foot skids; it would take approximately 2,300 men one night to carry enough sandbags to make the battery's defenses; 60 soldiers would be required to carry the gun's barbette platform; the chore would require another 450 men to mount the gun and 35 to carry its ammunition magazine.

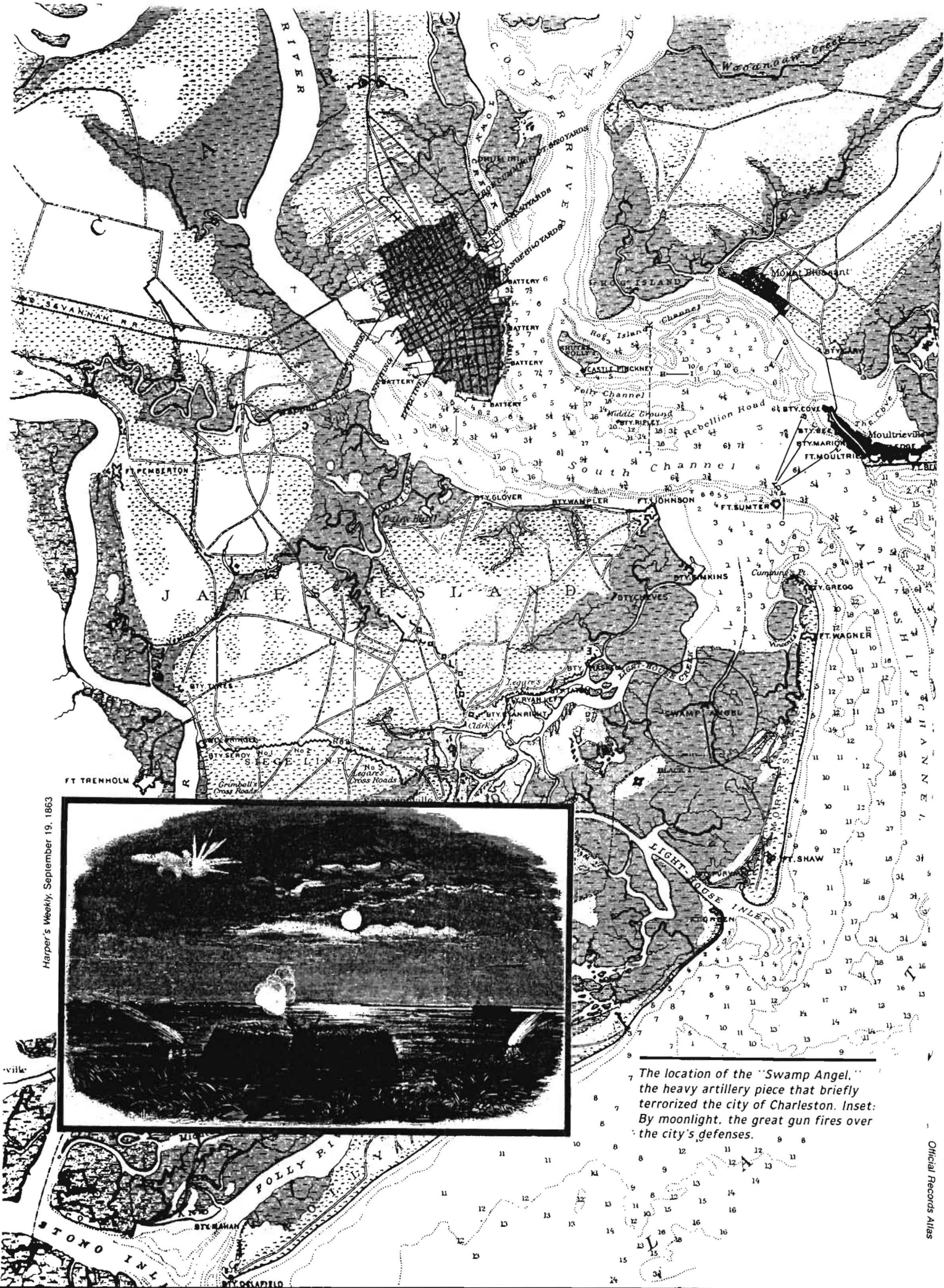
Further examinations of the marsh were made, including soundings of its wettest area with a 30-foot iron rod.

