ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Fortifications

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Symbolically the Civil War began and ended at fortifications, with the April 1861 shelling of Fort Sumter to the May 1865 imprisonment of Jefferson Davis at Fortress Monroe. Between those events, military strongholds would become one of the most impactful, transformative, and decisive factors of the war. Opposing forces would build more than one thousand of them—largely through African American labor—with the intent of holding their most vital transportation routes, urban areas, ports, and positions. In construction, many fort complexes would induce hyper-urbanization, resulting in population spikes, pandemics, and intense environmental destruction. Yet for many Federal fort networks, such as the massive rings around Washington, Nashville, New Orleans, and Memphis, they also evolved into points of stability and even economic growth. Union defenses also became, by far, the most common portals to human freedom. As US forts proliferated ever deeper into slave societies, hundreds of thousands of enslaved performed self-emancipation and walked into these installations, at first encountering federal government that did not want them, and then becoming a decisive labor and military force in Union's victory. Unfortunately, much of this progress would be lost as the US government abandoned nearly all these strongholds at the close of the war, leaving the newly free unemployed and unprotected, and southern white property holders in power once again.

Fort Stevens in 1864 was an example of the more than sixty such bastions guarding Washington, D.C. Excepting its lack of gun embrasures and the presence of nearby trees, Stevens possessed typical features of Civil War forts, with its pivoting artillery, tall earthen walls, dry moat, and ring of abatis.

Fortifications shaped the American landscape long before the United States existed. Native civilizations routinely utilized high ground and walled structures to secure their communities. European colonizers erected defensive works before constructing permanent housing or communal buildings. Place names often had the prefix Fort in their formative years, and over eighty US cities still do. Forts Sumter and Monroe were part of an elaborate Third System of US coastal defenses, so called because they represented the third wave of post-Revolution forts designed to repulse attacks from the world's naval powers. Over forty of these loomed over ports and river mouths on the eve of the Civil War, representing decades of construction (some of which was still ongoing) and several million dollars in materiel, labor, and ordnance investment.

It was these structures, among all other federal properties and laws, that the newly inaugurated Lincoln had sworn to uphold. Though he firmly believed the Union could be maintained, Lincoln was aware that if there were to be a military demonstration against the national government, a likely flashpoint would be one of the fifteen Third System Forts in the Deep South. Each represented federal might, but each had minimal or no garrison at the time of his taking office; the majority of US servicemen were stationed west of Mississippi in posts and forts designed to subdue Native Americans.

When hostilities did erupt at Sumter, new fortifications began piecemeal, as neither of the warring parties foresaw a prolonged contest. The prevailing assumption was that a few more pitched engagements would adequately communicate one's own resolve, and the opponent would acquiesce as a result. Hastily constructed earthworks were deemed adequate wherever forces were in close proximity, but building, arming, and manning extensive defenses was viewed as a waste of precious time and resources. But by 1862, when the war grew far beyond expectations, so came a phenomenon equally unforeseen—an explosion of fort construction unrivaled in the history of the continent.

What Was a Fort?

Thankfully, there are a multitude of Civil War-era fortifications that have been preserved, some with adjacent museums, walking trails, and extensive interpretation. Among the largest collections are those in and around Petersburg National Battlefield and Vicksburg National Military Park. Reclaimed sites and sizes continue to expand, thanks to friends' groups, state and local parks departments, archeology efforts, State Historical Commissions, etc. A prime example is Fort Negley, once an overgrown and largely forgotten hilltop in Nashville, now an extensively recovered and interpreted historic park. Representing the growing historiography on Civil War fortifications, Fort Negley is now a UNESCO site, recognized for being a main destination of Middle Tennessee's slave population who fled to Union-held Nashville from early 1862 onwards.

