

Through Their Eyes: Fort Fisher Primary Source Analysis

January 13-15, 1865 thousands of white and African American men fight in the Battle of Fort Fisher. The Confederate Civil War fort guards Wilmington, the last major port city available for the rebelling army. For two and a half years, the Confederate Army and Confederate politicians forced free and enslaved African Americans as well as American Indians to build Fort Fisher in preparation for an attack.

United States soldiers, sailors, and marines – including about 3,000 African American U.S. Colored Troops – fight to close that port and stop supplies from coming in and going out of the South. Confederate soldiers hope to keep the South fighting longer for an independent nation founded to preserve the institution of slavery. If the United States troops capture Fort Fisher, the fall of Wilmington and the end of military supplies to the Confederacy is all but guaranteed. For three days, Americans and Confederates fight on the earthworks of Fort Fisher. Meanwhile, loved ones and concerned local white men and women gather across the river from the fort and watch the battle.

The following primary sources from a Confederate officer, a United States Colored Troop soldier, and a white Southern woman help us understand just what happened during the Battle of Fort Fisher and how those people who witnessed it thought about the major historical event.

For each primary source, answer the background information questions based on the information provided by your instructor. Then, read the primary source on your own and analyze it using the guiding questions provided below. Be prepared to discuss each source as a class.

Source 1: “Thirty-Sixth Regiment (Second Artillery)” by Colonel William Lamb

Background information

1. This document was written by Colonel William Lamb, who was:
2. The intended audience for this source is:
3. The document was published in _____.

Analysis Questions Complete after reading the source.

1. What do you think Colonel Lamb hoped to convey in this regimental history?
2. What biases or limitations may affect Colonel Lamb’s experience and memory of the battle? In other words, what might Colonel Lamb not have known because of his limited role in the battle?

Source 3: Mrs. Susan Davis's Account

Background information

1. This document was written by Susan Davis, who was:
2. The intended audience for this source is:
3. Davis's recollection of the battle was published in _____.

Analysis Questions *Complete after reading the source.*

1. How did Susan Davis feel during the battle?
2. What do you think Susan hoped her readers would learn?
3. What biases or limitations might Susan have that influenced her account?

Source 1: "Thirty-Sixth Regiment (Second Artillery)" by Colonel William Lamb

"All day and night on the 13th and 14th the [U.S. Navy] fleet kept up a ceaseless and terrific bombardment. Reinforcements were sent from the adjacent forts. It was impossible to repair damages at night. No meals could be prepared for the exhausted garrison, the dead could not be carried without fresh casualties. Fully 200 had been killed during these two days, and only three or four of the land guns remained serviceable.

"[On January 15th] The enemy were unable to enter by the river road, and some of the most desperate fighting done in the work was in the space between the left bastion and the river shore.

"Notwithstanding the capture of a portion of the work and several hundred of the garrison, the Confederates were still undaunted and seemed determined to recover the captured salient and gun chambers.

"We had taken one of these in the charge led by [Major General] Whiting, and since we had opened on their flank we had shot down their standard bearers and the Federal battle flags had disappeared from our ramparts; we had become assailants and the enemy were on the defensive, and I felt confident we would soon drive them out of the fort. Just as the tide of the battle seemed to have turned in our favor, the remorseless fleet came to the rescue of the faltering Federals. Suddenly the bombardment which had been confined to the sea face during the assaults, turned again in our land front and with deadly precision...

"Nor was this all. We had now to content with a column advancing around the rear of the left bastion by the river into the interior plane of the fort. It moved slowly and cautiously...

"...If there was ever a longer or more desperate hand to hand fight during the war, I have never heard of it..."

Source 2: Chaplain Henry Turner's Letters to the *Christian Recorder*

"[The white U.S. soldiers] had approached near enough to commence the attack, and with an awful yell and dauntless courage, they could be seen running over an open space, in all apparent fearlessness, intent upon capturing the strong works which then lay in full view to every soldier. But the rebels replied to the charge and yells of our boys with the most awful volley of musketry, grape and canister [cannon shots], which mowed down our troops in fearful numbers. Yet our boys cut them down in heavy proportions.

"Never had I seen grape and canister used so effectually as the rebels used it on our troops on this occasion. At one time I thought they could never stand it; neither do I believe they would have stood, but for the fact that they knew the black troops were in the rear, and if they (the white troops) failed, the colored troops would take the fort and claim the honor...But it was a noble sight, to see our troops hanging on to the sides fort like so many leeches sticking to an afflicted man....after our troops gained a foothold on the fort, each party would stick to those mounds, and fight around them. You would constantly see them, by two's and three's, fall off and roll to the bottom [injured and dead].

"Several free [African American] men, who are now employed by us, were captured with the rebels in Fort Fisher, and have informed us, that during our bombardment of the fort, they were not allowed to enter the bomb-proof for shelter, and yet not a man was struck. And while the rebels had free access to all the bomb-proofs, yet they were slaughtered without mercy..."

Source 3: Mrs. Susan Davis's Account

"At times my imagination would tell me that my anxious eyes were resting upon him in the little group of heroic defenders that we could see distinctly; the next instant a monster shell would explode in their midst, enveloping everything in smoke and dust. At such moments I would feel as if my heart would burst; but when the wind lift the shroud of battle and I could see our flag still there, and the thin, gray line still in action, I would feel that exultant joy...

"We could count our heart beats as, with silent prayers and eyes too dry for tears, we watched the storm gather in great masses of dark columns of men moving on the helpless, but still defiant Confederates. Praying that my husband was yet alive, seeing the overwhelming odds against him, and realizing that victory was utterly hopeless, can I be blamed that courage failed me and that a white flag over the wrecked fort would have been a grateful to my sight?... I could not, if I would describe the fearful scenes that followed, for even at this late day it makes my heart sick to think of it; of how foot by foot our men were forced back from one traverse to another, often fighting with clubbed muskets, and marking every foot of the way with the dead bodies of their foes.

"... The fighting continued until about ten o'clock that night, when the fort surrendered. I could learn nothing of the fate of my husband, whether living or dead, and it was a month afterwards that I received a letter from him, saying he was a prisoner at Elmira, N.Y. He was released after the close of the war, and returned home on the 1st of June, 1865; but the 15th of January always brings back to me a remembrance of that, to me, awful Sunday evening forty years ago."