

BATTLES FOR FORTS

HENRY, HEIMAN & DONELSON

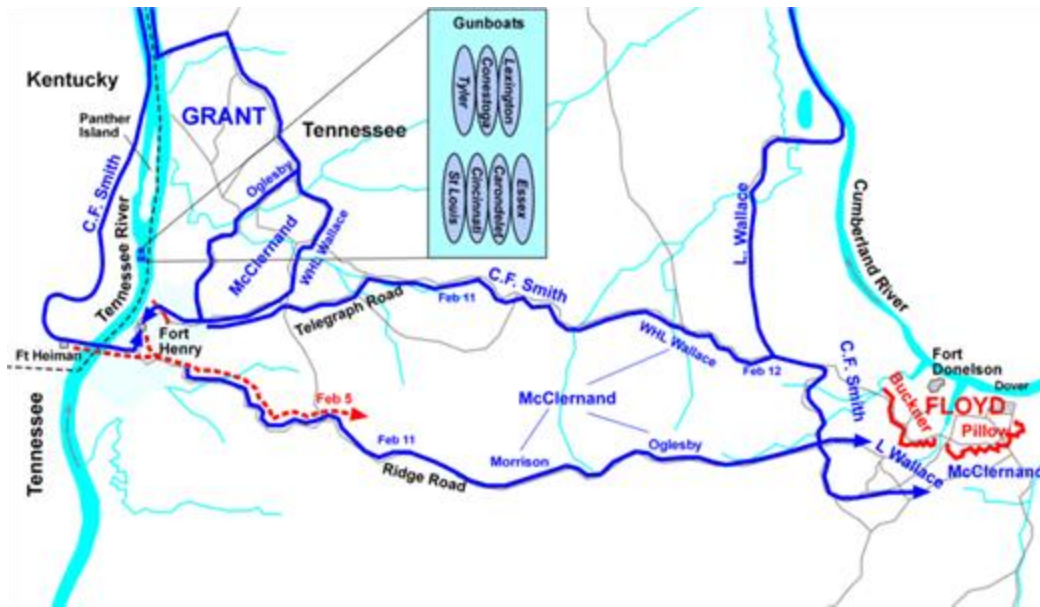
February 1862



The Civil War started on April 12th 1861 and the states were choosing sides. Tennessee was the last of the Confederate States to secede from the union, choosing to do so on June 8, 1861. Southern leaders were hoping Kentucky would follow Tennessee for example, providing the South a formidable northern boundary. When Kentucky chose to stay with the Union, Southern leaders realized it had to bolster the border to protect itself as the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers crossed the border of the two states. These were vital routes the Confederates used to transport soldiers, weapons and supplies. The South also knew that if the Union were to prevail it would have to use these waterways to maintain its supply routes if the Union Army moved south. Both sides knew controlling these waterways would be essential to fight the war.

Governor Isham Harris of Tennessee decided to start work on the defense of his state. He dispatched engineers to review and select sites for forts on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Engineers were told to select sites north of the railroad crossings in the area south of the state border with Kentucky. Fort Donelson would be built on a high bluff, while Fort Henry was built along the river on low ground which was frequently flooded by the Tennessee River. Due to the precarious position of Fort Henry, a third fort was constructed on the adjacent high ground and this would be Fort Heiman.

The earthen field fortification for Fort Henry was laid out and constructed by Tennessee state engineers in the summer of 1861. It was named for Tennessee senator Gustavus Adolphus Henry, Sr. Fort Heiman, actually built in Kentucky, was built to bolster the precarious position of Fort Henry and was named for Colonel Adolphus Heiman, commander of the Tenth Tennessee Regiment. These two forts only had a garrison of 2500 men between them. The third fort, Fort Donelson was even on higher ground and was a superior fort compared to the prior two. It was named for Brigadier General Daniel Donelson of the Tennessee State Militia and its garrison was over 12,000 men.



