

Wilmington National Cemetery
2011 Market Street
Wilmington, North Carolina 28403

Description

The Wilmington National Cemetery, established in 1867, is located in downtown Wilmington, one and one-half miles from the Cape Fear River. The cemetery is a five-acre, largely flat grassy rectangle on a north-south axis. The main entrance is off of the south boundary, defined by Market Street, and is located at the center point of that boundary. Along the south boundary is wrought iron fencing, and from the southeast corner of the cemetery to midway along the east boundary is chain link fencing. Along the balance of the boundary remains the original brick perimeter wall, constructed in the late 1870's. Behind the wrought-iron gates, a paved drive runs straight to the north boundary where it terminates in a circle. The site is divided into rectangular burial areas which are shaded by numerous large deciduous trees. The cemetery lodge and support buildings are located adjacent to the main entrance on the west side of the drive. At the center of the cemetery drive, there is a large traffic circle containing a flagpole. Just southeast of the flagpole is a brick and iron octagonal-shaped rostrum. Most graves are marked with upright marble headstones, and some are marked with flat granite markers.



In 1934, a brick, wood and concrete two-story, seven-room Dutch Colonial Revival lodge was constructed. This style of lodge was the standard for national cemeteries in the early 1930's. The first story is brick veneer, the second story is frame and stucco, and the gambrel roof is slate. There is a finished basement.



The brick and concrete utility building, 40 feet by 20 feet by 16 feet, constructed in 1939, contains a work-room, garage, implement room and two public toilet rooms. The roof is tile.

The octagonal-shaped rostrum is constructed of brick and iron, surrounded by a railing and ornamental grill work of iron. Records show that construction was begun during February 1887 and completed in April 1887. Records also show that the structure was uncovered until June 11, 1934, when galvanized iron roof was installed. The roof was removed on February 13, 1958.



The brick walls around three sides of the cemetery were constructed from 1875 through 1878. The original cemetery wall along Market Street was built of sandstone from Manassas, Virginia, the area of the famous battleground. A section

of the brick wall for a distance of approximately 332 feet long, facing Market Street, was demolished and replaced with a new brick wall with a concrete foundation topped by wrought iron fencing. The work was completed on June 15, 1934. On July 15, 1934, a brick arch, eight feet long, was constructed in a section of the East wall. On March 15, 1936, 180 feet of the north wall was demolished and replaced with a new brick wall.

Civil War Activity in Area

By late 1864, Wilmington was possibly the most important city in the South, except for Richmond, Virginia. General Robert E. Lee was largely dependent upon this Cape River port for supplies. The Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, which joined the Petersburg Railroad at Weldon, provided Lee with a direct line to the North Carolina coast. However, when the Union forces occupied the northern end of the Petersburg Railroad in August 1864, the Wilmington and Weldon became useful only as a local supply road. The direct connection between the Confederate capital and Wilmington was broken and supplies brought in through the blockade had to be transported north along a more circuitous route.

President Abraham Lincoln's able Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, had but 42 ships in commission when the war started—a far cry from the number necessary to close the Confederate ports. In May 1861, only two vessels guarded the entire coast of North Carolina, and it was not until July 20 that the blockader *Daylight* took up station off the Cape Fear River. Twelve months later, Rear Admiral S. P. Lee, in command of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, had three cordons of blockaders guarding the mouth of the Cape Fear. Still, he found it impossible to prevent vessels from coming in and going out.