These studies found the mud was between 16 and 18 feet deep. This conclusion led to the joke that it would take men 25 feet tall to work in the battery's 18 feet of mud. Jokes were not necessary, though. The mud was also of such jelly-like consistency that one worker wrote "two men standing upon a plank could, by the proper motion, make the entire mass beneath them visibly move for several hundred square yards." Serrell conducted a sandbag test, piling them on a platform to a height of 9 feet. The platform sank about 1 foot on one corner then set squarely. The test was considered a success, and on August 2 Serrell presented a construction plan to Gillmore.

The general quickly approved Serrell's scheme and battery construction started immediately. Under Serrell's direction a 2½-mile-long trestle-work roadway was thrown up across the marsh, providing access to the battery's location. Then a mock battery (wooden logs painted to look like cannon) was erected to draw Confederate fire. With this done, work on the battery itself commenced.

First, two large platforms were placed on the island's marshy surface. This was the gun deck or barbette platform, a structure surrounded by sheet pilings driven into the mud. Once the pilings were in place, a foundation of pine logs was bolted together surrounding three sides of the platform. Piled on this were sandbags forming a parapet.

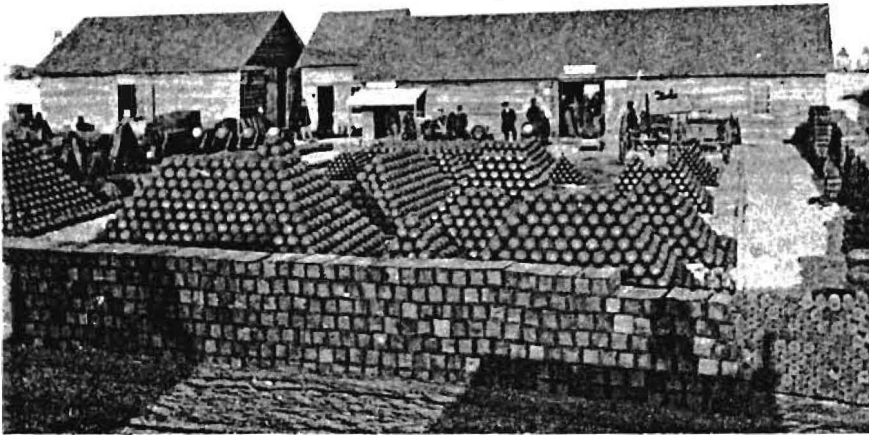
The Cannon Feared And Respected In Two Cities



