

Fort Donelson

NATIONAL MILITARY PARK



General Grant.



T E N N E S S E E

Fort Donelson

NATIONAL MILITARY PARK



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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Important in the western campaigns of the Civil War, the fall of Fort Donelson, in February 1862, also gave Grant the famous title of "Unconditional Surrender."

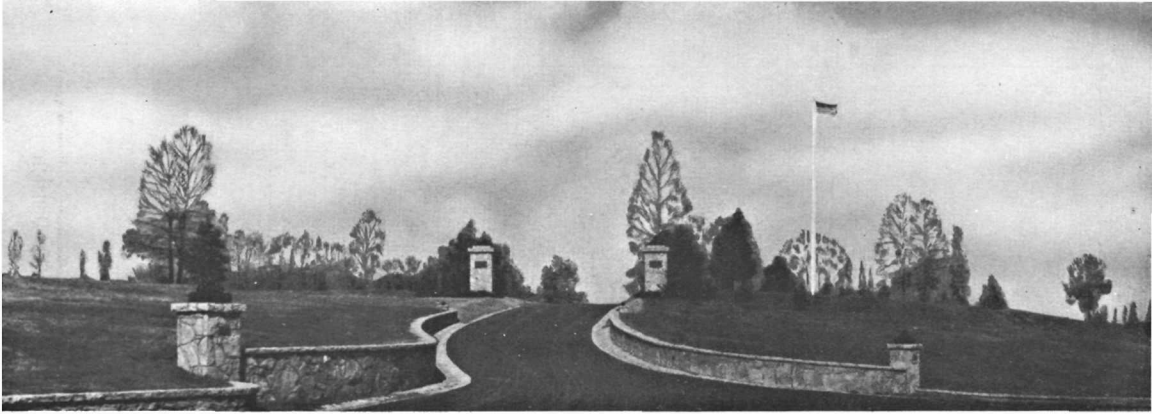
FORT DONELSON NATIONAL MILITARY PARK was the scene of one of the early decisive battles of the Civil War. A victory for the Union forces under the command of Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, the surrender of Fort Donelson and some 12,000 to 15,000 Confederate officers and men first directed wide public attention to Grant as a military leader of high caliber. Also, after almost a year of war in which the forces of the Confederacy had been uniformly successful, this triumph did much to raise the flagging spirits of supporters of the Union cause.

The Campaign Plan

In his campaign against Fort Donelson, General Grant, for the first time in the war, made successful use of a river for large-scale operations. His attack, brilliantly conceived and unflinching executed upon this strong defensive position, resulted in the most important victory yet achieved by the North. It opened an avenue into the very heart of the Confederacy by way of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, forcing the immediate evacuation of Columbus and Bowling

The Moat at Fort Donelson.





Entrance to Fort Donelson.

Green, and delivering western Tennessee and all of Kentucky into Federal hands. The battle marked the beginning of a campaign which, after 17 months of bloody fighting, resulted in the complete control of all strategic points in the Mississippi Valley, thus splitting the Confederacy.

It was inevitable that the valley of the great river which divided the continent should become the chief arena of conflict in the West. To open the Mississippi and separate the States of the Confederacy lying west of it from those lying to the east became the chief aim of all the Federal armies beyond the Alleghenies. For more than 2 years after the beginning of the war every other objective in this vast theater of operations was subordinated to this one purpose. The first effective step toward its accomplishment was taken when Grant forced the Confederates from all their strong positions on the Kentucky side of the Mississippi by his successful flank movement up the Tennessee and the Cumberland—one of the most far-sighted strategical maneuvers executed during the war. Carried through at the cost of thousands of lives and millions of dollars in property, the cleavage begun at Forts Henry and Donelson in February 1862 was completed at Vicksburg in July 1863.

The Confederate authorities at first sought to rest their line of defense on the Ohio River, although they did not have sufficient troops to hold Kentucky. But, in September 1861, Grant, then a brigadier general, frustrated this design by seizing Paducah and Cairo. In consequence, the Confederate commander in Kentucky, Albert Sidney Johnston, established his left flank at Columbus, on the Mississippi below Cairo, and thence carried his front eastward through Forts Henry and Donelson to Bowling Green and Cumberland Gap.

Late in January 1862, Grant conceived the idea of breaking the 11-mile Confederate line between Forts Henry and Donelson. Upon receiving permission from General Halleck, his department commander, to make the attempt, he moved up the Tennessee River to Fort Henry with 17,000 men on transports escorted by 7 gunboats. He could not have made this movement along the country roads, for they were utterly impassable at that season. The garrison of Fort Henry, less than 3,000, wisely withdrew before being surrounded by Grant and retreated to Fort Donelson, leaving a small artillery detachment which, after a gallant fight with the gunboats, surrendered on February 6.

