

**FORT DONNELSON**

NATIONAL MILITARY PARK • TENNESSEE



The artist Henri Lovie recorded the high drama of February 15, as the 2d Iowa, under the eye of their general C. F. Smith, charge the Confederate works on the right.

# THE FIRST MAJOR FEDERAL VICTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR

**A**winter sun, warm for February, broke through an overcast sky to shine upon a long line of Federal troop transports steaming up the Ohio River from Cairo, Ill. Turning to an assistant, the commander of the expedition, an obscure rustic-cut brigadier named Grant, suddenly said: "Now we seem to be safe, beyond recall by either electricity or steam. I am glad. I am thankful. We will succeed, Rawlins; we must succeed." After months of planning the Union army in the West was finally moving.

Ulysses S. Grant well understood the importance of the expedition. After 10 months of civil war, the North had little to show for its efforts. Since the Southern victory at Manassas, Va., in July 1861, the Union and Confederate armies had both remained almost immobile, each waiting to perfect itself before striking a heavy blow. In battles at Port Royal, S.C., and Mill Springs, Ky., Union forces had gained initial advantages but failed to follow them up. Now President Lincoln and his countrymen waited impatiently for their first conclusive engagement.



Ulysses S. Grant

In the West the Confederates' ambitious defensive line stretched across Kentucky from Columbus on the Mississippi through Forts Henry and Donelson past Bowling Green and down to Cumberland Gap. Albert Sidney Johnston, the able Confederate commander for the region, knew that he lacked the men and resources necessary to defend so vast a territory. Throughout 1861 only a combination of timidity on the part of the Union commanders and bluff by Johnston left the thin gray line undisturbed.

Then in January 1862 Grant, who recently had been promoted to command of the military district of southeast Missouri, proposed an expedition up the Tennessee to capture the Confederate river bastion of Fort Henry. After some hesitancy Henry Halleck, Grant's superior, approved a plan for a joint land and river attack. In the gathering dusk of February 3 Grant and his fleet commander, Andrew H. Foote, got the campaign underway. Nine transports, escorted by four ironclads and three wooden vessels designed for river fighting, began ferrying 15,000 troops up the rain-swollen Tennessee to a forward base just out of range of Henry's guns.

On February 6, while Grant's men marched overland from their camp downstream, Foote's gunboats slowly drew near the fort and opened a hot fire that quickly convinced Lloyd Tilghman, the Confederate commander, that he could not hold out for long. Shot and shell from the 11 cannon bearing on the river disabled one ironclad and rocked the others, but the steady gunboat fire eventually reduced the fort's guns and parapets.

Seeing that resistance was hopeless, Tilghman and a small cadre fought only 1 hour and 15 minutes, as the rest of his 2,600-man garrison fled to Fort Donelson a dozen miles away on the Cumberland. The Confederates had lowered their colors before Grant's infantry, plodding over muddy roads, could reach the action. Less than a hundred surrendered, including Tilghman, but the fall of Henry cleared the river all the way into Alabama. While Foote took his ironclads back to Cairo for repairs before proceeding up the Cumberland, Grant sent the three wooden gunboats on a raid up the Tennessee. Full of confidence, Grant wired Halleck of his next objective: "I shall take and destroy Fort Donelson on the 8th. . . ."

At Donelson the Confederates had a far stronger position. Two river batteries, mounting some 12 heavy guns, effectively controlled the Cumberland. An outer defensive line, built largely by reinforcements sent in after the fall of Henry, stretched along high ground from Hickman Creek on the right to the little town of Dover. Within the fort, a 15-acre earthen work, Tennessee infantry and cavalry huddled in log cabins against the winter. Aside from a measles epidemic, they lived "quite comfortably," cooking their own meals, fighting with snowballs, working on the fortifications, drilling, and talking about home—until the grim reality of war descended upon them.