Yet these forts we see today are just the axles to what used to be massive gears, interconnecting and forming expansive, carefully engineered defenses in depth. Unlike the quiet and unpopulated fortifications we visit in our time, during the war these were large, loud, bustling machines continually in motion. The axles themselves were artillery platforms, hosting anywhere between one and several score guns. In desperate moments, these platforms also functioned as infantry positions of last resort. Unlike the multi-tiered masonry citadels facing the Atlantic and the timber stockades in the West, strongholds built between 1861 and 1865 were usually constructed of piled earth and sod, with internal walls of lumber, logs, or gabions (wicker baskets), and steep external slops leading down to deep, dry moats. In most cases, just beyond the moats stood a ring of abatis, the barbed wire of its time. Less common were chevaux de frise (wooden

spikes slotted perpendicularly through horizonal logs). Beyond the abatis were rifle pits and meandering trenchworks. Commonly, all of this rested within a barren circle nearly a mile across, stripped of any trees, buildings, and other obstructions. Confederate populations under occupation derided such clearcutting as acts of wanton Yankee destruction, although their own forces did the same at Atlanta, Mobile, Richmond, and elsewhere. Both sides performed slash and burn operations for sound reasons - to provide an open field of fire for their own garrisons and to dissuade any would-be attackers from attempting an assault.

And still these positions reached ever outward. The next standard layer of defense was a primary picket line of infantry, usually positioned just short of the artillery platform's maximum range, and often shielded further by its own set of trenchworks. Beyond this was yet another collection of sentries, the last static line from which the entire position's cavalry and scouts probed many miles further afield. Interspersed within this enormous collective would be regimental camps, barracks and occupied homes, depots, mule and horse fields, bakeries, hospitals, headquarters, saw and grist mills, not to mention the reason for their presence – the city, town, rail line, river, and/or roads these fortifications were built to hold.

Often tethering these centers of defense were chains of thick log blockhouses, such as the US's forty-five stalwart artillery/rifle shelters connecting Nashville with Chattanooga in 1864. Long miles of primary, secondary, and tertiary trench lines, along with bastions and batteries, served the same purpose, like the meandering defenses that held Confederate Richmond and Petersburg together for the last year of the war.[1]

Enter the Slavery Question

The most significant effect of widespread fortifications was the unforeseen impact they would have on American slavery. The labor required to build and maintain an enormous number of earthen forts and trenches grew well beyond each War Department's military capacities. As a result, both sides hesitantly but heavily relied upon African American enslaved to produce and repair expanding fort systems. More importantly, the enslaved themselves eventually saw the rise of forts as unanticipated opportunities for self-emancipation. Despite early Federal resistance to receive them, the enslaved interpreted nearby Union forts as sources of three things critical for a successful escape: free soil within reach; protection; and employment.

[1] Edwin C. Bearss, "History of Fortress Rosecrans," 1960, Stones River National Battlefield Archives, Appendix A; United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 32, part 3, p. 290 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 32, pt. 3, 290).
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Before the war, despite incendiary events such as the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, the Underground Railroad, and publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin, successful slave escapes rarely exceeded 2,000 per year. Yet when the Federal war strategy employed expansive fortification in 1862, escapes neared 2,000 per month. At the end of 1863, the rate exceeded 2,000 every two or three days, most of which came by migration into Union fortified areas. Among the very first wartime escapes occurred in May 1861, when three enslaved men fled Confederate-held Norfolk, Virginia to nearby Fortress Monroe, where an eager Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler refused to return said "contraband." Fortifying sites in Union-held Kentucky and Missouri experienced similar flights. To the modern reader, the common thread from Union letters, diaries, and reports involves officers and enlisted describing enslaved as "coming into our lines." What is easily missed is that those "lines" were picket lines and trench works encircling Union fortifications.[2]

The gradual expansion of fortification turned trickles into floods. Known to us are the struggles that the US military, Lincoln administration, and Republican Congress had with addressing the slave question, yet to the enslaved themselves, political conundrums in Washington were largely unknown. Far more evident were opportunities appearing right before them. Thus, the Confiscation Acts of 1861 and 1862, and the Emancipation Proclamation were more reactive than proactive measures to what was increasingly taking place. Large groups of escapees, first seen as a hinderance to frontline operations, were gradually viewed as large pools of bakers, cooks, dock workers, engineers, laundry workers, nurses, teamsters, and general laborers. In late 1862, Major General Ulysses S. Grant established the first contraband camp in the Western Theater at Grand Junction, Tennessee, near the star fort built adjacent to the rail crossroads. Soon after, he began to employ the physically able among them. Formed in July 1862, the small contraband camp at Helena, Arkansas grew to nearly 6,000 persons by January 1863, and helped make Helena one