The Fall of Fort Donelson

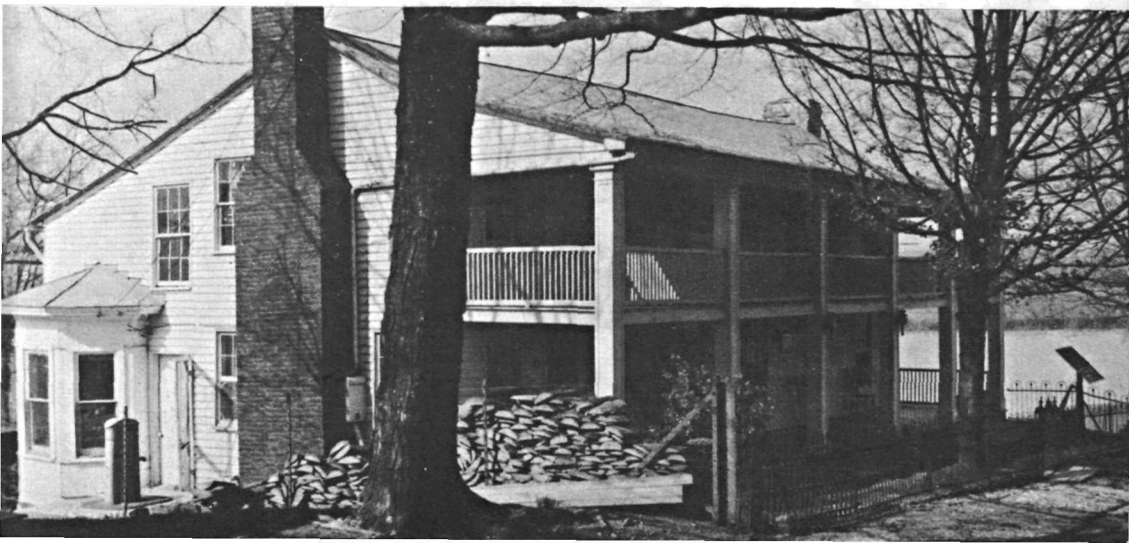
Grant marched his army with difficulty across the watershed between the Tennessee and the Cumberland, and, on February 12, arrived before Fort Donelson with 15,000 men. This force was later increased to about 27,000. The Confederates holding the fort now numbered about 21,000 men commanded by Gen. John B. Floyd, with Gen. Gideon J. Pillow and Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner as his chief subordinates. While awaiting the arrival of the gunboats which had to steam around from the Tennessee, Grant invested the place on the west and south. On February 13 a Federal brigade attacked the batteries near the center of the line and was repulsed with heavy losses. The next day Commodore Foote arrived with the gunboat flotilla and attacked the Confederate water batteries from the river. After a fight of 2 hours, in which every Federal vessel was more or less seriously damaged, Foote, himself wounded, was obliged to suspend his attack and retire.

Grant, much disappointed, concluded that he would have to resort to a siege, though ill-prepared to do so. Meanwhile,

the Confederate commanders, fearing that they were being trapped behind their own fortifications, determined to cut their way out and escape to Nashville. Early on the morning of February 15 they attacked the Federal right flank and drove it back from the river in confusion. Before noon the road was completely opened to a Confederate retreat. It has been said that this moment was the crisis of the battle, perhaps the crisis of Confederate fortunes. Two courses of action were now possible. A good leader might have saved the army by immediate retreat, or he might have taken advantage of the break in the Federal line to throw his entire force into the fight and boldly try to win a victory. Floyd did neither. In this moment, which required swift and fearless action, he failed as a leader. In indecision, he permitted Pillow to order the whole victorious left wing to return to the trenches to cover a Federal movement directed against another part of the line.

That night, a final council of war, held within the Confederate camp, resulted in a decision to surrender. Floyd, who had been Secretary of War of the United States and was at this time under indict-

House in Dover, Tenn., in which Buckner surrendered to Grant.



ment in Washington, declared that, personally, he did not dare surrender. For political reasons, Pillow also did not care to fall into Federal hands. In turn, these two generals relinquished their commands and made good their escape in boats up the Cumberland. Floyd took with him the Virginia troops of his own brigade. One other commander also made his escape but he took his whole command with him. That was Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest, destined to win world fame as a daring leader of cavalry. He marched his regiment out by way of the muddy river road, fording a creek up to his saddle skirts. There were some infantrymen, also, bold enough to accompany him. Not a man was lost. Perhaps the entire garrison might have been saved, but at dawn on February 16, Buckner, to whom the command had passed, requested a truce. It was in response to this request that Grant sent his famous ultimatum, demanding "Unconditional and immediate surrender." Buckner accepted the harsh terms and delivered to Grant between 12,000 and 15,000 officers and men as prisoners of war. The Federal losses were about 5,000 killed and wounded, and 450 missing.

The capture of Fort Donelson was Grant's first major victory in the Civil War, and it raised greatly his prestige as a military leader. By the strengthening effect this victory had on the morale of the North and by the strategic advantage it gained, it rightly has been called one of the turning points in the war.

About Your Visit

Fort Donelson National Military Park and Cemetery are near the town of Dover,

which is at the junction of State Routes 49 and 76, about 87 miles from Nashville.

While you are here, you can visit the well preserved fort, earthworks, rifle pits, and water batteries. Markers and tablets trace the course of the conflict. Near the earthworks on the west is a monument to the Confederate soldiers erected by the Tennessee Division, United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Groups may receive special service if advance arrangements are made with the superintendent. You may obtain further information at the headquarters building located in the National Cemetery.

Administration

Fort Donelson National Military Park, established by act of Congress on March 26, 1928, comprises 102.54 acres.

The National Cemetery contains 15.34 acres and was established in 1867. At that time, 670 Federal dead, 512 of them unknown, were taken from their original graves on the battlefield and reburied here. The headstones outline the heart-shaped burial plan.

The park and cemetery are administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Dover, Tenn., is in immediate charge.

Mission 66

Mission 66 is a program designed to be completed by 1966 which will assure the maximum protection of the scenic, scientific, wilderness, and historic resources of the National Park System in such ways and by such means as will make them available for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.

FORT DONELSON NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

TENNESSEE

On Feb. 14th Union gunboats defeated decisively by Confederate water batteries

On Feb. 16th Floyd and Pillow escaped, leaving Buckner who surrendered the garrison to Grant

