

Fort Donelson

National Battlefield
Tennessee

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



General Grant at Fort Donelson, from the painting by Paul Philippoteaux. Courtesy Chicago Historical Society.

From Henry to Donelson

Bells rang jubilantly throughout the North at the news, but they were silent in Dixie. The cause: the fall of Fort Donelson in February 1862. It was the North's first major victory of the Civil War, opening the way into the very heart of the Confederacy. Just a month before, the Confederates had seemed invincible. A stalemate had existed since the Southern victories at First Manassas and Wilson's Creek in the summer of 1861. Attempts to break the Confederate defense line, which in the west extended from southwest Missouri and the Indian Territory to the Appalachian Mountains, had achieved little success. A reconnaissance in January convinced the Union command that the most vulnerable places in the Confederacy's western line were Forts Henry and Donelson, earthen works guarding the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers.

The Confederates built Fort Henry on land not particularly suitable for forts. It was surrounded by higher ground and subject to flooding during normal rises of the Tennessee River. A joint army/navy operation against Fort Henry had been agreed to by Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote and an obscure brigadier general named Ulysses S. Grant. The attack was to take place in early February, using the Tennessee River for transport and supply. It would be the first test of Foote's ironclad gunboats. On February 4, 1862, Grant began transporting his army south from Paducah, Ky., to Fort Henry. He established a camp north of the fort and spent two days preparing for the attack.

On February 6, while Grant's soldiers marched overland from their camp downstream, Foote's gunboats slowly approached Fort Henry. These included the newly constructed ironclads *Cincinnati*, *Carondelet*, and *St. Louis*, as well as the converted ironclad *Essex*. They opened a

hot fire that quickly convinced Lloyd Tilghman, the Confederate commander, that he could not hold out for long. The plan called for the gunboats to engage the fort until the army could surround it. The bombardment raged for more than an hour, with the ironclads taking heavy blows and suffering many casualties. Most of the casualties came after a Confederate shell ruptured the boiler aboard *Essex*, scalding many of the sailors to death. The poorly located fort, however, was no match for the gunboats. To the army's chagrin, the ironclads pounded the fort into submission before the soldiers, plodding over muddy roads, could

reach the vicinity. Less than a hundred of the Confederate garrison surrendered, including Tilghman; the rest, almost 2,500 men, escaped to Fort Donelson, Grant's next objective, a dozen miles away on the Cumberland.

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

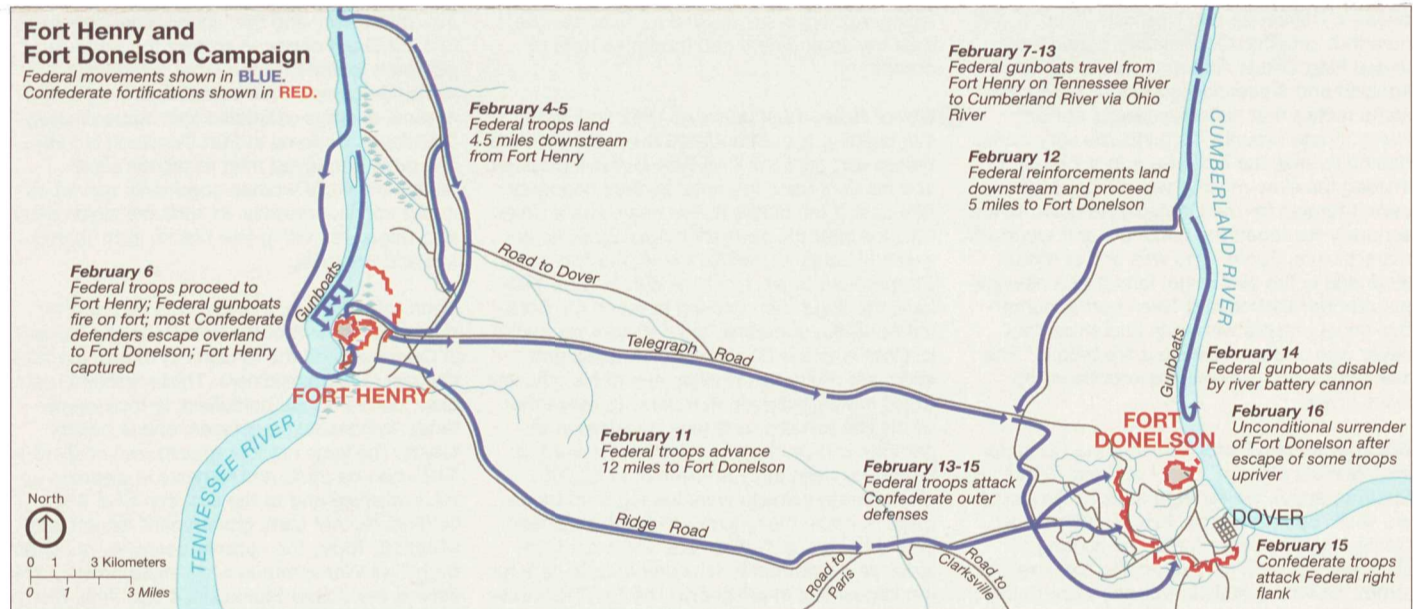
It took Grant longer than expected to start his men toward Donelson. Several days passed before Fort Henry was secure and his troops ready. He finally got underway on February 11, and when his soldiers stepped out briskly over the rolling terrain, the weather had turned unseasonably warm. Lacking discipline and leadership and believing that the temperature was typical of the South in February, many of the soldiers cast aside their heavy winter gear—an act they would soon regret. The Confederates were so busy strengthening their position that they allowed Grant's army to march from Fort Henry to Fort Donelson unchecked. By February 13 some 15,000 Union troops nearly encircled the outerworks of Fort Donelson. Sporadic clashes broke out that day without either side gaining ground. Nightfall brought bitter weather—lashing sleet and snow that caused great suffering.



Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote presided over naval operations on the upper Mississippi River and its tributaries and oversaw construction of the nation's first squadron of ironclad gunboats. His role in the capture of Fort Henry and in the joint army/navy attack on Fort Donelson helped win him promotion to rear admiral.



Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant commanded the Military District of Cairo at the time of the Fort Henry and Fort Donelson campaign. Until January 1862, when his plan to attack the Confederate river forts was approved, he had fought only one battle, a brief and inconclusive engagement at Belmont, Mo., in November 1861.



"No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted."

Ulysses S. Grant, February 16, 1862

The Battle of Fort Donelson

The morning of February 14 dawned cold and quiet. Early in the afternoon a furious roar broke the stillness, and the earth began to shake. Foote's Union gunboat fleet, consisting of the ironclads *St. Louis*, *Pittsburgh*, *Louisville*, and *Carondelet*, and the timberclads *Conestoga* and *Tyler*, had arrived from Fort Henry via the Tennessee and Ohio rivers and were exchanging "iron valentines" with the 11 big guns in the Southern water batteries. During this one and one-half hour duel, the Confederates wounded Foote and inflicted such extensive damage upon the gunboats that they were forced to retreat. The hills and hollows echoed with cheers from the Southern soldiers.

The Confederate generals—John Floyd, Gideon Pillow, Simon Buckner, and Bushrod Johnson—also rejoiced; but sober reflection revealed another danger. Grant was receiving reinforcements daily and had extended his right flank almost to Lick Creek to complete the encirclement of the Southerners. If the Confederates did not move quickly, they would be starved into submission. Accordingly, they massed their troops against the Union right, hoping to clear a route

to Nashville and safety. The battle on February 15 raged all morning, the Union army grudgingly retreating step by step. Just as it seemed the way was clear, the Southern troops were ordered to return to their entrenchments—a result of confusion and indecision among the Confederate commanders. Grant immediately launched a vigorous counterattack, retaking most of the lost ground and gaining new positions as well. The way of escape was closed once more.