[2] Slaves escaping to Fortress Monroe in May 1861 from James McPherson, *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 136; For estimates of slave escapes and attempts per year during the antebellum era, Eric Foner labels them "guesses" at best and cites a range of 1,000 to 5,000, Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of America's Fugitive Slaves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4; With somewhat more calculation, J. Blaine Hudson, estimates the same range, with 3,000 to 3,500 escapes per year from 1830 to 1860, J. Blaine Hudson, *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 161-3; Estimates of escapees to Union positions during the war range from Leslie Schwalm's conservative estimate of 320,000 to Ira Berlin et al's perhaps optimistic number of 474,000+ . See Leslie A. Schwalm, "Between Slavery and Freedom: African American Women and Occupation in the Slave South," in Lee Ann Whites and Alecia P. Long, eds., *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 138-9; Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland et al, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 178; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 259-60; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 79-80; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 648-9.

of the most fortified Union strongholds along the Mississippi. Going into effect on January 1, 1863, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation called for freedmen to enter the military, with an emphasis on garrisoning forts. In June 1863, contrabands built nearly all of Fort Nelson, the central citadel to Camp Nelson in Kentucky, where officials would eventually certify the legal freedom of more than 13,000 individuals. [3]

In contrast, as wealthy as the South was in human chattel, nearly all were under private ownership. While slaver owners in the Confederate military marched off frequently with manservants in tow, they were extremely reluctant to loan their possessions to their War Department. Owners demanded $30 monthly for each subject placed into service, including stern contractual agreements to adequately feed, clothe, shelter, and protect their property. Owners often forbade the enslaved to be used in dangerous situations. Increasingly desperate for labor, by late 1862, Confederate states began to formerly impress slaveowner property, with the Richmond government issuing similar demands from the spring of 1863 onward. Yet throughout the process, Southern officials strove to placate the wealthy. Use of slaves was commonly restricted to two months, with monetary compensation to the owners, and guarantees to minimize risk and overwork of their chattel.[4]

Forts and Their Creative Destruction

From Lost Cause mythology to environmental history, immense amounts of print have been dedicated to depicting the war's damage upon humans and ecosystems. Professional historians have shown in detail that stories of Confederate victimhood have been highly exaggerated, especially compared to the concurrent Paraguayan War (1864-1870) which likely killed a majority of that nation's population, and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) with its death toll in the tens of millions. By comparison, Paul S. Paskoff finds that nearly half of the counties in the South experienced virtually no military presence let alone hostility. Yet there is growing evidence that areas of fortified occupation and siege were where the Civil War was its most destructive. The chief causes were massive alterations to landscape as described above, and

[3] Cheri LaFlamme Szcodronski, "From Contraband to Freedmen: General Grant, Chaplain Eaton, and Grand Junction, Tennessee," in Tennessee Historical Quarterly 72, no.2 (Summer 2013): 113-15. Leslie A. Schwalm, "Between Slavery and Freedom: African American Women and Occupation in the Slave South," in Whites and Long *Occupied Women*, 147; David Williamson, *The 47th Indiana Volunteer Infantry: A Civil War History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 70; Michael T. Meier, "Lorenzo Thomas and the Recruitment of Blacks in the Mississippi Valley, 1863-1865," in John David Smith, ed., *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 251; Richard D. Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), xxxiii.

[4] Jaime Amanda Martinez, *Confederate Slave Impressment in the Upper South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 5-9, 99-110, 142-52; Colin E. Woodward, *Marching Masters: Slavery, Race, and the Confederate Army during the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 55-79. For Federal impressment of free and enslaved African Americans, see Brian P. Luskey, *Men is Cheap: Exposing the Fraud of Free Labor in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 150-63.

overlapping pandemics created by localized spikes in human and draft animal populations. Military and civilian migrations into the defensive rings of Atlanta, Chattanooga, Memphis, Nashville, Richmond, and Vicksburg tripled local populations. Smaller towns often saw numbers eight to ten times higher than prewar levels. Overcrowding in camps and housing fueled airborne contagions like chickenpox, measles, pneumonia, smallpox, and tuberculosis. Unsustainable pressures on water tables, food supplies, and waste disposal (exacerbated by huge number of equines, hogs, and cattle required for military operations) unleashed outbreaks of cholera, diarrhea, dysentery, and typhoid. Typifying what occurred under such circumstances, more Union troops died at Franklin, Tennessee during their spring 1863 fortification and occupation (almost entirely from typhoid, pneumonia, and diarrhea/dysentery) than died during the 1864 Battle of Franklin. No demographic suffered more than the very old and young in contraband camps. In his seminal work *Sick from Freedom*, Jim Downs finds that many contraband camps saw one of every four occupants succumb to illness and exposure. Specters of death and desolation seemed magnified by the widespread clearcutting and trenching that fortification required. An Ohio soldier said of fortressed area outside Washington, "For miles, every tree which lined the beautiful hills, has been cut down…There are thousands of acres of timber thus destroyed."[5]

