The Confederates were outnumbered and in desperation, the Confederates unleashed a long-range fire from guns along the sea face and at Battery Buchanan that killed and maimed friend and foe alike. Two Confederate counter-attacks failed to drive the U.S. troops out of the fort. As Federal mop-up operations are underway, the 27th USCT marched southward down the peninsula, along the sea .

The Federal assault on Fort Fisher

Casualties

The exact number of casualties in the battles for Fort Fisher will never be known. Confederate records are sketchy, and wide discrepancies exist between the various Federal numbers published. The best estimate for Federal troops is 347 killed, 1308 wounded, and 57 missing soldiers, sailors and Marines. Since there were no reports detailing Confederate causalities the best estimates are 494 killed, 364 wounded and about 1500 prisoners. For their actions during the savage fighting at Fort Fisher, 72 Medals of Honor were awarded to Federal 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. Some local African American men even enlisted in the Army.

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The Civil War Battles for Fort Fisher

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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. This inlet was a vital destination of ships attempting to run the U.S. Navy's blockade.

Running the Blockade

These 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 was designed to keep the Federal ships blockading the Cape Fear River at a distance. Its 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.
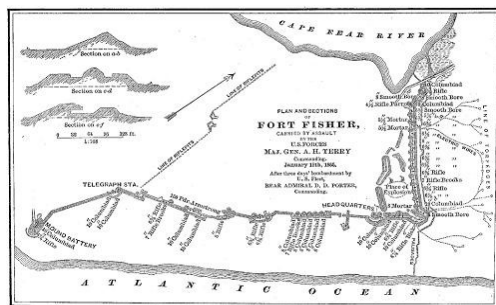
Building Fort Fisher

Construction of defensive works on Federal Point 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.

The sea face, equipped with 22 guns, consisted of a series of 12-foot-high batteries bounded on the south end by two larger batteries 45 and 60 feet high. The land face was equipped with 25 guns distributed among its 15 mounds. Each mound was 32 feet high with interior rooms used as bombproofs, or powder magazines. Extending in front of the entire land face was a nine-foot-high palisade fence and a minefield.

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

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. African American free and enslaved men and American Indians built and maintained the fort.

The Plan to Close Wilmington

Confederate General Robert E. Lee never doubted the importance of preserving Wilmington and his army's "lifeline" via the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad. Whatever merit lay in the strength of the Cape Fear River defenses, the continued success of Wilmington and its contraband shipping trade was due largely to neglect afforded by Northern attention being focused elsewhere. But by the summer of 1864, North Caroli

na's thriving little port had taken on new political significance in the eyes of policy makers in Washington. By mid-October 1864 it finally became clear to authorities in Richmond that Wilmington would probably be the target of an assault.

The December 1864 Attack

Confederate gunners returning fire on the Federal Fleet

U.S. forces concocted an ambitious scheme to blow down the walls of Fort Fisher and stun its garrison into submission by means of a giant floating bomb. In the early morning hours of December 24, the "powder vessel," USS Louisiana, exploded harmlessly doing no damage to Fort Fisher.

On Christmas morning, U.S. troops hit the beach and strove to secure a beachhead. As Confederate infantry retreated, the leading elements of U.S. infantry pushed to within 75 yards of Shepherd's Battery. But due to a disagreement over the strength of the fort and the capability of the attacking force, U.S. soldiers were ordered to return to their transports. With the weather deteriorating, more than 600 U.S. troops and several hundred Rebel prisoners were stranded on the beach for the next two days. As the Navy fleet sailed away, Confederate gunners at Fort Fisher fired a defiant parting volley toward the "beaten" enemy.

The January 1865 Attack

On the morning of January 13, U.S. troops began their second amphibious landing on Federal Point. Forty percent of the U.S. Army attacking Fort Fisher were freed African Americans formed into the United States Colored Troops, or USCTs. As thousands of troops poured ashore, U.S. Navy ironclad gunboats opened the second massive bombardment of Fort Fisher. Two days later, with nearly all the land face guns in ruins, U.S. forces determine that conditions are favorable for an infantry assault.

Members of the 4th USCT Regiment

The U.S. naval landing party, without waiting to coordinate the assault with Federal army attacked. As it rushed headlong to the Northeast Bastion, armed only with revolvers and cutlasses, the attackers were mauled severely, and forced back up the beach in a perfect rout. But more than 3,000 U.S. troops were crowding the base, slopes, and walls of Shepherd's Battery and pouring onto the parade ground behind the fort. Confederate defenders along the Northeast Bastion were stunned to see several large U.S. Army flags waving over Shepherd's Battery.

US Navy sailors and marines attack the Northeast Bastion