Wilmington was ideally situated for blockade-running. Located 28 miles up the Cape Fear River, it was free from enemy bombardment as long as the forts at the mouth of the river remained in Confederate hands. Moreover, there were two navigable entrances to the Cape Fear. These channels were separated by Smith's Island, which was about ten miles long and located directly in the mouth of the river. North of the island was New Inlet, and south of it was Old Inlet. The distance between the passages was only six miles, but lying between and jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean for about 25 miles was Frying Pan Shoals; therefore, a fleet guarding the two entrances had to cover a 50-mile arc and at the same time stay out of range of Confederate shore batteries. Protecting New Inlet, the passage preferred by most blockade-runners, was the extensive work known as Fort Fisher. This mammoth installation was sprawled along the beach of Confederate Point, a narrow strip of land that separated the river from the ocean. The big guns of the fort offered protection to incoming vessels by keeping the Union fleet several miles out to sea. Forts Caswell and Campbell on the mainland guarded the lower passage, as did Fort Holmes on Smith's Island. Up the river's west bank at Smithville and "Old Brunswick," respectively, stood Forts Johnston and Anderson. The latter installation was designed as part of the defenses for the city of Wilmington and thus was too far up the river to have a bearing on blockade-running. The strength of these fortifications, along with the natural advantages of Wilmington for blockade-running, made the absolute closing of the port probably more difficult for the Federals than the problem of slipping in and out was for the blockade-runners.

The usual plan of the blockade runners on the inward voyage was to strike the coast 30 or 40 miles above or below the inlets, depending on which bar they intended to cross, and then hug the coast so close that they were invisible against the heavily wooded shore line. The principal

dread of the blockade-runner captains, once they were close off shore, was the hazards of navigation, not the presence of the fleet. Admiral Lee attempted to blockade the two harbor entrances by dividing his command into three sections. Captain John Wilkinson, one of the most successful and famous of the blockade-runner captains, thought that if the number of vessels concentrated off the two bars had been decreased and a cordon of fast steamers stationed 10 or 15 miles apart inside the Gulf Stream, the number of captures would have been tremendous. To run the blockade successfully was an exciting experience but one usually filled with moments of extreme anxiety. Captain Wilkinson also used rockets to great advantage in eluding the enemy vessels.

Many of the blockade runners that made it safely into Wilmington were indebted to Colonel William Lamb, the commanding officer at Fort Fisher. Lamb recovered from the wreck of the blockade-runner *Modern Greece* four Whitworth rifle guns that had a range of five miles. With these pieces he made the blockading fleet move its anchorage from two and one-half to five miles from the fort. General Whiting said that the Whitworth gun, in the hands of the indefatigable Lamb, saved dozens of vessels and millions of dollars to the Confederate States. Whiting urged the Secretary of War to have two of the guns originally saved from the *Modern Greece* returned to Fort Fisher. At the suggestions of Captain Tom Taylor, a battery of six Whitworth guns was subsequently presented to the Colonel. For every blockade-runner destroyed on the beach, at least one other was captured at sea by the Federal naval forces.

With cotton selling in the Confederacy for three cents a pound and in England for the equivalent of 45 cents to one dollar a pound, investors were more than willing to hazard the blockade in order to reap enormous dividends. The *R. E. Lee*, under Captain Wilkinson, ran the blockade at Wilmington 21 times and carried aboard nearly 7,000 bales of cotton, worth about \$2,000,000 in gold. The most successful of the blockade-runners, the *Siren*, made 64 trips through the Federal fleet, running her profits up into the millions.

In accordance with an act of the Confederate Congress, every steamer that left port had to carry a certain amount of government cotton. In March 1864, when a steamer attempted to leave port without complying with law, Flag Officer W. F. Lynch, in charge of naval defenses, sent marines aboard her and took possession. General Whiting resented this action and considered it an unwarranted interference with his authority as departmental commander. In turn, he marched in a detachment of troops and ejected the marines. While the soldiers might laugh at the Confederate navy, they were much impressed by the blockade-runners that slipped through the Federal fleet.

The years 1863 and 1864 were the height of maritime activity in Wilmington. One source states that 397 ships visited Wilmington during the first two and a half to three years of the war, which is proof enough that the traffic was heavy. Of all the ships running the blockade, the steamer *Advance* was among the best known, for she was owned by the State of North Carolina. On her maiden voyage as a blockade runner, the *Advance* unsuccessfully avoided the Federal fleet and entered the mouth of the Cape Fear on June 26, 1863. From this date until her capture at sea by the *Santiago de Cuba*, a little over a year later, she contributed much to the welfare of the war-harassed state. The loss of the *Advance* was a blow to North Carolina's war efforts.