Yet over time, Federal fort systems gained distinctive advantages. All fortifications were essentially large construction projects. Once defensive works were in place, the infrastructure-rich US government was able to serve and supply their networks far better than the Confederacy. While places like Richmond, Mobile, and Atlanta experienced bread riots as soon as 1863 (with residents trapped in Vicksburg suffering far worse), Union held areas like Louisville, Memphis, Natchez, and New Orleans saw disease rates and supply shortages steadily abate. Supplied by secured roads, rivers, and rail lines connected to the North, and serviced through a dominant advantage in steam and draft animal power, slave societies under Union fortification experienced commerce and communications that exceeded prewar levels. For Southern whites who took loyalty oaths during the war (with the majority within US fort systems doing so), occupation also brought boards of trade supplying lines of credit in the millions of dollars. Federal mail service, national newspaper access, church services, and the introduction of US Treasury notes further aided survival and security. By late 1863 the US military established fire departments with steam engines, hand-pump wagons, plus hook-and-ladder companies in Chattanooga, Knoxville, and Nashville. By March 1864, the US government contracted over 15,000 civilian employees in Nashville alone, a number nearly equal to the city's total population in 1860.[6]

[5] Paul S. Paskoff, "Measures of War: A Quantitative Examination of the Civil War's Destructiveness in the Confederacy," in *Civil War History* 54 no.1 (January 2008): 35-62; Ohio soldier quoted in "Editorial Correspondence," *Elyria Independent Democrat* (Elyria, OH), June 4, 1862; Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4-6, 36, 69, 194 .

[6] Quartermaster J.L. Donaldson to Montgomery Meigs, June 30, 1865, *O.R.*, I, 52, pt. 1, pp. 684-9.

Notably, most of the war's one-thousand-plus forts did not experience direct combat for the entirety of their existence. Today, wayside signs of such sites almost lament this lack of trial by fire. Their synoptic histories frequently end with statements like "saw no action," suggesting that the respective strongholds played a marginal role during the war. Such interpretations long reflected professional historiography on fortifications, and still does reflect the general public's view of these thousand-plus structures. Through a pervasively battle-centric lens, observers often overlook all but the pathos-laden places like Fort Sumter, Forts Henry and Donelson, and Battery Wagner (Wagner itself being long lost to nature), thus missing the central point. The prevention of combat and the stabilization of an area were the very purposes of these structures. Thus, especially in the case of Federal works, Civil War forts were largely successful in their primary objective. A poignant example occurred during the late 1864 Battle of Nashville. Facing seven large forts, miles of trenches, nearly two miles of open ground, and thousands of embedded Federal Troops, John Bell Hood could not bring himself to attack. Nashville's Union defenses utterly dwarfed the hasty trenches Hood and the Army of Tennessee faced two weeks before at Franklin, and that assault that cost the South 2,000 dead in five hours. On December 15, black and white Union troops left their defenses and crushed the freezing and hungry Confederates. So stable and well protected was Nashville itself, that during the entire two-day fight, businesses remained open, and circus performances and plays in the city went on as scheduled. As much as secessionists complained about conditions under Union occupation, they profited far more than their compatriots in Confederate fortified areas, because they had access to Northern resources. Union fortified areas worked because three groups that were otherwise in direct opposition to each other – Federal combatants, Confederate civilians, and escapees from enslavement – had to work together to protect themselves from open warfare.[7]

Coastal Fortifications

It is difficult to overstate the importance of sea fortifications in the 19th-century federal mindset, other than to say that the US Congress appropriated hundreds of thousands of dollars per annum before, during, and after the war to sustain and improve Third System forts from Eastport, Maine to San Francisco, California. This attention intensified significantly after the loss of Fort Sumter. The same could be said of the Confederacy, as both sides soon realized that every southern port instantly became a secessionist lifeline to the outside world.