Confederate General Lloyd Tilghman was assigned as commanding officer of the Forts and upon initial inspection was very dissatisfied with Fort Henry's location so close to the water. He knew the earthen fort would be weakened by the Tennessee River flooding and it would pose little defense if the Union army chose to sail its Iron Clad boats for bombardment. As General Tilghman continued with the inspections of the three forts, he had no way of knowing that U. S. Grant's army of 17,000 Federal troops, on gunboats and transports and commanded by Commodore Andrew Hull Foote, had been moving toward the forts from the north since February 1st. Though not yet formally named, this army eventually became known as Grant's Army of the Tennessee.

General Grant with his Army of the Tennessee attacked a Confederate Camp at Belmont Missouri. The results of the campaign were inconclusive but it did provide Grant a close view of the Confederates work along the border of Kentucky and Tennessee. He was also receiving reports that Fort Henry was a weak position and requested permission from his superior General Henry Halleck to attack the fort. He was originally denied but when requests also came in from Admiral Andrew Foote, Halleck agreed to the joint Army and Navy assault.

By February 4th, General Grant's army had arrived and initially positioned themselves 3 miles downstream of Forts Henry and Heiman. This prompted General Tilghman to order the men from the yet unfinished Fort Heiman to leave their stations and reinforce Fort Henry. With heavy rains falling, the Tennessee River was rising causing further flooding of Fort Henry. After an initial call to surrender was rejected by General Tilghman, Flag Officer Andrew H Foote took his seven gunboats and began bombarding the fort. General Tilghman, knowing it was just a matter of time before Fort Henry fell, made a second move of his men. He sent all but 70 men to Fort Donelson figuring that the stronger fort with a larger garrison would be a strong point in the battle if Fort Henry fell. As the fighting continued, Flag Officer Admiral Andrew H Foote's seven gunboats moved up to within four hundred yards of the fort, firing point blank. With just 70 Confederate soldiers, they were able to disable one boat, the Essex. A chance shot from a 32 pound shot from Fort Henry penetrated the ironclad and hit her mid-boiler, sending scalding steam throughout half the ship. Thirty two crewmen were killed or wounded, including her commander William D. Porter. The ship was out of commission for the remainder of the campaign. With the gunships firing and Grant's men surrounding, Fort Henry fell at 2 o'clock the afternoon of February 6th. The fort was renamed Fort Foote and was occupied by Union Troops.



Bombardment and capture of Fort Henry, Tenn,

With two forts under control, General Grant advanced cross country eleven miles to Fort Donelson. Grant was determined to move quickly on the much larger fort and boasted that he would capture Donelson by the 8th of February. This goal quickly ran into challenges; poor winter weather, late arriving reinforcements and difficulty getting the ironclads to the Cumberland River.

During this delay, Fort Donelson was strengthened. General John B. Floyd was appointed commander of the fort and went about reinforcing his garrison. Reinforcements arrived with a total of 17,000 Confederate troops. The improved artillery positions and reinforced earthworks convinced General Floyd to stay and fight to protect the Confederate stronghold.

General Grant and his army arrived on February 13th and he began to post his men around the landward side of the fort to ensure no further retreat of the Confederate forces could be made. One day later, Admiral Foote and his flotilla, including the four ironclads St. Louis, Carondelet, Louisville, and Pittsburg , along with two gunboats, the Tyler and Conestoga moved up river readying them to bombard the fort. As the ironclads moved into position, a duel broke out between the Union Navy and artillery at the fort. Originally firing from a mile away, the Union Ironclads soon realized that firing from that distance was not doing enough damage to the fort. As the gunboats moved closer to inflict more damage, the Confederates opened fire with the heavy guns. One Confederate soldier was heard to shout “Come on you cowardly scoundrels. You aren’t at Fort Henry !” Many of Foote’s ironclads were heavily damaged and Foote himself was wounded in the attack. From the land, Grant’s men could here the Confederate cheers as the Union gunboats retreated from the battle.

