According to the 1860 census, Charleston was ranked the 22nd largest city in the United States. Sitting on the southeast coast of the United States and with many active ports, Charleston served as a hotbed for trade during the late 1800s. However, when eleven southern states declared their succession from the rest of the United States in the early 1860s, people became angry and armies began to form. The eleven states formed what was known as the Confederate States of America or “The Confederacy”. These eleven states fought against the rest of the United States, “The Union”, in which soon became known as the American Civil War or War between the states. A major cause for their succession and the start of the war was over slavery. Many Confederates believed that slavery was an important part of southern society; however, many Union men were fighting to abolish the idea of slavery among the states. Fort Sumter was a key to the beginning of the civil war. Located directly in the center of the Charleston harbor, it was able to protect the city and fight with neighboring islands from all sides. The war began on April 12, 1861 when the first shots were fired from Fort Sumter.
When South Carolina succeeded from the Union, Fort Sumter was still occupied by the north. After three days of bombing, the Union general surrendered and gave Fort Sumter back to the south. The fort changed hands many times during the duration of the war due to its strategic location in Charleston's harbor. After the Civil War, Fort Sumter was in ruins. With attempts to restore the fort, its damaged walls and tiers were torn down or re-leveled. The fort was later given to a museum in Charleston.

Many believe that the images of the ruins of downtown Charleston during the Civil War were from excessive amounts of bombing. While the city did face destruction from fighting, many of these ruin images are actually not from the fighting aspect of the war. Rather, on December 11, 1861, an enormous fire broke out in downtown Charleston. This fire covered over 500 acres causing massive destruction and millions of dollars worth of damage. The origin could not be identified for sure, however, this event will later be called the Great Charleston Fire of 1861.

The islands surrounding the Charleston harbor played an important part in the American Civil War. They were able to serve as strategic locations for battle and fort placement, especially the islands that had peninsulas protruding out into the harbor surrounding Fort Sumter. Various forts stretched from Mount Pleasant to Sullivans Island and James Island to the east coast of Morris Island. The location of Charleston and South Carolina made it easier for enemies to attack from the ocean and onto the coasts.