

The Fall of Fort Fisher

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In mid-January 1865, the Confederacy would suffer yet another serious reverse with the Union capture of Fort Fisher, North Carolina. This massive earthen fortification guarded the entrance to the Cape Fear River and the upriver port of Wilmington. Its fall meant the loss of the last major port open for Confederate blockade runners.

The Confederates had begun construction of the fort in April 1861 on a point of land near New Inlet that was originally known as Federal Point but was renamed Confederate Point during the war. Originally named Battery Bolles after its designer, it was renamed Fort Fisher later in 1861 in honor of a Confederate officer killed at First Manassas. Little was done to strengthen the position until July 1862, when Colonel William Lamb took command. Lamb redesigned the fortifications and spent the next two years expanding and improving them. In the words of historian Chris Fonvielle, Lamb supervised the construction of “a series of elevated gun batteries connected by a broad sand rampart on two fronts, one facing northward and the other facing the ocean. From a bird’s-eye view, the fort looked like a giant numeral 7.” The fort’s armament consisted of nearly fifty pieces of heavy artillery, with minefields and a palisade of sharpened logs to guard the land approaches. When completed, Fort Fisher represented “the largest and strongest seacoast fortification in the Confederacy,” and was referred to by some as the “Gibraltar of the South.”

With the capture in August 1864 of the Confederate forts guarding the entrance to Mobile Bay, Wilmington remained the last major port under Confederate control. Consequently, later that year Federal forces would make the first of two attempts to capture Fort Fisher and seal off Wilmington. In December, Major General Benjamin Butler devised a plan in which a boat filled

with gunpowder would be detonated just offshore Fort Fisher, thus killing or immobilizing the fort's defenders, while a landing force would then storm and capture the ruins. While the explosion did take place, it did no damage to the Confederates, and the subsequent landing force was easily repulsed. In the aftermath of that failure, Butler was removed from command, and a new expedition planned against the fort in early 1865. Admiral David Dixon Porter commanded the naval component, consisting of more than fifty ships of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, while General Alfred H. Terry led the land forces.

Porter's vessels commenced an intense bombardment that lasted for more than two days, while Terry's 8,000 man force, supported by some 2,000 sailors, took position for a land assault. On January 15 the Federals attacked, assisted by continual naval gunfire. The outnumbered Confederates fought back ferociously, but they were driven from bastion to bastion until 10:00 p.m. when General William Whiting reluctantly surrendered the garrison. Among those taken prisoner was the fort's designer, Colonel Lamb. The fall of Fort Fisher isolated Wilmington, but it would take a subsequent campaign to force the Confederates to evacuate the city on February 22. The fall of Wilmington had cut off a valuable supply line supporting Robert E. Lee's army, and certainly contributed to the eventual evacuation of Richmond and Petersburg.

Other events of the week included the Missouri Constitutional Convention adopting an ordinance abolishing slavery, Francis P. Blair Sr. met in Richmond with Jefferson Davis about the possibility of peace negotiations, Confederate General John Bell Hood resigned from command of the Army of Tennessee following the disastrous Tennessee Campaign, and the U.S.S. *Patapsco* struck a Confederate mine near the mouth of Charleston Harbor, sinking with a loss of more than sixty men. Despite only faint hopes for Confederate victory, the war went on.