Ashore the garrison life of the Confederate soldier was equally monotonous. Commerce brought into Wilmington a gang of foreign and domestic ruffians who made a livelihood out of

robbery and murder. It was unsafe to venture into the suburbs at night, and even in daylight there were frequent conflicts in the public streets, between the crews of the steamers in port and the soldiers stationed in the town, in which knives and pistols were fully used. Speculators from all over the South joined the "foreigners" at Wilmington and congregated to attend the auctions of luxury items brought in through the blockade. Blockaders, to the sorrow of many people, did not always bring in auctionable goods. The little steamer Kate arrived in Wilmington from Nassau on August 6, 1862, bringing with her the dreaded disease, yellow fever. Almost overnight it spread throughout the city. Deaths reached as high as 18 in a single day and, at one time, there were 500 cases reported. Numerous costly fires also plagued Wilmington. More spectacular than these fires in town was the burning of the pine forests around Wilmington. The citizens of Wilmington, except for those engaged in blockade-running, suffered toward the end of the war from a lack of adequate food. By late 1864, the Army of Northern Virginia was getting possibly half its foodstuffs through the blockade at Wilmington. In August of that year, Lee wrote Governor Vance that the importance of the port of Wilmington was such that every effort should be made to defend it. It was obvious to Federal commanders that they could strike General Lee no more effective a blow than by an attack on Wilmington. The capture of this vital port, contemplated since 1862, had now become an absolute necessity.



In late August 1864, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, stated that something must be done to close the entrance to Cape Fear River and the port of Wilmington. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton was willing to cooperate with Welles but doubted if Grant would favor an expedition that might drag on. On September 2, the War Department consented to a joint operation against the defenses at the mouth of the Cape Fear. Grant set one condition—that Admiral Samuel P. Lee should not head the expedition. After consideration of several persons, Rear Admiral David D. Porter was deemed the best man for the service. So, on September 22, Admiral Porter was detached from the Mississippi Squadron and ordered east. General Benjamin F. Butler was selected as the army commander, but Butler and Porter thoroughly disliked each other. Secretary Welles energetically began to assemble a fleet and, at the same time, Butler came up with the idea of a powder ship (an old steamer filled with powder) being exploded next to Fort Fisher. He felt certain the resulting blast would smash the fort's walls, dismount the guns, paralyze the garrison, and make simple the matter of occupancy. Admiral Porter thought it was at least worth trying. He selected from his fleet the Louisiana, a propeller of about 250 tons. The Louisiana was ordered from the North Carolina waters to Norfolk where her officers and crew were transferred to other vessels, and gangs of workmen at once commenced transforming her into a "torpedo." From Norfolk the powder boat was towed to Craney Island at the mouth of the Elizabeth River. Here Commander Alexander C. Rhind and Lieutenant Samuel W. Preston took charge. On December 7, Butler began embarking at Bermuda Hundred, Virginia, a force of approximately 6,500 men.

When it became evident to Confederate authorities that an attack on the Cape Fear defenses was being planned, President Jefferson Davis sent General Braxton Bragg to Wilmington to exercise immediate control over the troops and defenses of the city and its approaches. Fort Fisher, the mammoth earthwork at the tip of Confederate Point, was the key to the Cape Fear defenses. It was begun in April 1861, with the construction of Battery Bolles, which later became

a part of the larger works. In July of the following year, Major (later Colonel) William Lamb assumed command at Fort Fisher and began construction in earnest on what was to become one of the strongest installations in the world. He immediately went to work, and with 500 colored laborers, assisted by the garrison, constructed the largest earthwork in the Southern Confederacy.

