

Battle at Fort Henry

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In the summer of 1861, Tennessee Confederates built two new forts just inside their border with Kentucky, their northern neighbor. Fort Henry was constructed on the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River. The two forts were only 12 miles apart so the Confederates hoped that if one fort was attacked it might be easily reinforced by troops from the other. The purpose of the forts was to prevent Union forces from penetrating the South along either river.

Unlike its counterpart, Fort Henry was not an impressive installation. Built on low swampy ground, the earthen fort was easily flooded and faced dominating hills across the river. Early in February, Union troops under Ulysses Grant prepared to attack the two forts, beginning with Fort Henry, a strategic target for the Union. On February 4th and 5th, Union troops landed north and west of Fort Henry in order to coordinate with a gunboat attack which was scheduled to come on the following day.

At the time of the gunboat attack on February 6, Fort Henry was severely flooded and most of its guns and its powder magazine were under water. Confederate Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman realized that the fort was indefensible, calling it a “wretched military position”. He sent most of his troops eastward to the stronger Fort Donelson.

At around 11:00 am on February 6, Union gunboats under the command of Admiral Andrew Foote began their bombardment. Gunners in the fort did some minor damage to the Union gunboats, but by 2:00 pm Tilghman had lowered his flag and surrendered the position. One interesting side note about the battle is that the Confederates made use of a new defensive device they called a torpedo, what we would now call a contact mine. These devices were

immersed in the water around the fort but failed to detonate as planned. In addition to providing a much needed morale boost, the fall of Fort Henry opened up the Tennessee River and provided an alternative to the Mississippi River for Union gunboats heading south. Grant and his troops now turned their attention east to the more imposing Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River.

While the battle for Fort Henry was unfolding in the West, the Union was preparing for another engagement in the East. On February 7, a Union expedition of 7,500 soldiers led by Ambrose Burnside made its way from Fortress Monroe in Virginia towards Roanoke Island, North Carolina. Control of Roanoke Island would allow Union forces to maintain control of the sounds of Eastern North Carolina and ramp up pressure on the blockade of Norfolk to the north. Despite the ocean blockade in Virginia, supplies still made their way to eastern Virginia by way of the sounds and the Dismal Swamp.

After a harrowing journey on which many of his men became sea sick, Burnside launched his attack on the island early on February 8. The 2,000 Confederates under Colonel H.M. Shaw were quickly overrun. In the aftermath of the battle, Colonel Shaw was forced to surrender all of his garrison and thirty artillery pieces to the victorious Federals. While generally considered a minor battle, 63 soldiers were killed and 276 soldiers were wounded; it had a large impact on the war effort of both the North and the South. Control of Pamlico Sound gave the Union an excellent base with which to attack Confederate ports in North Carolina. News of the Union victory at Roanoke Island also came around the same time as the Confederate defeat at Fort Henry. Early in the war, it appeared that Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan to strangle the Confederacy on its rivers and ports was headed toward success.