

## **Grant is Victorious at Fort Donelson** **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

The mid-February 1862 capture of Forts Henry and Donelson marked the first major Union victory in the war's western theater and also the beginning of the rise to prominence of the commander who eventually led northern armies to victory in the conflict. During the latter engagement Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant would earn the nickname "Unconditional Surrender" for his insistence that no terms be granted to the capitulating Confederate forces. The combined victories at Forts Henry and Donelson led to the capture of Nashville, opened much of Tennessee to Union occupation, and shifted the initiative in the west to the United States forces.

On February 6, Union gunboats had bombarded the Confederate position at Fort Henry, located on the east bank of the Tennessee River about 12 miles west of Fort Donelson, into submission. Much of the southern garrison had evacuated the fort before the bombardment even began, leaving Union land forces under Grant to easily occupy the fort. Grant and his subordinate officers then determined to move their small army across the narrow strip of land that separated the two positions and attack Fort Donelson, located on the west bank of the Cumberland River. Bad weather delayed the advance, but by February 12 Grant had his 15,000-man force take positions opposite about 20,000 Confederates at Fort Donelson. The fort's commanding generals did nothing to contest the Federal advance and generally proved incompetent in defending their position. Two of the men, John B. Floyd and Gideon Pillow, had more political than military experience, with only Simon B. Buckner performing capably in the fort's defense.

On February 13, Union troops under General John McClernand attacked the center of the rebel line. While the Union attacks failed, the Confederates did not respond with a counterattack of their own. While Grant's army invested the fort, Union gunboats under Andrew Foote attacked the Confederate batteries guarding the river on February 14. Southern artillery fire was more effective than at Fort Henry, damaging a number of the Union ships and driving away the remainder. Foote was wounded during the fighting, as were numerous men on the more vulnerable wooden vessels. Though they had defeated the Federal naval attack, the Confederate generals grew despondent over the fact that Grant's army was receiving reinforcements and tightening its lines around the fort, and they determined to try and break out and escape the following day.

Early in the morning of February 15, General Pillow launched an assault on the Union right, hoping to open an escape route along the swampy land on the river's edge. Buckner's division, meanwhile, would strike the Union center in an effort to draw back the Union lines. The rebel infantry succeeded in pushing back the Federals, but Grant ordered a counterattack which eventually occupied portions of the southern breastworks and ended the advance. Confederate prospects appeared even bleaker when additional Union reinforcements arrived shortly thereafter. On the evening of February 15-16 the Confederate commanders held a council of war, in which Floyd and Pillow determined to escape by boat with a few troops, leaving Buckner to surrender the remainder of the garrison. In addition, a few cavalymen under Nathan Bedford Forrest managed to slip through the Federal lines to safety.

Buckner, a prewar friend of Grant's, hoped to receive lenient surrender terms, but Grant replied: "No terms except immediate and unconditional surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon you works." Reluctantly, Buckner then capitulated. The news of the

fort's surrender brought jubilation to the north and despair to the south. The tide of the war was turning in the west.