



The Caning of Charles Sumner (Witness to History)

Williamjames Hull Hoffer

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A signal, violent event in the history of the United States Congress, the caning of Charles Sumner on the Senate floor embodied the complex North-South cultural divide of the mid-nineteenth century. Williamjames Hull Hoffer's vivid account of the brutal act demonstrates just how far the sections had drifted apart and explains why the coming war was so difficult to avoid. Sumner, a noted abolitionist and gifted speaker, was seated at his Senate desk on May 22, 1856, when Democratic Congressman Preston S. Brooks approached, pulled out a gutta-percha walking stick, and struck him on the head. Brooks continued to beat the stunned Sumner, forcing him to the ground and repeatedly striking him even as the cane shattered. He then pursued the bloodied, staggering Republican senator up the Senate aisle until Sumner collapsed at the feet of Congressman Edwin B. Morgan. Colleagues of the two intervened only after Brooks appeared intent on beating the unconscious Sumner severely -- and, perhaps, to death.

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