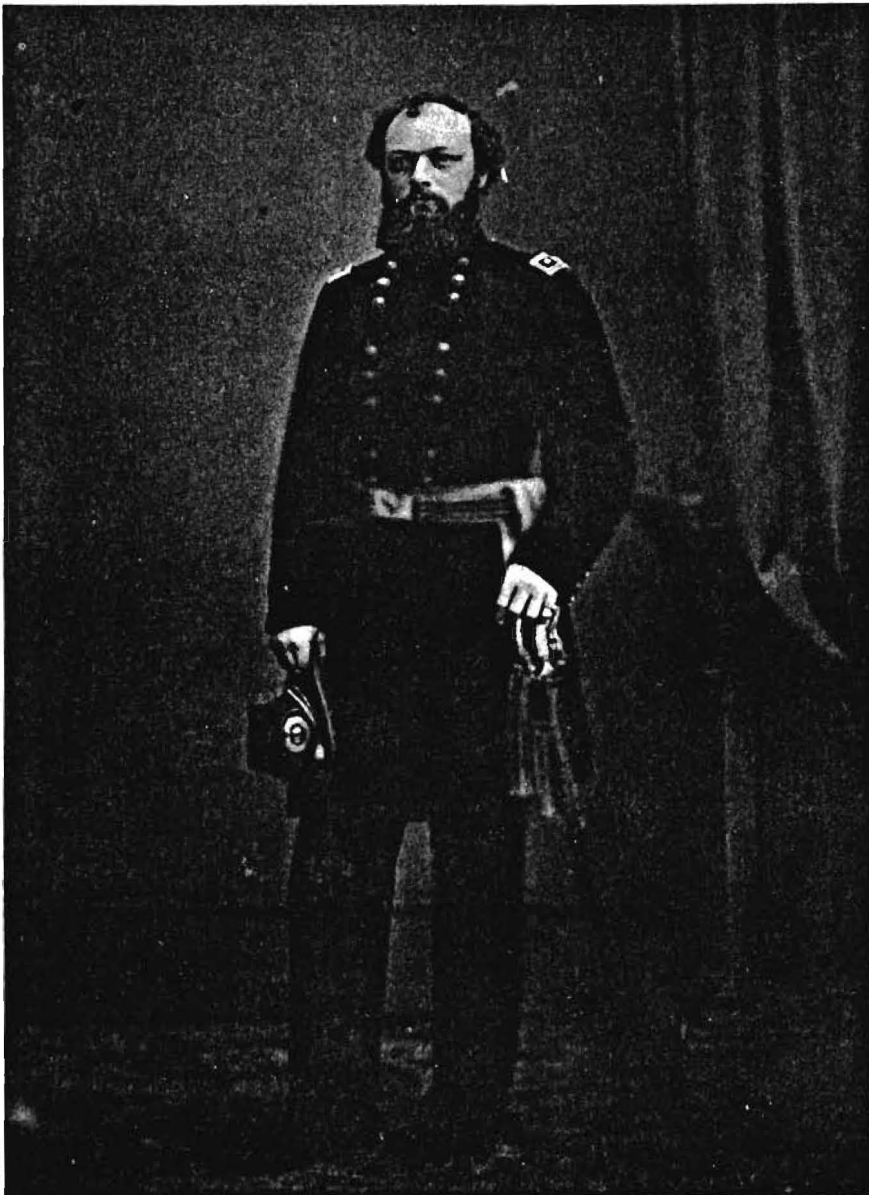
Harper's Weekly, September 19, 1863



The location of the "Swamp Angel," the heavy artillery piece that briefly terrorized the city of Charleston. Inset: By moonlight, the great gun fires over the city's defenses.



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Left: Major General Quincy Gillmore, the Union soldier who initiated the "Swamp Angel" project. Top, left: General Gillmore's shell-covered ordnance yard on Morris Island, the source of the great gun's 150-pound shells. Above: The "Angel" dismantled in its marsh battery after its breech was blown off.

The project was an immense undertaking. The battery was composed of 13,000 sandbags, 123 pieces of yellow pine timber measuring 15 to 18 inches in diameter by 45 to 55 feet long, 5,000 feet of 1-inch board, eight tarpaulins each 18 by 28 feet, 9,516 feet of 3-inch pine plank, 300 pounds of 7-inch spikes and 300 pounds of 4-inch spikes and nails, 600 pounds of round and square iron, and 75 fathoms of 3-inch rope. The gun was made at New York State's West Point Foundry. It weighed 16,500 pounds



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and had an 11-foot, 4-inch bore depth. It fired a 150-pound projectile, a round so heavy it needed a 16-pound powder charge to send it flying.

On the night of August 17, under heavy guard and protected by gunboats, a detachment under command of the 3d New Hampshire Volunteers' Captain Andrew Wadlia hauled the behemoth into position. The following night the gun was mounted. From that moment, Gillmore could proceed with the bombardment at his leisure.

On August 21 Gillmore sent a message to Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard, commander of the military district of Charleston, demanding that Morris Island and Fort Sumter be evacuated at once or the city would be shelled.

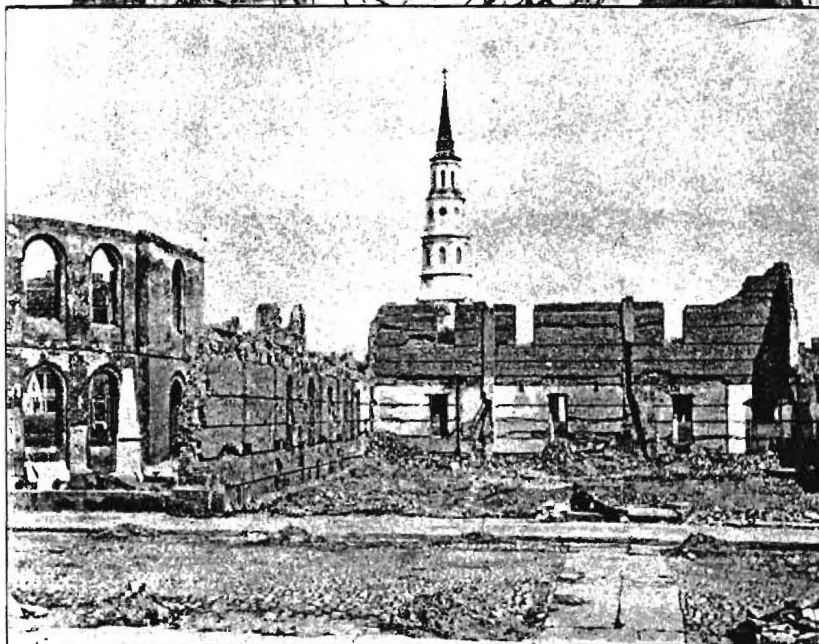
The message was unsigned. Consequently, it did not reach the general


quickly. When no reply was received by midnight, Gillmore ordered the shelling to commence. Lieutenant Charles Sellmer of the 11th Maine Volunteers took a crew to the battery. Because a woods stood between the battery and the city, ranges had to be determined by triangulation, the steeple of the city's St. Michael's church being a focal point. The gun was elevated to 31°, 30 minutes, and at 1:30 A.M. the first percussion-fused shell was fired.