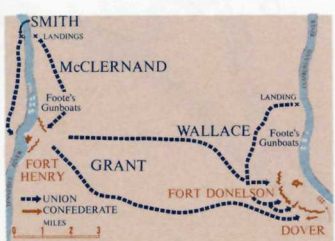
Nothing hampered the Confederates so much as their weak generalship. In the week following the debacle at Henry, the command at Donelson changed



Gideon J. Pillow S. B. Buckner

four times before John B. Floyd arrived on February 13. A politician, former Secretary of War, and without formal military training, he had to rely heavily on the advice of his two subordinates, Gideon J. Pillow—a lawyer with previous command experience—and Simon J. Buckner—a professional soldier and able officer.

**I**t took Grant longer than he expected to start his men toward Donelson. Several days passed before Fort



The Henry-Donelson Campaign.

Henry was secure and his troops ready. Finally he got underway on the 12th. His men stepped out briskly over the rolling terrain, littering the march route with unwanted winter gear.

The battle for Donelson opened about noon at a point some 2 miles from the Confederate perimeter, as the lead units met spirited resistance from cavalry under Nathan Bedford Forrest, an aggressive, untutored Tennessean whose bent for war had so far gone unrecognized. When Forrest was ordered to fall back, the Federals edged to within sight of the Confederate outer defenses. Looking the field over that night while his men made camp, Grant decided to contain the enemy within their lines and wait for the gunboats.



J. H. McClernand

February 13 passed with only limited action, since Foote still had not come up in force. Confederate artillery harassed the Federals as they attempted to extend their siege lines around the Donelson perimeter. Disregarding orders, John H. McClernand launched an attack against a troublesome battery (Maney's, in the middle of the Confederate line) that was better protected than he thought. His green regiments charged bravely into the face of murderous artillery and musketry and took considerable losses. The intense gunfire ignited the dry leaves on a hillside, and as the main body of the Federals retreated, part of the Confederate line made a valiant gesture. Leaping from their trenches, they ran into the flames to rescue helpless Union wounded, and saved some who otherwise would have perished.

To the west Charles F. Smith also tried to advance a brigade, but the hot fire of Kentucky sharpshooters soon forced it back. On the river a lone gunboat threw 184 shells at the fort and took two hits in exchange. The day's action convinced Grant that he had a fight on his hands, and night brought little comfort. The temperature dropped to 12° F., and the ranks on both sides suffered in the sleet and snow.



Charles F. Smith

On February 14 Foote arrived with the rest of the gunboats and transports carrying thousands of reinforcements. (Eventually Grant's numbers would grow to 27,000, or 11,500 more than the total within Donelson's lines.) All morning the musketry of skirmishers cracked along the ridges. Then in the afternoon Grant sent the gunboats forward. At 2:35 p.m. Foote steamed around the bend toward the river batteries, with four ironclads in front and two wooden boats a thousand yards astern. A Confederate 10-inch columbiad opened the firing, and for an hour and a half the gunboats and batteries duelled. At one point Foote brought his ironclads to within 400 yards of their target, only to have the attack falter as the Confederate fire grew more accurate and his own less so. With three ironclads disabled and Foote himself wounded, the battered squadron drifted back down river in defeat, while on shore cheers went up from the Confederate gunners. Yet Grant himself had no doubts about the eventual outcome. His troops now completely invested Donelson. Smith, Grant's old West Point commandant, held the Union left, Lew Wallace occupied the center, and McClernand's division covered the right. That night Grant wrote Halleck, "I feel great confidence . . . in ultimately reducing the place."

