

This Day in History... February 16, 1862

Grant Claims Victory at Fort Donelson

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This is the first stamp honoring Grant, issued five years after his death.

The year 1862 began badly for the Confederacy in the western theater. General Albert Sydney Johnston faced a nearly impossible task – defending a 400-mile line that stretched across Kentucky from the Mississippi River at Columbus through Bowling Green and down the Cumberland Gap at the border of Tennessee. His line began to vanish after his troop’s right flank was exposed with the defeat at Mill Springs in eastern Kentucky in January.

Shortly after that rout, Union Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant turned his focus on Forts Henry and Donelson. Capturing the forts would give the Union control of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers and easy access to the cities of Nashville and Columbus. On February 6, 1862, Grant’s force took Fort Henry, opening the Tennessee River for the Union.

About 2,500 Confederates escaped before the surrender and fled 12 miles east to Fort Donelson.

On February 12 and 13, Grant marched his army to Fort Donelson and conducted several small attacks to probe the enemy position. On the 14th, Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote moved a US Navy gunboat into position and tried unsuccessfully to take the fort with naval gunfire much like he’d done at Fort Henry. Meanwhile, Grant’s army consisted of three divisions commanded by Brigadier Generals John A. McClelland, Charles F. Smith, and Lew Wallace, who braced for battle on land assisted by four ironclads and three wooden gunboats.

The Confederate forces included divisions commanded by Brigadier Generals John B. Floyd, Bushrod Johnson, Gideon J. Pillow, and Simon Bolivar Buckner as well as garrison troops and a cavalry led by Lt. Colonel Nathan B. Forrest.

Forrest had delayed Grant’s army as it marched from Fort Henry to Donelson. But by the early morning hours of February 14th, Floyd was forced to call a council of war with his advisors. Agreeing that Fort Donelson could not be held, Gideon Pillow was ordered to lead an attempt at a breakout. Pillow moved his men into position and prepared to assault the Union troops, but an enemy sharpshooter killed one of his aides at the last moment. Unnerved and convinced the element of surprise was gone, Pillow decided to postpone the breakout.

After Foote launched an unsuccessful naval attack, Grant realized his best hope was a siege followed by a battle carried out by the army without naval support. But Pillow surprised Grant by attacking McClelland’s division on the morning of February 15. After two hours of heavy fighting, the Confederates had pushed the Union troops back and opened an escape route.

Dismayed by the confusion, Grant realized the enemy troops were carrying knapsacks filled with three days of rations – indicating they were trying to escape, not fight. But to his amazement, Pillow ordered his men back to their trenches before losing his nerve and directing the entire Confederate force back inside the fort.

Nearly 1,000 men on both sides had been killed and another 3,000 wounded were still lying on the field, where some would freeze to death in a snowstorm that struck overnight. During the night, the Confederate officers realized they would be forced to surrender. Nathan Forrest and his cavalymen escaped across the river. When the sun rose on February 16, the white flag of surrender was flying above Fort. Buckner sent Grant a note requesting terms of surrender, to which the Union general replied, “I’ll make no terms with Rebels with arms in their hands – my terms are unconditional and immediate surrender.” For his statement, Ulysses S. Grant became known as “Unconditional Surrender Grant.”

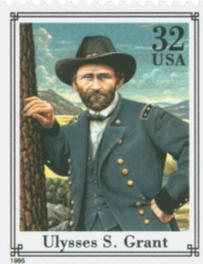
Church bells rang and cannons boomed as the news spread across the North. Grant had scored the Union’s first decisive victory at Fort Donelson, paving the way for his rise in the Federal Army. Grant had captured more soldiers in a single battle than all American generals combined up to that time, and Johnston’s loss of the 12,000 men would put him at a disadvantage less than two months later in the Battle of Shiloh. Johnston’s remaining troops were split by 200 miles with Grant’s army between them and in control of the rivers and railroads, making it difficult to resupply the Confederate army. Control of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers gave the Union easy avenues to invade the South. General Buell’s troops were menacing Nashville while John Pope’s threatened Columbus. On February 23, Johnston evacuated Nashville – the first Confederate state capital to fall – surrendering the important industrial center to the Union. With the March 2 evacuation of Columbus, most of Tennessee and Kentucky fell under Union control for the remainder of the war.



As a result of the battle, the Union gained control of virtually all of Kentucky and most of Tennessee.



Grant’s victory at Fort Donelson brought him national fame and a promotion to major general.



Grant earned the nickname “Unconditional Surrender” for his response to a Confederate commander’s request for surrender terms.



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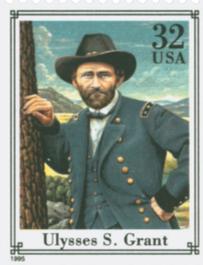
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