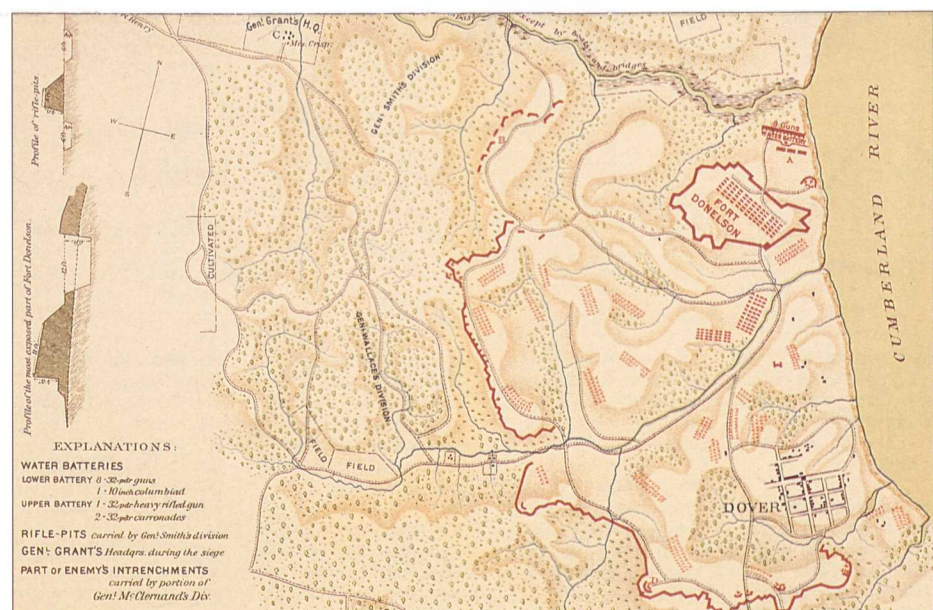
Floyd and Pillow turned over command of Fort Donelson to Buckner and slipped away to Nashville with about 2,000 men. Others followed cavalryman Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest across swollen Lick Creek. That morning, February 16, Buckner asked Grant for terms. Grant's answer was short and direct: "No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted." Buckner surrendered.

Soon after the surrender, civilians and relief agencies rushed to assist the Union army. The U.S. Sanitary Commission was one of the first to provide food, medical supplies, and hospital ships to transport the wounded. Many civilians

came in search of loved ones or to offer support. Although not officially recognized as nurses, women such as Mary Ann Bickerdyke cared for and comforted sick and wounded soldiers.

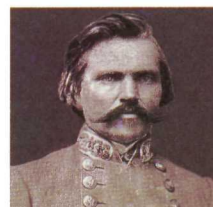
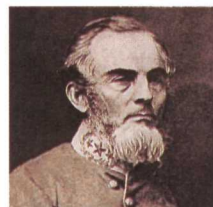
With the capture of Fort Donelson and its sister fort, Henry, the North had not only won its first great victory; it also gained a new hero—"Unconditional Surrender" Grant, who was promoted to major general. Subsequent victories at Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga would lead to his appointment as lieutenant general and commander of all Union armies. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox would put Grant in the White House.

After the fall of Fort Donelson, the South was forced to give up southern Kentucky and much of Middle and West Tennessee. The Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, and railroads in the area, became vital Federal supply lines. Nashville was developed into a huge supply depot for the western Union armies. The heartland of the Confederacy was open, and the Federals would press on until the "Union" became a fact once more.



Plan of Fort Donelson, from *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*.

John B. Floyd (top), politician turned general, took charge of Fort Donelson shortly before the siege began. As his situation grew more hopeless, and fearing capture because he might be arrested in the North for allegedly transferring arms to southern arsenals while secretary of war in the Buchanan administration, Floyd turned command over to **Brig. Gen. Gideon J. Pillow** (center), and escaped upriver to Nashville. Pillow also chose escape over capture and gave command to **Brig. Gen. Simon B. Buckner** (bottom), West Point graduate and former classmate of Grant's who had come to Fort Donelson early in 1862 with reinforcements from Kentucky. Buckner would stay and share the fate of his men.



Fort Donelson Today



Reconstructed Confederate Log Hut James P. Bagnoby



Lower Water Battery James P. Bagnoby



Confederate Monument James P. Bagnoby



The Dover Hotel Eastern National



Fort Donelson National Cemetery Eastern National

A Guide to the Park

The following guide, keyed to the map below, highlights major sites within the park.

