

Forts Henry and Donelson

The first step for the Union in fulfilling their goal of controlling the Mississippi River and dividing the Confederacy came in early 1862, when General Ulysses S. Grant and Flag-Officer Andrew H. Foote requested permission to go down the Tennessee River into northwest Tennessee. The purpose of the expedition was to capture Fort Henry, which overlooked the western section of the Tennessee River. Henry was not as strong a fort as other Southern strongholds on the Mississippi.¹ It had been hastily constructed in June, 1861 by the 10th Tennessee Infantry and hundreds of enslaved people. Yet the Tennessee River cut Tennessee in half and dipped into Alabama, making it a crucial avenue for an advance into the Deep South. Also, capturing Fort Henry opened up the way to Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River. By February, Grant and Foote were on the move. The roads were too muddy for travel by Grant's large army, so Grant was ordered to steam down the Tennessee River with Foote's fleet. On February 5, Foote's transports deposited Grant's 15,000 soldiers below Fort Henry. The plan involved the ironclad riverboats pounding the fort from one side with Grant approaching overland from the other. When the steamers approached the fort, an artillery duel began. The ironclads were so effective that Confederate General Lloyd Tilghman surrendered in a little over an hour. Grant's troops had not even arrived. Fort Henry was in Union hands along with "seventeen heavy guns, General Lloyd Tilghman and staff, and 60 men."² Also, the river belonged to the Federals all the way to Alabama. Foote's gunboats sailed down to Muscle Shoals and back harassing the Confederate navy along the way.³

¹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 393.

² Official records of the Union and Confederate armies. Ser. I, Vol. 7, p. 121.

³ *O.R.*, *Ibid.*, 153.

Grant planned to attack Fort Donelson the same way he had attacked Fort Henry. Foote would wear down the Confederate defenses from the river on the east. Grant would capture the fort from the west with foot soldiers. The idea was then to march on and occupy Nashville. By February 13, Grant's entire force of 15,000 men was in front of Donelson, gunboats and all. Foote and his navy attacked on the 14th hoping for the same result as at Fort Henry. Fort Donelson, however, proved formidable and well-equipped. By damaging a handful of Foote's vessels, Confederate gunners repulsed the attack. Grant then decided to hold his lines and wait for the boats to be repaired.⁴

The Confederates in Donelson, however, led by General John Floyd, Tennessee politician Gideon Pillow, and General Simon Bolivar Buckner, decided that the best thing they could do was try to break out of the fort and fight off Grant's army. On the morning of February 15, while Grant was away visiting an injured Andrew Foote, Confederate forces attacked on the Union right. The rebels shoved the Federal force back over a mile. Heavy casualties were inflicted on both sides. In confusion and exhaustion, however, the Confederates were ordered by Pillow to retreat back to their entrenchments. Considering that the Union men were out of ammunition, the Confederate force might have broken out of the Donelson siege if they had kept up the attack.⁵

When Grant returned and saw that the Confederates had pulled back, he assumed they were more demoralized than the Union's defeated force. "Taking advantage of this fact," Grant later reported, "I ordered a charge upon the left ..."⁶ By nightfall, Grant's

⁴ O.R., Ser. I, Vol. 7, p. 159.

⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 400-01.

⁶ O.R., Ser. I, Vol. 7, p. 159

men had retaken all the ground they had lost. The following morning, while Grant prepared to attack, General Buckner sent Grant a note under a flag of truce, offering to end the fighting and discuss surrender terms. Disgusted with their admission of defeat, Confederate cavalry commander Nathan Bedford Forrest led his regiment on a late-night breakout through enemy lines. Grant told Buckner that he would accept “no terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender.”⁷ Buckner, trapped with his men in the fort, had no choice. That same day Grant filed a report to his superiors: “I am pleased to announce to you the unconditional surrender this morning of Fort Donelson, with 12,000 to 15,000 prisoners, at least 40 pieces of artillery, and a large amount of stores, horses, and other public property.”⁸ U.S. Grant’s terms for Buckner’s surrender earned him a nickname that stuck throughout the war: “Unconditional Surrender” Grant.

The capture of Forts Henry and Donelson were significant because they provided the Union its first foothold in the South. It also provided a much-needed morale boost to Northerners, who had been disappointed by the lack of progress in Virginia. The fall of Forts Henry and Donelson led Albert Sydney Johnston to abandon Nashville on February 23, 1862. Union troops under Don Carlos Buell occupied Nashville on February 25, making Nashville the first Confederate state capitol to come under Union control. After capturing the forts, Grant and his army moved deeper into Tennessee--all the way to the town of Pittsburg Landing, home to a small church called Shiloh. It was there, in the spring, that Grant would clash with Confederate Generals Albert Sidney Johnston and P.G.T. Beauregard in one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 402.

⁸ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 7, p. 159