With the news of the gunboats retreating, Grant was contemplating a siege on the fort and went to confer with Admiral Foote to survey the damaged boats. The Confederate soldiers devised a bold plan to move as many men as possible to the landward side and attack Grant’s army. When Grant left Foote, he heard firing but was not alarmed as he had thought there wouldn’t be any engagement on land unless he brought the attack. The Rebels however, had taken the initiative. The morning of February 15th the Confederate assault hit the Union army and pushed them back. Union Brigadier General John McClernand’s division trying to reinforce their lines was attacked heavily and the Rebels continued to drive his troops to the southeast. Since the beginning of the campaign in Tennessee, the Union forces were now on their heels and ultimate victory was in question.

The Confederate breakthrough had ground to a halt by mid-afternoon but the Rebel attack had opened the road to Charlotte and Nashville, giving the Confederates their escape route. In what would be the oddest and most unpredictable moves of any battle in the Civil War, Confederate General Gideon Pillow, sensing a complete victory over the Union forces ordered his men back into the Fort, thereby abandoning the ground they fought so hard for during the morning hours. Seeing this, General Grant ordered Generals Lew Wallace and John McClernand to retake

their ground and then rode to the Union left to order an attack forward to take more ground on that side of the fort. The battle raged until nightfall when both sides suspended action.

During the night of the 15th, the Confederate leaders discussed the battle and what their options would be come morning. Many thought that surrender would be the only option. Some Confederate commanders were disgusted with the decision to surrender and led their troops to escape that night. Even with these defections, more than 13,000 Confederate soldiers remained at Fort Donelson.

Union forces planning another attack were surprised to see white flags flying above the fort the next morning. General Simon B. Buckner was left in command of Fort Donelson and sent Major Nathaniel F. Cheairs of the 3rd Tennessee Infantry out with a note to General Grant to discuss surrender terms.

The note read:

SIR: In consideration of all the circumstances governing the present situation of affairs at this station I propose to the commanding officers of the Federal forces the appointment of commissioners to agree upon terms of capitulation of the forces and post under my command, and in that view suggest an armistice until 12 o'clock to-day.

I am, sir, very respectfully,

your obedient servant,

S. B. BUCKNER, Brigadier-General, C. S. Army.

Buckner, a West Point classmate and friend to General Grant was hoping for generous terms for he and his men. Brigadier General Smith escorted Major Cheairs to Grants headquarters and listened as his commander read the note. Grant then handed the note to Smith asking for his opinion. Smith replied "No terms to the damned rebels!" Grant in agreement penned the following:

*General S. B. BUCKNER,
Confederate Army.*

SIR: Yours of this date, proposing armistice and appointment of commissioners to settle terms of capitulation, is just received. No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

U.S. GRANT,

Brigadier-General, Commanding.

General Buckner was disappointed to learn of terms offered by Grant, but had no recourse but to except them. He wrote Grant back with the following scathing reply:

*Brig. Gen. U.S. GRANT,
U.S.A.*

SIR: The distribution of the forces under my command incident to an unexpected change of commanders and the overwhelming force under your command compel me, notwithstanding the brilliant success of the Confederate arms yesterday, to accept the ungenerous and unchivalrous terms which you propose.

*I am, sir, your very obedient servant,
S. B. BUCKNER,
Brigadier. General, C. S. Army*

The victory of Forts Henry, Heiman and Donelson meant control of the waterways and was the first major victory of the war for the Union . The victory by Grant won many accolades and won him the reputation he would use many times again of being a general who would only accept unconditional surrenders.

The equivalent of a corps of Rebel soldiers, some 12-15,000 were marched north to Union prisoner of war compounds. The Confederate dream of establishing a northern frontier of the new nation on the banks of the Ohio River died on the banks of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers that February in 1862.



Brigadier General Gideon J. Pillow Lt. General Simon B. Buckner Brigadier-General Ulysses S. Grant

~Battle Stats~

Forces Engaged in Battle

Union: 25,000

Confederates: 17,000

Total Estimated Casualties: 16,537

Union:

507 killed

1,976 wounded

208 missing & captured

2,691 total

Confederate:

327 killed
1,127 wounded
12,392 missing & captured
13,846 total

[Source: <http://usmilitarybattles.com/battles-for-forts-henry--heiman---donelson.html> , U.S. Library of Congress & Armchair Reader Civil War Feb 2014 ++]