People called Fort Fisher the Gibraltar of the South, and it is little wonder that Federal military chieftains were hesitant to attack this massive earthwork. The construction of Fort Fisher had taken nearly four years, and on the day Admiral Porter's fleet arrived off the mouth of the Cape Fear, work was still in process. The army transports arrived at the rendezvous point 20 miles off New Inlet on the evening of December 15. Admiral Porter arrived with his fleet on the evening of the 18th. The powder ship Louisiana was intended to go in that night, but General Butler requested that the explosion be delayed. Upon the advice of Admiral Porter, the fleet of transports turned back to Beaufort to ride out the storm and to take on coal and water. The weather continued to be bad until the 23rd. Butler sent someone to advise Porter that the army would be at the rendezvous point on the evening of the 24th and ready to commence the assault, weather permitting. Admiral Porter decided not to await Butler's arrival to begin the attack. On the night of the 23, he directed Commander Rhind to proceed and explode the powder vessel right under the walls of Fort Fisher. Although the Louisiana still had steam, she was towed by the Wilderness to a point within a short distance of her station. Upon signal, the Wilderness cast off the powder boat and anchored. The Louisiana, carrying a crew of 13 men and two officers, steamed in unaided to within 300 yards of the beach and dropped her anchors. They triggered the mechanism designed to explode the powder and started the fire already laid in the ship's stern. Then joining the volunteer crewmen in a small boat drawn up alongside, they raced back to the Wilderness, reaching her precisely at midnight. At 1:40 a.m., the powder boat went up. Since the walls of Fort Fisher had not come tumbling down as expected, Admiral Porter made preparation to use his guns, nearly 600 in number, against this Gibraltar. At 11:30 a.m., Porter gave the order to engage the forts. The battle had commenced. At nightfall, Porter broke off the attack. Despite heavy Union shelling, Fort Fisher suffered very little damage and few casualties. Admiral Porter's losses were far greater than Colonel Lamb's. The small Confederate garrison, numbering approximately 900 men, worked energetically to repair the damage to the fort, and at daylight Christmas morning, found them at their posts awaiting a renewal of the attack. The Federal troops began coming ashore above Fort Fisher at about noon. General Robert F. Hoke's division had recently arrived in Wilmington from Virginia. Lee dispatched Hoke and 6,000 veteran troops to strengthen the Cape Fear defenses. By 4 p.m. Major General Godfrey Weitzel, Butler's chief lieutenant, had moved his skirmish line to within 50 yards of Fort Fisher and Admiral Porter had increased the tempo of the bombardment. Suddenly, the 3,000 Federal troops turned their backs on the enemy and marched up the beach. Admiral Porter could not believe his eyes. Orders were issued for the troops to re-embark on the transports that would take them back to Fortress Monroe. The first battle of Fort Fisher closed.

Ashore, the Confederates were jubilant. General Bragg congratulated his officers and men for their successful defense of Fort Fisher against one of the most formidable naval armaments of modern times.

On January 8, 1865, Colonel Lamb's intelligence reported that Federal transports were rendezvousing with Admiral Porter's fleet at Beaufort before clearing the mouth of the Cape Fear. Four days later, the Federal fleet was plainly in sight as it passed observers on the coast

east of Wilmington. Shortly after dawn the next morning, the gallant Colonel inspected the fort to make certain everything was in order and ready for action. Then with startling suddenness, the Union Armada opened fire, the New Ironside spouting her flame and thunder first. The second battle of Fort Fisher was on.