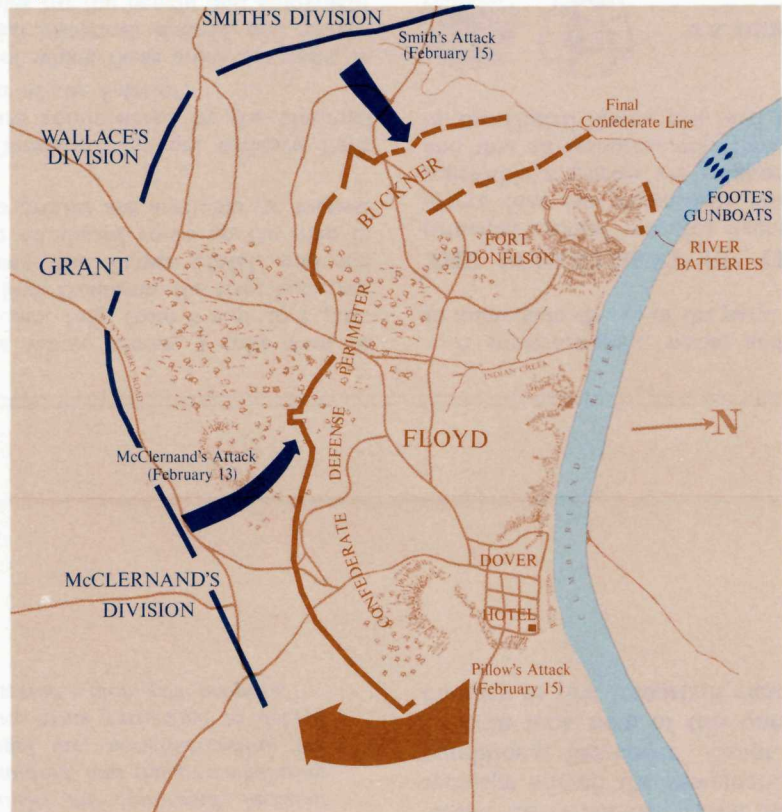


Andrew H. Foote

Though they had won the first round, the Confederate generals found themselves pinned against the river by a foe who was rapidly increasing in numbers. Moreover, if Nashville were to be saved, Floyd had to escape the present trap and unite his army with Johnston's. At a council of war that night in the Dover Hotel, the top command laid plans for a breakout. Early on the morning of the 15th, Pillow massed about 10,000 men just south of Dover, leaving only a thin line of infantry along the western ridges. As dawn spread through the snowy woods, Pillow sent his regiments crashing forward into the Illinois brigade anchoring McClernand's right.

The attack caught the Federals preparing to fall in for breakfast. Part of the brigade rushed up and turned aside the advance, but the Confederates re-formed and came on again, while Bedford Forrest's cavalry struck the flank. For 7 hours the fight went grimly on. As their ammunition ran out, McClernand's men fell back to the west, into Lew Wallace's brigades moving down the Wynn's Ferry Road to the point of danger. Throwing a roadblock across the path of the Confederates, the Nebraska and Illinois regiments of Wallace's division halted the drive by early afternoon, but the road to Nashville, farther east, remained open. At this critical moment, the Confederate command faltered and Grant seized the initiative.

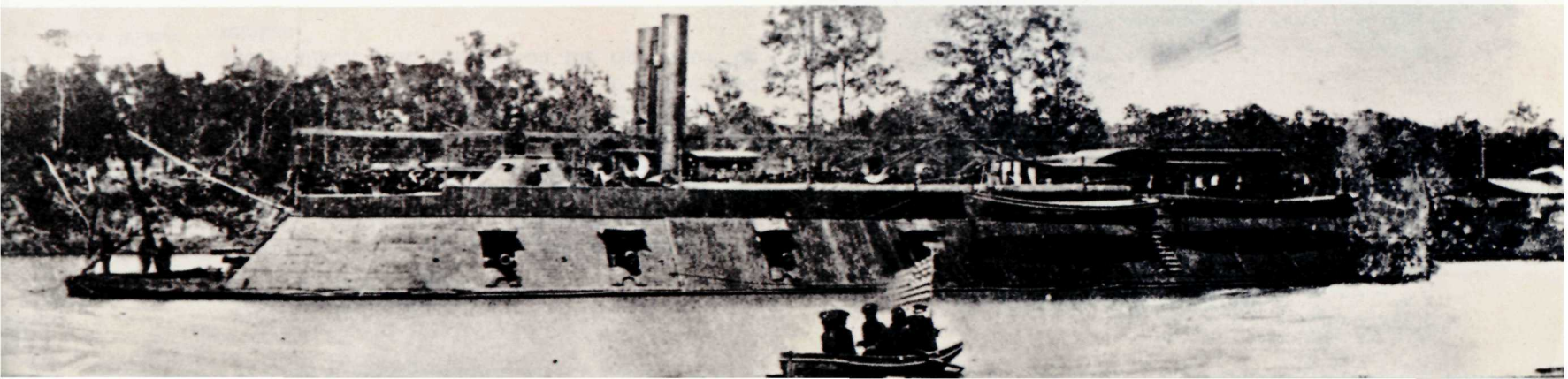
Early that morning Grant had ridden northward to confer with the injured Foote aboard his flagship. He knew nothing of the near-disaster on his right until late morning when he reached shore again. Hurrying around the line, he found his left and center in good shape but the right routed and demoralized. He also saw that the



The battlefield and important actions between February 13 and 15 are seen above.



