

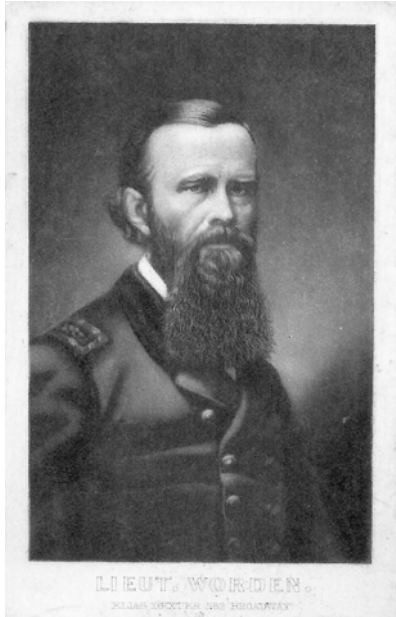
Lt. John L. Worden at the Start of the Civil War

by

Robert L. Worden

Annapolis, Maryland

(wordenannapolis@aol.com)



Prior to the opening days of the Civil War, which started on April 12, 1861, Lieutenant John Lorimer Worden, USN (1818–1897), was a very busy man. Previously, Worden had completed a short tour onboard the frigate USS *Savannah* of the Home Squadron on November 20, 1860, and then had gone on home leave to Quaker Hill, Dutchess County, New York, where his wife Olivia, and children John Lorimer Jr., Daniel Toffey, Grace, and Olivia Steele Worden were living with Olivia's uncle John Toffey and his wife, Esther Akin Toffey. Here are the details on what Worden was doing at the onset of war and how he became the war's first POW. The details are based primarily on letters and documents in the John L. Worden Papers at Abraham Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee.

Monday, April 6, 1861: Lieutenant Worden arrives in Washington, D.C. with orders from Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, dated April 2, 1861, "to report to the Department for special duty connected with the discipline and efficiency of the Naval Service." Holds a late-night meeting with Welles about a secret assignment.

Tuesday, April 7, 1861: Lieutenant Worden departs by train from Washington, D.C. bound for Florida. He carries Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles' secret orders for the commander of the U.S. Navy fleet off Pensacola, Florida, to reinforce Fort Pickens by landing troops. The same day, a joint army-naval force was set to depart New York Harbor for Charleston, South Carolina, to relieve Fort Sumter.

Thursday, April 11, 1861: After four days of railroad travel through the South, Lieutenant Worden arrives in Pensacola, Florida. The train he had taken from Atlanta was filled with Confederate soldiers who taunted the U.S. Navy officer (in uniform). Fearing he might be arrested, Worden went into the train's water closet, opened, read, and destroyed the secret orders given to him by Gideon Welles but which he now knows came from President Abraham Lincoln himself. At Pensacola he meets with Confederate General Braxton Bragg and obtains his permission to convey orders to Captain Henry A. Adams, captain of the USS *Sabine* and commander of U.S. Naval Squadron at Pensacola. In January Adams had agreed with the local secessionists that he would not land the troops onboard the USS *Brooklyn* to reinforce Fort Pickens if they would not attack the fort. In March Adams had received War Department orders to land the troops but had not done so because of his truce with the Confederates and afraid such action would ignite war. Now it was April and war was imminent.

Friday, April 12, 1861: At 10:00 AM, Lieutenant Worden takes the gunboat USS *Wyandotte* out to the USS *Sabine*, the flagship of the Naval Squadron off Pensacola. Arriving at Noon, he conveys the secret orders to Captain Henry A. Adams to land the troops now onboard the USS *Sabine* (86 soldiers and 115 marines) to reinforce the garrison at Fort Pickens. The landing took place that night, allowing time for Worden to return to shore and start making his way back to Washington. The secessionists are furious and consider the movement of troops a violation of a previous agreement and an act of treachery. Had the war not already begun that morning at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, this action in Florida instead might have started the Civil War. Regardless, Worden's timely delivery of orders saved Fort Pickens for the Union. Returning ashore at Pensacola, he took the 9:00 PM train to Montgomery, Alabama.

