

Bombardment at Drewry's Bluff and Confederate Retreat towards Richmond

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On May 6, 1862, as Major General George B. McClellan was dealing with the aftermath of the previous day's battle at Williamsburg, President Abraham Lincoln arrived at Fortress Monroe on the Virginia Peninsula. Surveying the situation locally and with McClellan occupied to the north, Lincoln used his executive powers to order a bombardment of the city of Norfolk across the James River from the peninsula. Lincoln believed that opening up the James to Union naval vessels would be critical for taking the city of Richmond and that capturing Norfolk at the mouth of the James was the first step.

After a bombardment on May 8, Union forces easily took the lightly defended city on May 10. With Norfolk taken, the formidable CSS *Virginia* had lost her home port. She was not capable of surviving ocean waters and her deep draft would prevent her from navigating the shallow waters of the James closer to Richmond. With nowhere to go and not wanting her captured for use against the Confederates, the commander of the *Virginia*, Josiah Tattnall ordered that she be destroyed. On the morning of May 11, 1862, massive powder charges were detonated onboard and the *Virginia* was obliterated. The way up the James River was now open to Union vessels.

The only serious obstacle to Union boats approaching Richmond now was the battery on the cliffs at Drewry's Bluff, about seven miles below Richmond on the James. The men stationed there included artillerymen and the crew of the recently demised CSS *Virginia*. Along with substantial fortifications, the battery had eight powerful naval guns aimed down the river. These included one 10-inch Columbiad and two 8-inch Columbiads in the fort itself and six more guns in pits between the fort and the river. Commander Ebenezer Farrand also had a number of older ships sunk in the river to serve as obstacles.

On the morning of May 15, the Union's James River squadron, consisting of five boats, including the USS *Monitor* approached Drewry's Bluff. Also part of the group were two new ironclads, the USS *Galena* and an ironclad revenue cutter, the USRC *E.A. Stevens*. As the

Galena, in the lead, approached Drewry's Bluff at about 7:30 am, she was slowed about 400 yards short of the bluff by the underwater obstacles. The Confederate guns began to pound the *Galena* and she sustained heavy damage. The *Monitor*, whose guns could not be elevated, proved useless in this engagement. The *Stevens* fared better than the other two ironclads and was able to withstand the shelling from above but was damaged when one of her own guns burst.

By about 11:30 am, Union Commander John Rodgers had had enough and signaled for the fleet to head back downriver to Norfolk. The fleet had suffered 14 dead and about the same number wounded, while Confederate losses were a bit lighter. After only a little over a year of war, Union forces had approached within seven miles of the Confederate capitol only to be firmly repulsed. The fortifications at Drewry's Bluff had proved to be formidable and Union forces would not approach them again for two years when they would again be thrown back. The fort remained intact until April 1865 when the troops there joined the general Confederate retreat after the fall of Petersburg.