During the day Colonel Lamb received around 700 reinforcements that brought his complement up to only 1,500 men. The deadly battering by Union ships continued all day and into the night. Admiral Porter still commanded the fleet. Butler had been replaced by Major General Alfred H. Terry. General Terry started putting his men and supplies ashore. By 3 p.m., General Terry had large quantities of supplies and 8,000 men ashore, each soldier with three days of rations and 40 rounds of ammunition. Before landing, Terry had selected the general area for the strong defensive line that he planned to construct across the peninsula. However, morning found the Union troops behind a thoroughly respected breastwork thrown up during the last hours of darkness. General Terry decided that the assault could be made the following day. That evening Terry visited Admiral Porter aboard the Malvern to work out plans for the next day's attack. The two officers decided that a heavy bombardment would begin in the morning and last up to the moment of the assault. The navy continued to pound Fort Fisher all night. The shelling had been so fierce during the day that Colonel Lamb had found it impossible to repair damages. On the 14th, as an estimated 100 shells a minute were bursting among the guns and traverses, Whiting, at Colonel Lamb's request wired Bragg to come to the rescue of the fort. General Bragg immediately sent 1,100 "veteran infantry" down the river by steamers, but the transports went aground and less than half the men reached the works. The casualties left Colonel Lamb with no more than 1,200 men to defend the works. The situation was now extremely critical for the Confederate garrison and through the smoke the men could see Union soldiers, sailors, and marines forming for an assault. On the opposite side of the peninsula, 4,000 troops under Brigadier General Adelbert Ames also formed for an attack. The remainder of General Terry's force, mostly Negro troops, commanded by Brigadier General Charles J. Paine, manned the defensive line that stretched from the ocean to the river. All the naval bombardment then ceased and every Union vessel offshore sounded its steam whistle. This was the signal for the land forces to attack. The soldiers struck the western end of the land face, while the tars, under Lieutenant Commander Randolph Breese, headed for its eastern tip. The fort's one big gun and Lamb's small pieces opened up with grapeshot and canister, but the bluejackets charged on gamely. The sailors fell back in panic, leaving their dead and wounded, over 300 in number, on the beach. As shouts of victory went up from his men, Colonel Lamb turned to look at the western salient and saw three Federal battle flags crowning the works. General Whiting saw the flags and roared for a counterattack to drive the enemy out. A savage hand-to-hand battle developed, the fighting swirling back and forth between the traverses. General Whiting sank to the sand, critically wounded. Colonel Lamb ordered what cannon he had left to swivel around and fire point blank into the mass of bluecoats. Then he rallied his men to sweep the Federals from the land face. Several gun chambers were retaken and enemy battle flags disappeared from the ramparts. Then suddenly the naval bombardment, which had been confined to the sea face, turned again to the land front with deadly precision. Admiral Porter delivered support within 50 yards of Terry's advancing lines. This fire swept everything before it, including Colonel Lamb who fell, a bullet in his hip, while leading his men in a final desperate charge. The command now depended upon Major James Reilly. The march was directed to Battery Buchanan. A short distance from the battery, Reilly halted his troops and sent a messenger ahead to warn the post of his arrival. The Major also sent along instructions to Captain R. F. Chapman, commanding the small installation, to have his men and armament ready for action. The messenger returned shortly with the word that

Captain Chapman and command was gone with few exceptions, the Battery abandoned and the guns spiked. Reilly had no alternative but to proceed with his original plan. At Battery Buchanan, he attempted to get his men in some order, only to learn that three-fourths of them had no arms. In company with Major James H. Hill and Captain A. C. Van Benthuisen of the Marine Corps, Reilly went up the beach a short distance to await the enemy. He carried a white flag. Around 10:20 p.m., the Federal advance appeared. Major Reilly stepped forward and, to the Captain in charge, said, "We surrender." With this laconic statement, the second battle of Fort Fisher came to an end. To celebrate the victory, the ships of the Union fleet set off a brilliant pyrotechnic display.

Since the Second Battle of Fort Fisher, the citizens of Wilmington had known that they were at the mercy of the enemy. The times were especially trying for those soldiers of Bragg's command who were natives of Wilmington. Back at Wilmington, "A mass of black smoke had settled like a pall over the silent town; in its extent and density suggestive of the day of doom." The Federal soldiers took the fall of Wilmington as a good omen since it occurred on George Washington's birthday. But for the residents of Wilmington it was a time of sadness, not celebration. The omen was bad, not good. The Confederacy, without supplies from abroad, surely could not stand much longer.

When the vital port of Wilmington was lost following the Battles of Fort Fisher, the days of the Confederacy were numbered. The Federal occupation of much of the state's coastal region after 1861 was also of vital concern to General Lee, since Union troops in this area posed a constant threat to the vital communication lines running south from Richmond. Lee's dependence upon North Carolina, both for supplies and protection to his rear, led to Stoneman's raid and Sherman's march in 1865. And with the latter came the horrors of total war and the pangs of defeat. Struck by land and sea, invaded from the east, the west, the north, and the south, North Carolina played an important but frequently overlooked role in the grand strategy of the war.