Saturday, April 13, 1861: At about 4:00 PM, the Pensacola-to-Montgomery train stops at the last station before reaching Montgomery (at the time, the Confederate capital) and four Confederate officers come

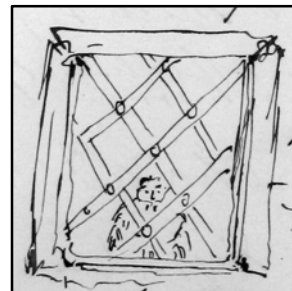
onboard. Entering Lieutenant John Lorimer Worden's car they arrest him as a spy, even though he is still in his Navy uniform. Arriving at in Montgomery, the depot is surrounded "by a large gathering of excited people" (the local papers had reported his impending arrest) but his captors rush him through the crowd and get him safely into a carriage which takes him to the adjutant general's office. Worden becomes the first POW of the Civil War.

Monday, April 15, 1861: After a weekend in detention, Lieutenant Worden is moved to the Montgomery City Jail. The same day (April 15), he sent a telegram to his wife, Olivia saying, "arrived here on the thirteenth am detained well & comfortable hope to see you in a few days. He also her wrote a longer, more realistic letter, also dated April 15: "I am under arrest here as a prisoner of war. I cannot tell you how long I shall be detained, but hope and trust it will not be long. In the meantime, I pray you to keep up good spirits & a cheerful heart. I cannot write fully. Kiss the little ones for me & believe me as ever, your affectionate husband."

Thursday, May 2, 1861: Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, Washington, D.C., writes to Olivia Worden in Quaker Hill, New York, saying he had received hers of April 25 and that "I can give you no information concerning your husband, as the Department has had no intelligence from him." He concluded by saying "I do not entertain any fear for his safety."

Tuesday, May 7, 1861: Secretary of the Navy Welles, writes again to Olivia Worden in Quaker Hill, acknowledging receipt of her letter of May 2. He reports that the department has received a letter from Lieutenant Worden reporting that he has been imprisoned and is "well treated by those who have him in custody." Welles says that Worden's "conduct has always been that of an officer of high standing and I sincerely regret that at present there appears no way of releasing him from his unjust detention. Rest assured the first opportunity of relieving him will be embraced." In conclusion he said that the Department had no way of determining how long Worden would be in detention "but is not apprehensive that personal violence will befall him."

Wednesday, May 8, 1861: Old shipmate and family friend Lieutenant Henry A. Wise, USN, soon-to-be chief of the Navy's Bureau of Ordnance in Washington, D.C., writes to Olivia Worden in Quaker Hill, New York, saying he had received her "sad note" of May 4 and had immediately gone to Commodore Hiram Paulding (a Navy Department official who had been tasked in mid-April 1861 with destroying the strategic Gosport Navy Yard at Portsmouth, Virginia, in which lay the USS *Merrimack*) and Secretary of Navy Gideon Welles. The two men assured Wise the matter was under control and let him believe that Worden "will shortly be released." Some politicians have called for arrests of Southern officers in retaliation, but Welles has said such action would "not be judicious." In a line meant to be encouraging, Wise says "and when he does get out he will be a commander with his pocket full of money, for he must be economical where he is, and then you can both go on a spree." He went on to say: "I really can't help laugh, the idea that Jack braking [*sic*] through this sort of thing but I done say he lets down a little basket occasionally for coppers and so gets jolly as possible under the circumstances." In the middle of this sentence he drew a little picture of a forlorn Worden looking through a barred window.



It was Lieutenant John Lorimer Worden's fate to remain imprisoned in Montgomery, Alabama, until November 13, 1861. More details will follow on his exchange at Hampton Roads, Virginia, and assignment to command a revolutionary new warship being built in Brooklyn, New York.