Shortly after firing, the gun crew could hear the wail of steam whistles and the ringing of bells indicating that the shell had landed within the city. The threat had been carried out, alarming the sleeping city of Charleston. More shells were fired — 16 in all. Twelve of these rounds were filled with an incendiary fluid known as "Greek Fire." St. Michael's Church

was hit several times, but its steeple remained undamaged.

Meanwhile, the Northern newspaper *Harper's Weekly* was calling Gillmore "the foremost military engineer in history." Referring to the late Crimean War, the paper confidently declared Gillmore's ability. "Had Gillmore, with his present artillery, been in command before Sebastopol the Russian stronghold would have been demolished in a week." The same edition published a sketch of the battery with this brief editorial: "One of our batteries on Morris Island, built under exceeding difficulties, is looked upon with so much pride and interest by our brave soldiers that this sketch of it, by the light of a just full moon, will no doubt please the anxious ones at home, who look with glad eyes upon the rapid progress of this siege.




THE SWAMP ANGEL
 THE FIRST GUN, AN EIGHT INCH BROTT
 RIFLE OR 200 POUNDER FIRED FROM THE
 MARSH BATTERY, ON MORRIS ISLAND, S.C.
 AT THE CITY OF CHARLESTON, 70 MILES
 DISTANCE. WEIGHT OF GUN 16,500 POUNDS.
 WEIGHT OF CHARGE OF POWDER 1,000 POUNDS.
 AND WEIGHT OF PROJECTILE 150 POUNDS.
 GREATEST ELEVATION USED 35°.
 BOMBARDMENT OPENED AUGUST 18, 1863.
 GUN BURST AT 36th ROUND.
 ERECTED FEBRUARY 1871 AT CORNER OF
 NO. CLINTON AVENUE AND FERRY STREET,
 TRENTON. REDEDICATED AT CAMDEN
 PARK ON 100th ANNIVERSARY OF THE
 START OF AMERICAN CIVIL WAR APRIL 1961.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Courtesy of the author



Left: The "Swamp Angel" at rest in Trenton. Inset: The steeple of St. Michael's, the landmark gunners used to aim the "Swamp Angel." Surrounded by the rubble of other buildings destroyed by Gillmore's gun, it stands unscathed.

"Who built the battery and where it is is a sort of secret we are keeping from the rebels; so for a time the names, places, and kind of batteries are withheld."

The Confederates may not have known who built the battery, but they were well aware of its existence. Beauregard sent an angry communication to Gillmore. He wrote, "Your firing a number of the most destructive missiles ever used in war into the midst of a city taken unawares and filled with sleeping women and children will give you a bad eminence in history." Along with this came messages from the British and Spanish consuls. Concerned about the safety of their subjects, they objected to the shelling and requested its immediate cessation. Gillmore coolly replied, "Respectfully received — request declined. Q.A.G."

The next day, August 23, the shelling continued with the firing of 20 more "Greek Fire"-filled shells. Unfortunately, six of them exploded prematurely inside the piece. On the 36th discharge the "Swamp Angel" burst. The breech was blown out of its jacket, catapulting the gun forward on the parapet. It landed in such a position as to appear to be ready to fire again. The Confederates, who had been firing at the battery since August 21, continued to fire, wasting ammunition needlessly.

Lieutenant Wadlia was given the task of disposing of the gun, which he buried under the sandbags of the parapet. And so ended the life of the "Swamp Angel." Its existence was a short but useful one. For two days it had sent destruction into Charleston, the city of secession.

But the "Swamp Angel's" story did not end there. After the war a Trenton, New Jersey foundry man collected and bought the old iron from Morris Island. He did not realize it, but the "Swamp Angel" was part of his purchase.

Later it was discovered that the man had the famous gun. When the citizens of Trenton were made aware of this fact, they purchased it at the old iron price and mounted it on a pedestal. From that time to the present day, it sits in a Trenton park, a monument to one of the most remarkable feats of military engineering in the Civil War. ■