

River Fortress Guarded Confederacy's Supply Line

BY SUSAN USHER

Place: Fort Fisher, at the mouth of the Cape Fear River.

Date: January 13, 1865.
Time: 3 p.m.

All firing stopped; then, with one piercing blast of their steam whistles, the Union naval fleet sounded the assault charge that marked the beginning of the end for the Confederacy's last stronghold.

A Christmas Eve, 1864, advance of Federal troops had turned back; this time the attack would proceed—and succeed.

Fort Fisher and its sister installations along the river protected the blockade-runners using the port of

Wilmington. These ships and the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad to Richmond practically kept Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in supplies during the last months of the four-year struggle.

Federal forces realized they could strike Lee no harsher blow than to capture Wilmington.

As John Gilchrist Barrett writes in "North Carolina as a Civil War Battleground," "General Lee's dependence upon North Carolina both for supplies and for protection to his rear gave the State an important role, yet oftentimes overlooked, in the grand strategy of the war."

On that fateful January day, the

steam whistles signaled a column of Union soldiers and marines, which had landed above the fort, to move to the attack.

After three days of sustained bombardment by Union land and sea forces and six hours of some of the bitterest hand-to-hand combat of the war, the fort surrendered on April 15 at 9 p.m.

Fort Fisher's loss forced the Confederates to abandon the other defenses at the mouth of the Cape Fear. On the night of January 16, Fort Caswell was blown up. The installation in Smith's (Bald Head) Island and Forts Carolinell and Johnston were also destroyed. This

left only Fort Anderson, situated on the ruins of Brunswick Town, as a defense for Wilmington. It held out until February 26. The Confederate troops made their next stand on the north bank of Town Creek, only to be defeated and driven back toward Wilmington in a brief skirmish.

All that remains of Fort Fisher today are remnants of the extensive earthworks that earned it the name "Gibraltar of America."

Its museum/visitors center and grounds offer a variety of exhibits, tours and a reconstructed battery for visitors' perusal. Researchers access to the archives, which include a roster 10 years in the making of Con-

federate soldiers stationed at Fort Fisher at the time of its capture.

Living history programs as well as other special events are scheduled periodically, including a weekend encampment in the spring and a special observance of the Christmas season.

This season the fort is featuring two new exhibits, a traveling diorama of the state's historical sites and also two bells, one returned to Fort Fisher from New York State after an absence of almost 100 years. The bell was taken when the fort was captured.

The second bell, of bronze, was retrieved from a shipwreck near the fort.

Visited more than any other of the state's 23 historic sites, Fort Fisher is open to the public at no charge. Hours through October 31 are Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Nearby attractions include Carolina Beach State Park, public beaches, a public boat launch ramp, the N.C. Marine Resources Center and the Fort Fisher-Southport toll ferry. Also nearby is Zeke's Island, part of the state's Estuarine Sanctuary Program and accessible for day use by crossing "The Rocks", a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers jetty at the tip of the peninsula.

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