John B. Floyd





Lew Wallace

Confederate attack had lost momentum. (In a fateful decision, upheld by Floyd, Pillow had ordered his men back to their trenches to pick up rations and equipment before proceeding down the road.) Sitting on his horse and chewing a dead cigar, Grant gave the order that witnesses later said turned the tide of battle. "Gentlemen," he said to McClernand and Wallace, "the position on the right must be retaken."

Grant now put everything he had into a general offensive. To Foote he scribbled a note calling for the gunboats to shell the enemy at long range. Wheeling his horse around, he galloped off to see his commander on the left, Charles F. Smith, an old-line regular, tall and lean with a great white mustache. Grant reasoned that for the Confederates to have hit so hard in one place, they must have weakened their lines in another, and he ordered Smith to attack on his front immediately. Smith led his men forward with drawn sword and a mixture of oratory and oaths:

"Damn you, gentlemen, I see skulkers. I'll have none here. Come on, you volunteers, come on. This is your chance. You volunteered to be killed for love of your country and now you can be. You are only volunteers. I'm only a soldier, and don't want to be killed, but you came to be killed and now you can be."

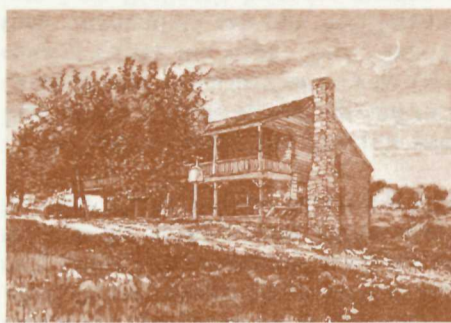
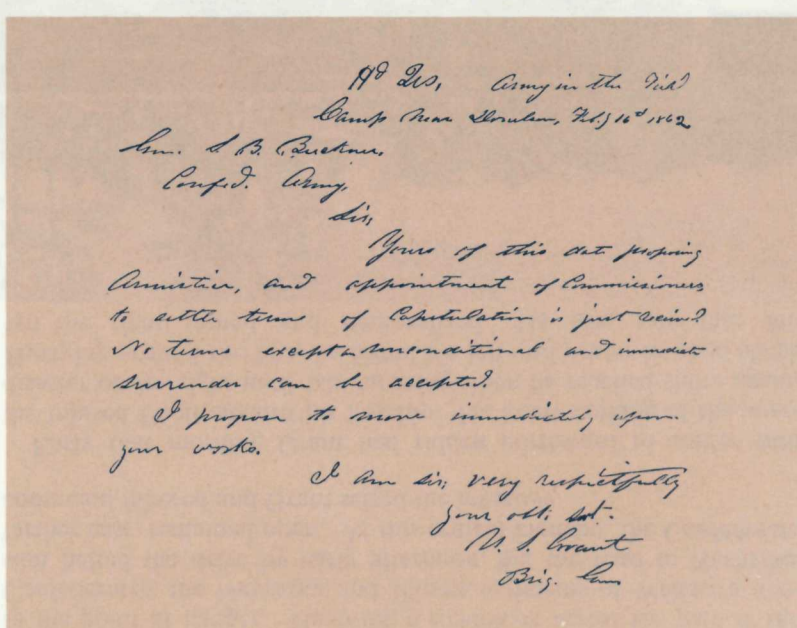
With fixed bayonets, the 2d Iowa led the assault up the slippery hill and through a smoke-shrouded tangle of fallen timber and drove the thin Confederate line back to the next ridge.

