

The Union Conquest of the Carolinas

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As the Confederacy was split in two by Sherman's march through Georgia and with Lee bogged down in the outskirts of Petersburg by Grant, the possibility of a Confederate victory started to seem more and more distant as the days went on. During the week of February 22, 1865, this fading dream of a glorious Confederate victory became even more of a fantasy with the fall of the last blockade running port of the Confederacy, Wilmington, North Carolina.

The loss of Wilmington, North Carolina was a crippling blow to Lee's attempt to keep Grant from edging to Petersburg and the Confederate capital of Richmond. Wilmington was the last major port city for the Confederacy that traded tobacco, lumber, and other products to the outside world through the Union naval blockade. This port also kept Lee's army fighting with essential supplies of food and ammunition. Wilmington was protected by General Bragg who knew the defense of the city was hopeless with the loss of Fort Fisher. On February 22, General Bragg withdrew his last remaining troops defending Wilmington and left the city to the advancing Union regiments. Union General John Schofield marched on Wilmington in the afternoon of February 22, and drove another nail in the coffin of the dying Confederacy.

On February 25, General Johnston assumed Command of the Tennessee Army scattered in the Carolinas with the intent of reuniting the unorganized army and slowing down Sherman's advance through the Carolinas. The task of halting Sherman's advance was a daunting task for Johnston and his army of 20,000 to 25,000. Johnston wrote to Lee, "In my opinion, these troops form an army far too weak to cope with Sherman."

Johnston was right in his opinion as Sherman's army barreled through South Carolina towns, such as Columbia and Camden, getting closer to North Carolina with every day that passed. As Johnston's forces confronted Sherman in skirmishes around Camden, South Carolina, Johnston started to unite his army throughout the Carolina countryside.

Also this week, Tennessee approved the new state Constitution that abolished slavery in the Volunteer State. Tennessee became the second old Confederate state to do so after Missouri. Tennessee was unique in the sense of abolition of slaves because the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 did not apply to Tennessee as it did to the border states, Kentucky and Maryland, and the future conquest of the other Confederate states. The practice of slavery also existed in Tennessee after the Union controlled the state starting in 1863 until the new Constitution was approved. Kentucky rejected the thirteenth amendment to abolish slavery during the week of February 22nd.

This week continued the downward spiral of the Confederacy's hopes and dreams of victory. Sherman's advance seemed unstoppable as it had since his march on Atlanta. The supply lines of Lee's army dried up and Lee's chances of success to hold Richmond diminished as the major port of Wilmington fell to the Union. The fate of the Confederate States seemed to follow the route of Tennessee in the approval of abolishing slavery and occupation by Union forces.