[7] Open circus, plays, and businesses in Nashville during the Battle of Nashville from *Nashville Daily Union*, December 16, 1864; *Nashville Daily Union*, December 17, 1864.

In historiography, the centerpiece of this subject has been Major General Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan. While the debate continues over the effectiveness of this blockade operation, the general focus has been on naval operations. Arguably the more important facet involved coastal fortifications themselves. Before either side could ramp up vessel production or conversion to impactful levels, the US and Confederate armies began aggressively augmenting their respective beachheads. It was one thing to have ships attempting to run or patrol harbors, but the harbors themselves required multiple strongholds to hold onto their shores and inlets.

Charleston Harbor itself serves as a paradigm of fortifications' power. Before South Carolina militia initiated their bombardment upon Fort Sumter, they had already taken nearby forts Moultrie and Castle Pinckney as well as built more than a dozen additional forts and batteries. From then on, the "Birthplace of the Confederacy" invested the area so exhaustively, that the Union did not execute a major offensive on the port until 1863. To Union Rear Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont, it seemed as if "the whole harbor [was] ringed with batteries…like a porcupine's hide and quills turned outside in and sewed up at one end." Because of these defenses, blockade running had nearly ceased by 1864, but Charleston itself would not succumb until a joint Army/Navy operation finally surrounded the city in February 1865 [8]

Rebels similarly defended Wilmington, North Carolina, with militia securing the US Fort Caswell soon after secession. Thereafter, rebel plans led to the construction of more than thirty additional forts and batteries, including the behemoth Fort Fisher armed with over forty guns. Further demonstrating the South's success in expanded coastal defense, Mobile, Alabama was protected on the water by a small CSA flotilla featuring just one fully operational ironclad. But on the bay's islands and shores, the Confederacy built twenty citadels in addition to Forts Gaines and Morgan, plus two large defensive rings around Mobile proper consisting of three dozen additional forts. Further west, Confederates held onto Galveston into 1865, partly because of its distance from more pressing fronts, and partly from construction of fourteen coastal bastions in 1863.[9]

Elsewhere, however, the US regained losses quickly, particularly in Virgina and Florida. Having never lost Fort Monroe, Federal domination of the Chesapeake simply increased, exemplified by City Point becoming the fortified staging area from which the Army of the Potomac eventually subdued Richmond. While it is true that Tallahassee avoided Union capture during the war, it is largely because Florida's modestly populated interior held little strategic importance after the US reclaimed and strengthened its hegemony of coastal forts. The peninsula, valuable for its connections to Europe via the Atlantic and cash crop slaveocracies in the Caribbean, was home to

[8] DuPont quoted in McPherson, *War on the Waters, 141.*

[9] McPherson, *War on the Waters,* 207.

eight of the nation's Third System forts. In early 1861, the Confederacy quickly seized four of these, including three at Pensacola. But by spring of 1862, all eight were back in US possession, with dozens of smaller earthen structures further securing each position.

Between the Capitals

Historian Thomas Connelly cited the Eastern Theater as geographically designed for a military stalemate. With the Atlantic to the east, Appalachians to the west, two capitals just 100 miles apart, and a series of wide rivers laying across any path between the two, the region contained only a handful of viable paths for the warring parties to take. Each side also viewed their respective capitals as indispensable, inviting a highly defensive stance. While the Western Theater provided multiple options for maneuver, like the Pacific Theater in World War II, the Eastern Theater became a slogging standoff like Flanders' fields in World War I.

The Confederates were first to heave up basic works on the Virginia side of the Potomac, some complete with "Quaker guns" (repeating the tactic at Shreveport, Louisiana and Galveston, Texas, among other places). Federals soon followed. Excluding what would become West Virginia in 1863, Old Dominion would eventually host over 200 named forts, more than any other state. Of these, most were Union. Starting in spring 1861, Federals and African American laborers inundated Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax, and other communities southwest of Washington. Across the river in the District of Columbia itself, over fifty forts were standing by the end of 1862. Unlike the temporary defenses erected during McClellan's failed 1862 Peninsula Campaign, most of these works protecting the capital stood for the remainder of the war. Counterfactual histories offer "what if" scenarios involving the CSA capturing Washington. Certainly, the shock loss at First Manassas in 1861, the first day's success of the CSS Virginia (Merrimack) at Hampton Roads in 1862, and Lee's Gettysburg Campaign in 1863 caused real fear among residents in and around D.C. Lincoln himself burdened Union generals repeatedly to pursue Confederates in the Eastern Theater yet never leave Washington exposed. What is true however is that the US capital never came close to capturing what had become by late 1862 the most fortified city in the world. So stalwart were its defenses by 1864 that Lincoln felt secure enough to watch firsthand Jubal Early's 1864 assault on its outer forts.[10]