- Confederate Monument** Confederate soldiers were hastily buried on the battlefield after the surrender. The exact location of their graves is unknown. This monument commemorates the Southern soldiers who fought and died at Fort Donelson. The United Daughters of the Confederacy erected the monument in 1933.
- Fort Donelson** Confederate soldiers and slaves built this 15-acre earthen fort over a period of seven months, using axes and shovels to make a wall of logs and earth 10 feet high. While a more permanent fort of brick or stone would have been more desirable, earthen walls were much quicker to build. Properly constructed earthworks can provide better protection than brick or stone. The fort's purpose was to protect the Cumberland River batteries from land attack. At the time of the battle, all trees within 200 yards of the fort were felled, clearing fields of fire and observation. The branches of these trees were sharpened and laid around the outside of the fort to form an obstacle called an *abatis*.
- Log Huts** Soldiers and slaves built more than 400 log huts as winter quarters for the soldiers garrisoning and working on the fort. In addition to government rations of flour, fresh and cured meat, sugar, and coffee, every boat brought boxes from home filled with all kinds of things a farm or store could provide. Off-duty soldiers from the local area hunted and fished in the same locations they had frequented a few short months before as civilians. Sometime after the surrender, Federals burned the cabins because of a measles outbreak.
- River Batteries** The rivers were vital arteries that flowed directly through the Confederate heartland. Transportation and supply routes depended heavily on these waterways. Both the upper river battery and the lower river battery were armed with heavy seacoast artillery to defend the water approach to major supply bases in Clarksville and Nashville, Tenn. It was here that untested Confederate gunners defeated Flag Officer Andrew Foote's flotilla of ironclad and timberclad gunboats. Using the same tactics that were successful at Fort Henry, Foote brought his gunboats very close, hoping to shell the batteries into submission. Instead the slow-moving vessels became excellent targets for the Confederate guns, which seriously damaged the gunboats and wounded many sailors. Foote, who was one of those wounded in the exchange, later told a newspaper reporter that he had taken part in numerous engagements with forts and ships "but never was under so severe a fire before." The roar of this land-naval battle was heard 35 miles away.
- Buckner's Final Defense** After the Confederate breakout attempt, Grant ordered Gen. C. F. Smith to attack the far right flank of the Southern lines. Smith's troops, facing a weakened Confederate position due to the shifting of Buckner's division to support the breakout attempt, drove the 30th Tennessee back to this ridge. The regiment held this position until reinforced by Buckner's troops and the fort's garrison.

son. Although the southerners still held the ridge, Smith retained a solid hold on the Confederate right flank.

- Jackson's Battery** Ordered to support the Confederate right wing, Jackson's four-gun battery moved to this position on the night of the 13th. It was held in reserve here throughout the following day. Early on the morning of the 15th, the battery was ordered to the Wynn Ferry Road sector to assist with the attempted breakout.
- Smith's Attack** Grant correctly concluded that for the Confederates to hit so hard on the right, they must have weakened their line somewhere else. Seizing the initiative, he told General Smith to "take Fort Donelson." Smith had his troops uncap their guns (so the men would not be tempted to stop and fire, risking greater casualties) and fix bayonets. With the Second Iowa Infantry spearheading the attack, Smith led the assault against the Confederate lines on this ridge. Smith's division captured and held the earthworks, controlling this position on the night of the 15th. Before the attack could be renewed the next morning, Grant and Buckner were already discussing terms for surrender.
- French's Battery** In conjunction with Maney's Battery to the west, the four-gun battery emplaced here was intended to prevent Union forces from attacking down Erin Hollow and penetrating the Fort Donelson perimeter.
- Forge Road** At daybreak on February 15, Pillow and Johnson's division, along with Col. Nathan B. Forrest's cavalry, attacked Gen. John A. McClelland's troops on the Union right flank in an attempt to secure an escape route. The attack succeeded in briefly opening the Forge Road as an avenue of escape but, due to indecision and confusion among their commanders, the Confederate troops were ordered to return to their entrenchments. The Union soldiers were allowed to reoccupy the area the southerners had fought so hard to control.
- Dover Hotel** Built between 1851 and 1853, this building accommodated riverboat travelers before and after the Civil War. General Buckner and his staff used the hotel as their headquarters during the battle. It also served as a Union hospital after the surrender. After Buckner accepted Grant's surrender terms, the two generals met here to work out the details. Lew Wallace, the first Union general to reach the hotel following the surrender, did not want his men to gloat over the Confederate situation and told Capt. Frederick Knefler, one of his officers, to tell the brigade commanders "to move the whole line forward, and take possession of persons and property . . . [but] not a word of taunt—no cheering." An estimated 13,000 Confederate soldiers were loaded onto transports to begin their journey to Northern prisoner-of-war camps. Neither the Union nor Confederate governments was prepared to care for the large influx of prisoners. The Fort Donelson prisoners were incarcerated in hastily converted and ill-prepared sites in Illinois, Indiana,

