

Casualties

The exact number of casualties in the battles for Fort Fisher will never be known. The best estimate for U.S. troops is 347 killed, 1308 wounded, and 57 missing soldiers, sailors and Marines. Confederate casualties are around 494 killed, 364 wounded and about 1500 prisoners. For their actions during the brutal fighting at Fort Fisher, 72 Medals of Honor were awarded to American soldiers, sailors and marines.

Capture of Wilmington

After capturing Fort Fisher on January 15, 1865, the American forces recuperated for about three weeks before marching north towards Wilmington. Along the way, white and African American soldiers liberated enslaved men, women, and children. The soldiers also clashed with Confederate soldiers stationed at various outposts and defensive works on the path to Wilmington.

On February 22, 1865, the U.S. Army paraded into Wilmington. Free and now formerly enslaved African Americans lined the streets to celebrate their liberation.

After the war, white and African American soldiers were stationed in Wilmington. Local white residents resented African American soldiers placed in charge of them and complained. The authorities responded by relocating USCTs to Fort Fisher—miles away from town. Fort Fisher was abandoned by 1868.

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Fort Fisher in the Civil War



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Federal Point in 1865

At the dawn of the American Civil War, the Confederacy took control of a neck of land in southeastern North Carolina near the mouth of one of the inlets into the Cape Fear River. Work soon began to fortify the position to protect trade in and out of Wilmington, the major port city a few miles up the river.

Running the Blockade

Trading ships, called blockade runners, smuggled provisions into the Southern states and supplied General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. They traveled from Bermuda, the Bahamas, and Nova Scotia, where southern cotton and tobacco were exchanged for food, clothing, and munitions from British traders. Fort Fisher's mission was to protect Wilmington from attack and ensuring relatively safe passage for Confederate supplies. By August 1864, Wilmington

was the last major port open to the Confederacy.

Building Fort Fisher

Construction of defensive works on what became Fort Fisher commenced in the spring of 1861 as a series of batteries about a mile north of New Inlet. On July 4, 1862, Colonel William Lamb assumed command and recognized the importance of Fort Fisher to the defense of the Cape Fear and of Wilmington. Under his direction and design, expansion of the fortress began.

Lamb's plans were to build Fort Fisher from mostly of earth and sand. Unlike older fortifications built of brick and mortar, this type of construction technique was ideal for absorbing the explosive impact of the higher velocity and the heavier shot from the new rifled cannons.

White Confederate soldiers helped build their fort, but the engineer corps relied heavily on free and enslaved African Americans as well as American Indian laborers. These men were forced into service and seldom—if ever—paid. They endured separation from their loved ones, hunger, exposure, and exhaustion.

The First Battle—December 24-25, 1864

U.S. forces made their first attempt to close the last port city of the Confederacy in December 1864. Since Fort Fisher guarded the major inlet to the Cape Fear River, U.S. forces decided to attack it to start the campaign against Wilmington.

U.S. Navy vessels bombarded Fort Fisher for the better part of two days. Meanwhile, the U.S. Army landed soldiers to prepare for a land attack. However, the U.S. Army leadership decided that despite the Navy's shelling, Fort Fisher stood

too strong. They reembarked and sailed away from Wilmington.

The Second Battle—January 13-15, 1865

On the morning of January 13, U.S. troops began their second amphibious landing on Federal Point. Approximately 9,000 soldiers and 2,000 sailors and marines took to the shore.



US Navy sailors and marines attack the Northeast Bastion

As thousands of American troops poured ashore, the U.S. Navy ironclad gunboats opened the second massive bombardment of Fort Fisher. Two days later, with nearly all the land cannons pointing towards the advancing U.S. forces in ruins, the military leadership determine that conditions are favorable for an infantry assault.

The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps landing party, without waiting to coordinate the assault with U.S. Army, attacked. As sailors and marines rushed headlong to the fort, armed only with revolvers and cutlasses, the attackers were mauled severely, and forced back up the beach in a perfect rout.

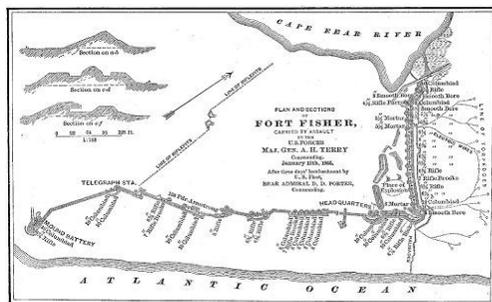
As the U.S. naval force retreated, more than 3,000 U.S. soldiers crowded the base, slopes, and walls of Shepherd's Battery and poured onto the parade ground behind the fort. Confederate defenders who fought off the American sailors and marines were stunned to see several large U.S. regimental flags waving over Shepherd's Battery. The Confederate leadership divided their force unevenly and left only a few hundred soldiers to protect the area of Shepherd's Battery while the bulk of the force fought off the advancing sailors and marines; they did not expect a two-prong attack.

The Confederates were outnumbered. In desperation, Confederate officers ordered all long-range cannons still serviceable to fire upon the advancing U.S. forces. Not all shots were precise. Further, by this point U.S. and Confederate soldiers fought in close-quartered combat. The Confederate artillerymen hit friend and foe alike. The Confederate Army rallied twice for counterattacks with minimal, temporary success.

Meanwhile, Confederate soldiers north of Fort Fisher marched south in hopes of reinforcing Fort Fisher and surrounding the U.S. forces. As they marched, they encountered approximately 3,000 African American soldiers (a.k.a. U.S. Colored Troops) holding the U.S. Army's rear line. With many of the USCT regiments experienced in combat, the soldiers refused the Confederate advancement. Even though the USCTs were not selected for direct action against Fort Fisher, their actions contributed to the victory.



Members of the 4th USCT Regiment



Map of Fort Fisher drawn by Federal Engineers after it's fall in 1865.