Concurrently, the same could almost be said of Richmond. For the Confederacy to keep the Armies of the Potomac and the James at bay for as long as it did can be contributed mostly to geography, the Army of Northern Virginia, and extensive fortifications. Defenses around Richmond and Petersburg eventually included over thirty forts connected by rows of trenchworks,

[10] James H. Bruns, *Crosshairs on the Capital: Jubal Early's Raid on Washington, D.C., Reasons, Reactions, and Results* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2021), ix-xii.

much of which is still visible. By 1864 Richmond's defenses stretched thirty-five miles and held off the largest army then on earth for nine months. The Petersburg Campaign remains the longest siege in US military history.[11]

Fortifications in the Western Theater

Concerning self-emancipation, environmental impact, and defeat of the Confederacy, fortification played its largest role in the region where most Southerners free and enslaved lived, where a majority of battles occurred, and where Federal forces regained the most territory. While the Army of the Potomac conquered part of Virginia during the course of the war, the Army of the Cumberland, the Army of the Ohio, the Army of the Tennessee, and others subdued thousands of square miles and virtually every other seceding state. In the vast regions west of the Appalachians, fortifications were decisive, but neither side invested substantially until well after Sumter.

For the Confederacy, miscalculation, miscommunication, and sheer space plagued their western strategy. After Leonidas Polk's ill-conceived invasion of neutral Kentucky in September 1861, the Bluegrass State swung marginally in favor of the Union. The shift enabled Federal forces to capture key secessionist forts along the Ohio and accelerate their own fortifications along the critical riverway. Eventually the US would build around eighty forts in Kentucky. Opposing them in 1862 was the much-heralded Albert Sydney Johnston, who claimed to have invested Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Mississippi so thoroughly with fortifications that the region was all but impenetrable. In reality, Johnston placed so much emphasis on building up a vulnerable Bowling Green, Kentucky, that he had left Nashville all but unprotected. Aside from forts Heiman, Henry, and Donelson (the first two constructed too close to the Tennessee to avoid flooding and poor firing angles), the remainder of the Cumberland and Tennessee valleys were unfortified. In addition, lack of enslaved and military labor minimized Johnston's buildup along the Mississippi. A series of defeats left secessionists in the west wondering how much longer they had left. The New Orleans Crescent was not alone in chastising Johnston's dearth of forts along the Father of Waters, saying, "He left the main artery to the heart of the Confederacy open to the enemy." New Orleans fell soon after. Perhaps Johnston's reputation was somewhat spared by his death in the April 1862 Battle of Shiloh.[12]

Yet if the venerable Johnston was overconfident, the same could be said of the Union in the West. Victories at Forts Henry and Donelson, Pea Ridge, and even Shiloh (spun as a Union

[11] Earl J. Hess, *In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications and Confederate Defeat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), xii-xv.

[12] New Orleans *Crescent* quoted in Chicago *Tribune*, March 4, 1862.

win) helped secure major cities like Memphis, Nashville, and New Orleans. Although susceptible to guerrilla attacks, most of the critical rails, rivers, and roads of Arkansas, Missouri, and Tennessee were in Union hands. Some Federal regiments that had been in service for a few months had already reached Mississippi and Alabama.[13]

This all changed with Gen. Braxton Bragg's often overlooked grand Confederate counteroffensive of summer and fall 1862. For context, Bragg's big push northward lasted twice as long and travelled twice as far as Lee's 1863 Gettysburg Campaign. In August 1862, along with Edmund Kirby Smith, Bragg directed two great columns totaling more than 50,000 men. With brigades coming from as far as the Gulf of Mexico, the campaign retook much of what had been lost and more, with some men reaching the banks of the Ohio River. It was and would remain the longest forward movement of troops the Confederacy ever achieved.[14]

We know that Bragg's mighty offensive effectively ended after an indecisive engagement at Perryville. What is less observed is the dramatic sea change in Federal strategy thereafter. Although committed to retaking the coasts and maintaining Washington, the Lincoln administration did not look to garrison the Western Theater in volume, until the setbacks from Bragg's campaign. From then onward, spurred by wide use of African American labor and then the arming of USCT, the Union employed fortification to use the Confederacy's most valuable cities, transportation arteries, material wealth, and human beings against the Confederacy itself.

