



Foundation Document Overview

Fort Donelson National Battlefield

Kentucky and Tennessee



Contact Information

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Purpose



FORT DONELSON NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD protects and preserves the resources associated with the 1862 Civil War Campaign for Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson and control of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. The park unit and associated National Cemetery provide a setting for education, commemoration, and contemplation.



Significance

Significance statements express why Fort Donelson National Battlefield resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The well-preserved archeological, cultural, and natural resources offer outstanding opportunities to study, preserve, and interpret Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson as examples of early Civil War river fortifications.
- The first use of inland ironclad gunboats and the first joint Army/Navy operation in the Civil War occurred in the Campaign for Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson. These events provide insight into the evolution of naval technology and riverine tactics in the western theater of the Civil War.
- The Campaign for Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson resulted in the first major strategic Union victory in the Civil War under the leadership of General Ulysses S. Grant, via “unconditional surrender.” The National Battlefield provides excellent opportunities for studying the successes and failures of tactics and leadership.
- The Union victories at Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson affected the outcome of the Civil War by thwarting a key Confederate strategy for the defense of the western theater. This resulted in the Federal Army gaining control of important resources such as the iron industry, railroads, rivers, and the Tennessee Valley’s agricultural wealth.
- The presence of the Union Army at Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson encouraged enslaved African Americans to seek freedom through Union Army protection, leading to the establishment of Free State, one of the first freedmen’s communities in Tennessee, and perhaps the nation.
- The Fort Donelson National Cemetery was one of the first national cemeteries and was established in 1867 as a burial ground for Union soldiers and sailors initially buried in the Fort Donelson area. The cemetery was established on a tract that included the majority of the old Union fort. The fort was leveled to accommodate the cemetery. Today, the Fort Donelson National Cemetery contains Civil War veterans as well as veterans who have served the United States since that time. Many spouses and dependent children are also buried there.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Fortification Systems**
- **Archeological Sites**
- **Battlefield Landscape and Setting**
- **Dover Hotel / Surrender House**
- **Historic Roads and Traces**
- **Freedmen Community (“Free State”)**
- **Core Combat Areas and Troop Positions**
- **Fort Donelson National Cemetery**

Fort Donelson National Battlefield contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Museum Collections**
- **Appropriate Recreational Opportunities**



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- **Riverways to Victory.** Union victories at Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson opened critical riverways into the Confederate heartland, elating the North and bringing Union Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant to national attention.
- **The Age of Ironclads.** The victories achieved by the use of Union ironclads at Fort Henry, and their assault on Fort Donelson, ushered in a new age of technology in naval warfare.
- **The Importance of Leadership.** Military leadership, both good and bad, was critical to the outcome at Fort Donelson.
- **The End of Slavery.** Freedmen’s communities formed after the fall of Fort Donelson heralded the collapse of the south’s slave-labor economy—and freedom and citizenship for those once enslaved.
- **The Natural Setting.** The once-bloody fields of Fort Donelson provide a beautiful natural setting for contemplation of nature and human events.
- **Sacrifice and Commemoration.** Fort Donelson National Cemetery and the battlefield monuments are powerful symbols that commemorate sacrifices made during the Civil War and in later conflicts.
- **War in Winter.** Grant’s decision to campaign in the winter greatly intensified the wartime suffering of soldiers on both sides.



Description

The “unconditional surrender” of Fort Donelson on February 16, 1862, spread excitement throughout the North and shock in the Confederacy. It was the North’s first major victory of the Civil War, opening the way to the very heart of the Confederacy. The fall of Fort Donelson, which fully opened up access of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers to federal advancement, forced the Confederacy to give up southern Kentucky and much of central and western Tennessee. The Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, as well as regional railroads, became vital federal supply lines. Nashville was developed into a huge supply depot for the Union Army in the west. The heartland of the Confederacy was opened, and the federals would press on until the “Union” became a fact once more.

Fort Donelson National Battlefield was established in 1928 to preserve and protect the significant resources associated with the 1862 Civil War battle of Fort Donelson. The 1928 act and subsequent legislation provided for identification of battle lines and troop movements and setting aside the battlefield “. . . for historical and professional military study.” The battlefield was expanded in 1960 to include additional Confederate positions and again in 2006 with the addition of the Fort Heiman property. Fort Donelson is administratively in the National Register of Historic Places. Although Fort Henry is located within the boundary of Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area and managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service is a cooperating agency in the interpretation and management of the property.

The battlefield manages 1,017 acres of the 1,309 acres within the legislative boundary and is accessed by more than 200,000 park visitors every year. The primary areas of the battlefield are the main park unit; the National Cemetery, located within the main park unit; the Dover Hotel, located in Dover, TN, approximately 2 miles east of the main park unit; and the Fort Heiman Unit, located in Calloway County, Kentucky, approximately 22 miles west of the main park unit. In addition to these areas, about 60 acres near and adjacent to the Fort Donelson units are currently owned by the American Battlefield Trust, with the potential of being transferred to the National Park Service. While the U.S. Forest Service retains ownership of the Fort Henry site, the National Park Service provides historical assistance, shared programming, and interpretive exhibits.

The main park unit includes a 1962 Mission 66 visitor center and museum. Stone walls and drainage from the Civilian Conservation Corps period are along key portions of the park tour road. Most of the earthworks that comprised the Fort Donelson defenses remain. Surviving fortifications include more than 2.5 linear miles of outer earthwork and river battery fortifications, as well as an earthen wall enclosing the center of the approximately 15-acre fort structure.

In 1867, Fort Donelson National Cemetery was established as the final resting place for Union soldiers and sailors initially buried across the Fort Donelson area. Today, the Fort Donelson National Cemetery contains Civil War veterans, as well as veterans who have served the United States since that time. Many spouses and dependent children are also buried there. The Fort Donelson National Battlefield headquarters is in the historic “Meigs-style” national cemetery lodge. A substantial limestone wall encloses almost 5 acres that includes burial sections, the vertical cannon monument, the cemetery lodge, and two other historic buildings.

The Dover Hotel (locally referred to as the “Surrender House”) is in the town of Dover and was the site of the Confederate surrender to Union forces following the 1862 battle. Managed by the National Park Service, the structure provides interpretation specific to the hotel and the battle surrender. The Dover Hotel is the only major Civil War-related surrender structure still standing in its original location.

The most isolated unit of Fort Donelson National Battlefield is the Fort Heiman Unit. Fort Heiman consists of remnants of a Confederate fortification constructed atop a high bluff overlooking the Tennessee River. It also peers down upon Fort Henry, located across the river at a much lower elevation. The Confederate fort was completed, but never armed, before federal forces captured both Forts Henry and Heiman. Shortly after, a federal fortification was constructed nearby and, like much of the Confederate earthworks, remains intact.