Late that night in the Rice House in Dover, Floyd, Pillow, Buckner, and their key lieutenants held a final conference. There were conflicting reports about Union dispositions along Forge Road, one route to Nashville. All three thought that the Federals had seized this road and that the river road, another escape route, was flooded. In fact, both were still open, though McClernand had regained much of the ground lost earlier in the day.

Recriminations passed back and forth as Pillow and Buckner disputed tactics. Pillow wanted to have a go at cutting his way out; Buckner thought their position "desperate, and that an attempt to extricate it by another battle, in the suffering and exhausted condition of the troops . . . almost hopeless." Floyd this time sided with Buckner. Both believed that three-quarters of the army would be lost in trying to fight their way out. One thing that he and Pillow agreed on was the necessity of avoiding personal surrender—Floyd feared reprisals because of his questionable conduct as Secretary of War, while Pillow was determined to seek liberty as long as he drew breath. So Floyd passed the command to Pillow, who turned it over in an instant to Buckner. "I assume it," said Buckner. "Bring on a bugler, pen, ink, and paper." At this, the wrathful Forrest strode from the room, determined not to surrender his brigade, and Floyd and Pillow soon followed, leaving Buckner the bitter task of petitioning an old West Point comrade for terms of surrender.

It was dawn and Grant was still in bed when Smith walked in with Buckner's note asking him to appoint commissioners to agree upon the details of capitulation and suggesting an armistice until noon. Grant replied with one of the most famous dispatches in American military history: "No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works." Buckner had no choice but to submit:

"The distribution of the forces under my command, incident to an unexpected change of commanders, and the overwhelming force under your command compel me, notwithstanding the brilliant success of the Confederate arms yesterday, to accept the ungenerous and unchivalrous terms which you propose."



The Dover Hotel, Confederate headquarters and the scene of the capitulation. The dispatch above is Grant's demand for "unconditional surrender" which he sent to Buckner.

Later that morning in the Dover Hotel the two men renewed their friendship and discussed the procedures for surrender. Confederate prisoners would go by steamboat to Northern camps, and the dead on both sides would be buried in battlefield graves. Casualties totaled some 1,500 Confederates and about 2,800 Federals. That afternoon Grant summed up the victory in a message to Hallack:

"We have taken Fort Donelson and from 12,000 to 15,000 prisoners . . . also 20,000 stand of arms, 48 pieces of artillery, 17 heavy guns, from 2,000 to 4,000 horses, and large quantities of commissary stores."

The details were less important than the fact that Grant had bagged an entire opposing army.

The loss of the two forts dealt the Confederacy a blow in the West from which it never recovered. Johnston now had to abandon Kentucky and most of middle and west Tennessee, and the vital industrial and transportation center of Nashville fell into Federal hands. Foreign governments took special note of the defeats. From England the Confederate commissioner J. M. Mason wrote: "The late reverses at Fort Henry and Donelson have had an unfortunate effect upon the minds of our friends here." The French foreign minister said that if Fort Donelson and later New Orleans had not fallen, his government would have quickly recognized the Confederacy. Spanish authorities were surprised that so many Confederates should surrender without greater resistance.

The victory gave the North its first good news of the war. As the telegraph clicked out the details of battle in countless cities and towns across the Nation, church bells rang and strangers embraced on the street. In Grant the people had a new hero. His laconic surrender message stirred the imagination, and he was quickly dubbed "Unconditional Surrender" Grant. Far away in Washington, President Lincoln took note of this quiet, resolute man who had brought his country its first important victory.

**ABOUT YOUR VISIT**—The visitor center, 1 mile west of Dover, Tenn., on U.S. 79, is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. For a self-guided auto tour of Fort Donelson, the river batteries, the Confederate outer defenses, the Dover Hotel, and the National Cemetery, follow the numbered route on the map in this folder. Special services to groups are available on request to the superintendent.

**ADMINISTRATION**—Fort Donelson National Military Park and the National Cemetery are administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The National Park System, of which these areas are units, is dedicated to conserving the great historical, natural, and recreational places of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of all the people.

A superintendent, whose address is Dover, Tenn. 37058, is in immediate charge of the park.

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