From then on, Union losses of territory were rare. The most conspicuous loss of a fortified position occurred on April 12, 1864, with Fort Pillow north of Memphis. Even in this "success," Confederates under Nathan Bedford Forrest made no effort to hold the fort and unleashed a northern outcry against the horrific treatment of black soldiers. Otherwise, extensive use of strongholds enabled the US to besiege and retake Vicksburg and Port Hudson (and with them the Mississippi River), endure nearly two months of siege at Chattanooga, keep major cities including Memphis, Knoxville, Nashville, and New Orleans, occupy Arkansas, and begin a drive toward Atlanta. In this last instance, the Confederacy briefly held an advantage, for it was in Georgia more than any place except Virginia where secessionists were able to build an effective system of preemptive fortifications.[15]

[13] Clement Eaton, *A History of the Southern Confederacy* (New York: Collier's, 1961), 89-91; George C. Rable, *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution Against Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 164-5.

[14] Bragg's record rail transport achievement noted in McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 516.

[15] John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow: A Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 86-97.

Of north Georgia and Atlanta itself, William Tecumseh Sherman lamented, "the whole country is one vast fort, and [Joseph E.] Johnston must have full fifty miles of connected trenches, with abates and finished batteries." The assessment was not far off, considering Atlanta alone stood behind several forts and around two dozen redoubts. Defenses were such that Sherman's forces moved west a portion of his force west of the city, opting to cut off supplies and lines of retreat in lieu of repeated frontal assaults. The surrender of Atlanta and ensuing March to the Sea may have ended with a scene similar to Vicksburg, as Savannah was heavily defended by a dozen batteries and forts, including the Third System Fort Johnson and the stalwart earthen Fort McAllister possessing 24 guns. The city avoided a prolonged siege when the Confederate garrison escaped, and civilian leadership surrendered to Sherman. And still, to ensure the Union keep Savannah, Sherman ordered the construction of yet more forts.[16]

Surrendering Victory

Soon after the cessation of armed hostilities, the US War Department began abandoning its fort systems. This was to have a particularly damaging effect in the Western Theater, where a number of Union strongholds created uneasy but functional cooperation between Northern troops, Southern civilians, and emancipated blacks. Into the vacuum returned the prewar authority of white property owners. Losing their protection and employment by way of Federal forts, African Americans were exposed to Black Codes and domestic terrorism, resulting in near total return of the old guard. It is unknown whether the Northern population would have financially and materially supported an extensive occupation, or whether it would have been effective, other than to point to the limited advances made during the U.S. Grant administration. Notably, though recent historiography recognizes Grant 's sincere efforts to enforce and expand Federal law concerning African American rights, historians also recognize his failures concerning the treatment of Native Americans, conducted mostly through the use of force, and forts.

It is often said that the Civil War involved over ten thousand battles and skirmishes. Far less recognized is that the national contest also involved more than one thousand forts and bastions. While pitched engagements lasted for hours and days, fortifications operated for months and years. Control of transportation hubs, manufacturing centers, lines of communication, even entire cities and regions depended on their existence. Ultimately, the Union crushed the Confederacy through a massive southward proliferation of these citadels – strongholds of earth and timber increasingly built and sustained by a population that ran towards them in search of freedom.

[16] Sherman quoted in Jeffrey A. Hill, *The 26th Ohio Veteran Volunteer Infantry: The Groundhog Regiment* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010), 445; Holding onto Savannah described in Olynthus B Clark, ed., Alexander G. Downing, *Downing's Civil War Diary: Sergeant Alexander G. Downing, Company E, Eleventh Iowa Infantry* (Des Moines: Historical Department of Iowa, 1916), 242.