

## Fort Lamar History

- By the spring of 1862, Union forces under the leadership of Brigadier General David Hunter, commander of the Union's Department of the South, were poised to launch an assault on Charleston by way of land. A Union victory at the Battle of Port Royal in November of 1861 provided the Federals an excellent staging area for organizing an attack on the city. Logistical information provided by Robert Smalls, a runaway slave who had commandeered a Confederate steamer, the C.S.S. Planter, opened the way for Union troops to advance on James Island.
- Capturing Charleston early into 1862 would have dramatically turned the tide of war in the Union's favor. The North could have utilized Charleston's large harbor and railroad connections to launch large-scale campaigns into the South's interior, potentially forcing the Confederacy to divert its eastern forces away from Virginia.
- To protect Charleston's southern flank, the Confederates, under the command of Major General John C. Pemberton, constructed a string of fortifications on James Island, extending from Fort Pemberton on the Stono River to a small fort built on the neck of the Secessionville peninsula. General Pemberton placed South Carolinian Brigadier General Nathan George "Shanks" Evans in charge of the island's defenses.
- The Secessionville fort, then known as the Tower Battery for the watchtower constructed at the site, was flanked by marsh on both sides and was built on the narrowest portion of the peninsula, which measured only 125 yards wide. Colonel Thomas G. Lamar was placed in command of the fort and tasked with overseeing its construction.
- On June 2, 1862, Union forces under the command of Brigadier General Henry W. Benham, who was placed in charge of the operation by General David Hunter, landed on the southwestern tip of James Island at the Grimball Plantation.
- A few minor skirmishes followed as Union forces began to unload supplies and organize troops, in turn prompting the Confederates to reinforce their fortifications.
- Worried that they did not have enough men to capture Charleston, General Hunter ordered General Benham to not advance on Charleston or Fort Johnson until he received reinforcements or direct orders to attack.
- Despite these instructions, in the early morning of June 16th General Benham launched a surprise attack on the Secessionville fort. This force, totaling around 6,500 men organized into two columns, was expected to easily overwhelm the Confederate garrison of 500.
- As the Union force approached the fort, they had to navigate through overgrown hedge rows and open cotton fields, slowing their advance. As the land approaching the fort narrowed, the left side of the Union column was pushed into the marsh, breaking the line and compressing the center, causing the second wave to run into the first.
- At this point, around 5:00 am, the fort's defenders were alerted to the Union's presence. As the Confederates rushed to their stations, Colonel Lamar took personal command of the 8-inch Columbiad cannon. When the Union lines were within two hundred yards of the fort, they were met with the mighty Columbiad's blast.
- Despite sustaining heavy fire from the fort's cannons, the Union forces managed to climb onto the fort's parapets where they fought hand to hand with the Confederate defenders.
- The fort's garrison was quickly reinforced by surrounding Confederate battalions, who

were able to repel the Union's foothold.

The marshes inhibited the Union army from launching a successful flanking maneuver to assist the main assault, as the water and pluff mud proved to be impassable.

- Confederate artillery fire to the Union's flank, in addition to Confederate reinforcements, forced General Benham to order a retreat. Despite the battle only lasting around two and a half hours, losses were heavy.
- The Union sustained nearly 700 casualties, with 107 killed, while the Confederates experienced around 200 casualties, with 52 killed. Most of the battle's casualties occurred either on the narrow peninsula immediately in front of the fort or on the fort itself.
- After the battle, the Secessionville fort, which was referred to as the "Tower Battery" at the time of the battle, was renamed to Fort Lamar in honor of its commander. Colonel Lamar, who was wounded during the battle, died a year later from fever contracted while serving on the island.
- By July 8th, the Union army vacated James Island and returned to Port Royal.
- For disobeying orders and losing the battle, General Benham was court martialed and demoted.
- Fort Lamar was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

## Medicine & Disease in the Civil War

For soldiers in the Civil War, the most dangerous threat to life was not gunfire but instead infectious diseases. Of the war's estimated 620,000 fatalities, almost two-thirds of this figure can be attributed to death by disease. The high rate and lethality of infection during the Civil War was due to a limited understanding of germs, unsanitary living conditions in army camps, and the drafting of soldiers either too young or too old with weak immune systems.

Furthermore, many of the enlisted men in the Union and Confederate armies were from rural areas and had little prior exposure or resistance to common infectious diseases. Some of the most widespread illnesses included malaria, diarrhea/dysentery, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis. Vaccines for these diseases were largely unavailable, so doctors and nurses depended on morphine, quinine, chloroform and natural remedies to treat their patients.

Because of the unsanitary conditions of army camps, it was easy for bacteria and viruses to quickly spread among soldiers. Inspectors in the early years of the war often described camps as "littered with refuse, food, and other rubbish, sometimes in an offensive state of decomposition."

Latrines and animals were often kept too close to the camp and the camp's water supply. Doctors frequently went days without washing their hands or equipment, passing germs from one patient to another.

Both sides were woefully underprepared at the start of the war in providing medical staff that could treat the sick and wounded. The Union only had around ninety-eight medical officers at the start of the war in 1861, while the Confederacy only had twenty-four. Most of these doctors were unfamiliar with treating gunshot wounds and performing surgery. By the end of the war in 1865, the Union had nearly 13,000 doctors working in the field and in army hospitals, while the Confederacy had approximately 4,000. In addition, each side had thousands of nurses and other medical volunteers.

The large numbers of sick and wounded in the Civil War forced doctors to rethink and adapt their medical practices to better combat the challenges of war and to reduce fatalities. Doctors began to keep detailed medical records and reports, helping to curb bad medical practices and raising awareness for effective treatments. Union army surgeon William A. Hammond created a new hospital layout that was well ventilated and more sanitary. Another doctor, Jonathan Letterman, devised an effective three-step evacuation procedure for wounded soldiers and established the Ambulance Corps. Though often referred to as "butchers" during the war for their propensity to amputate wounded limbs, surgeons typically were as careful as possible when it came to amputation. By using sterile tools and chloroform as anesthesia, army surgeons reduced the mortality rate of amputations from 46% to 15% by the end of the war. To combat unsanitary conditions in camps, the United States Sanitary Commission was established to inspect camp cleanliness.

Furthermore, the presence of women in nursing and other volunteer medical roles earned them the respect of male doctors and patients, paving the way for women in the medical field. The challenges imposed by the Civil War forced doctors and nurses to evolve their medical practices, in turn laying the foundation of modern medical science and practice in the United States.