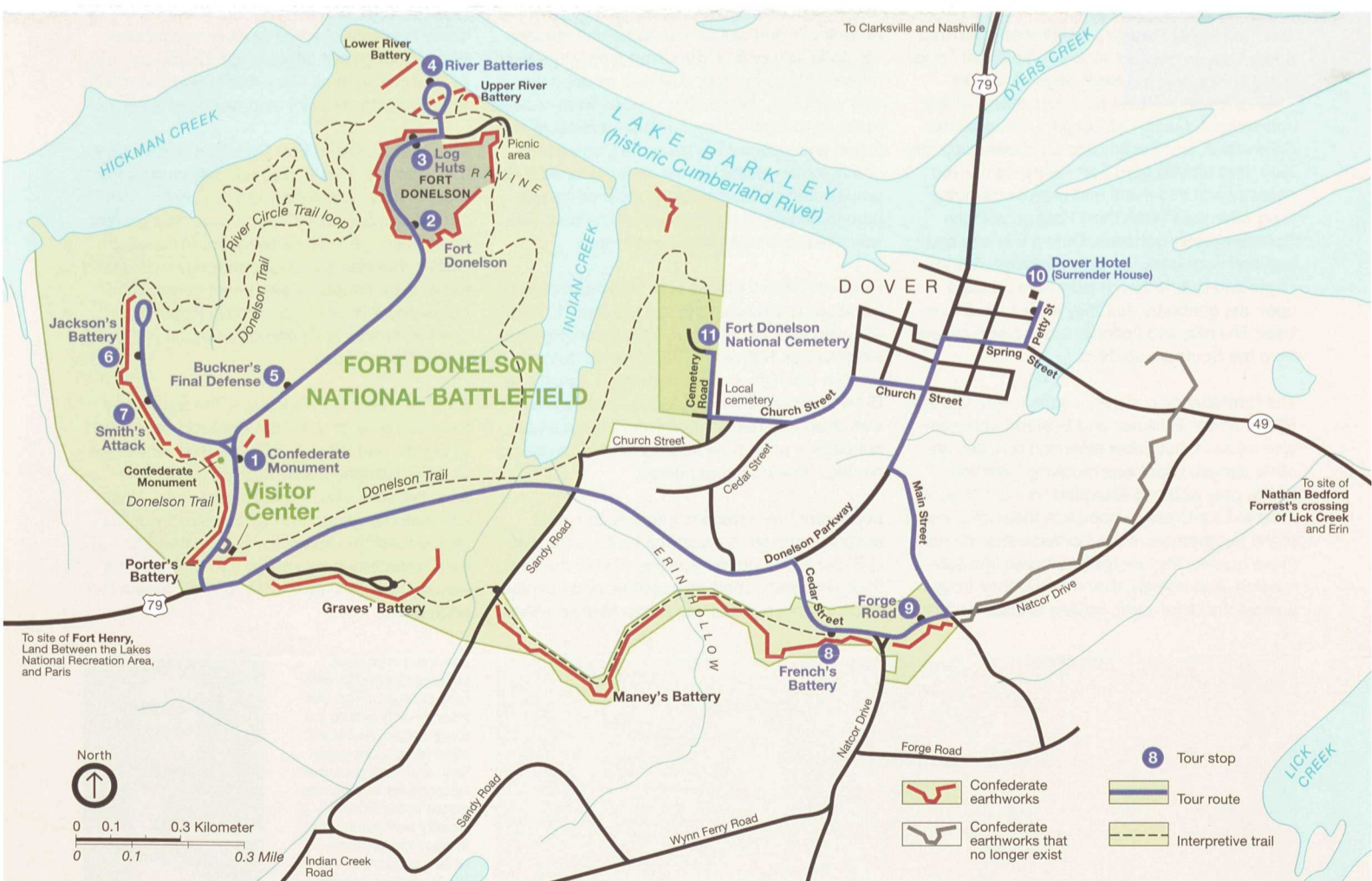
Ohio, and as far away as Boston, Mass. Fort Donelson POWs suffered more from the northern climate than any other hardship. In September 1862 most of the Fort Donelson prisoners were exchanged.

On two occasions, once in mid-1862 and again in February 1863, Confederate forces tried to drive the Federal troops from the area. Both attempts failed; but the second, led by soldiers under the command of Gens. Joseph Wheeler and Nathan Bedford Forrest, cost the town its future. That skirmish, known as the Battle of Dover, resulted in the destruction of all but four of the town's buildings. One of those to survive was the Dover Hotel, which remained in business until the 1930s. It has been restored through the efforts of the Fort Donelson House Historical Association and the National Park Service. The exterior looks much the same as it did when the surrender took place.

- National Cemetery** In 1863, after the Battle of Dover, the Union garrison rebuilt its fortifications. Diary accounts left by soldiers of the 83rd Illinois Regiment, stationed here after the Battle of Fort Donelson, explain how demanding soldiering could be. Besides working on the new fortifications, the garrison protected the Union supply line. Soldiers frequently commented on the constant threat of attacks by guerrilla parties. Sgt. Maj. Thomas J. Baugh wrote in 1863 that the "rebels [had] been trying to blockade the river" again. Pvt. Mitchell Thompson, who was often detailed to repair Union telegraph lines, described the area as being filled with "rebel bands of thieves and robbers."

Slaves began coming into the Union lines soon after the victory in 1862, seeking shelter, food, and protection. The issue of how to deal with the large influx of slaves who were still considered property by the slave owners and individual state laws presented a problem for both the Union army and the Lincoln administration. In 1862 Grant chose to protect the slaves and put them to work for the army. Eventually freedmen camps were established across Tennessee, and it is estimated that approximately 300 slaves wintered at Fort Donelson in 1864. The army employed men as laborers and teamsters, while women commonly served as cooks and laundresses. In 1863 the Union army also began recruiting free blacks from Tennessee and Kentucky.

Soon after the war, this site was selected for the establishment of the Fort Donelson National Cemetery and the remains of 670 Union soldiers were reinterred here. These soldiers had been buried on the battlefield, in local cemeteries, in hospital cemeteries, and in nearby towns. The large number of unknown soldiers—512—can be attributed to haste in cleaning up the battlefield and to the fact that Civil War soldiers did not carry government-issued identification. Today the national cemetery contains both Civil War veterans and veterans who have served the United States since that time. Many spouses and dependent children are also buried here.



About Your Visit

Fort Donelson is one mile west of Dover, Tenn., and three miles east of Land Between the Lakes on U.S. 79. The visitor center is normally open from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily.

Trails Fort Donelson has two principal trails: the three-mile River Circle Trail and the four-mile Donelson Trail. Both trails begin and

end at the visitor center. Guides to natural and historical features along the trails are available. Please remain on the trails. Be alert for poison ivy, poisonous snakes, ticks, stinging insects, and spider webs. Do not disturb or remove any vegetation. Be prepared for strenuous walking in some areas.

For Your Safety Hikers using park roads should walk facing traffic and bikers should ride in the direction of traffic in single file.

Drivers should observe speed limits and park only in pull-offs. Keep close watch over your children. Use caution when near the river and on trail bridges, which can be slippery. Be

alert to uneven ground surfaces. Do not walk or stand on rock walls, cannons, or earthen mounds.

Regulations Build fires only in the picnic area (grills only). Pets must always be physically restrained and are not allowed in buildings. Obey building signs. Guns and other weapons must be packed

to prevent their use. Hunting is prohibited, as is the use of metal detectors. Picnic in designated areas only. And please don't walk on earthworks.

Fort Donelson is one of more than 380 National Park Service units representing important examples of our country's natural and cultural inheritance.

For More Information
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