

FORT HEIMAN: FORGOTTEN FORTRESS

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Autumn of 1861 posed a number of problems for Confederate commanders charged with the defense of Kentucky and Tennessee against Union invasion. "General A. S. Johnston, on September 17, 1861, sent General S. B. Buckner . . . to seize and occupy Bowling Green, in Kentucky, with a force of 4,000 men."¹ Johnston realized that Bowling Green could be an effective base for action to stop Union operations against Kentucky and Tennessee, since all major railroads passing south out of Louisville, in Federal hands, went through or near Bowling Green. Roads leading into the interior of the two states were generally too poor for large troop movements, or too short. The Confederate strategists thus concluded that the Union troops would probably attempt invasion via the Ohio, Tennessee, Mississippi, or Cumberland rivers. Confederate engineers had already begun constructing defensive earthworks at Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River, Fort Henry, twelve miles to the west on the Tennessee River, and at Columbus, to the northwest and on the Mississippi River.²

Federal leaders, meanwhile, had reasoned like their opponents. The commanding officers of the United States agreed that it was necessary to force the Confederate position at Bowling Green. General Henry W. Halleck, in a letter to General George B. McClellan, January 20, 1862, considered a movement down the Mississippi too early and thought it better up the Cumberland and Tennessee.³ In a rare moment of agreement, Generals U. S. Grant and D. C. Buell supported Halleck's judgment, and the three pressed McClellan for permission to set the invasion in motion. The movement began on February 1, with Grant's army, 17,000 strong, carried on gunboats and transports commanded by Commodore Andrew Hull Foote.⁴

1. Manning Ferguson Force, *From Fort Henry to Corinth*. (Campaigns of the Civil War, VII). (New York, 1882), II, 24.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 26. U. S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (2 vols., New York, 1885), I, 285.

4. *Ibid.*, 28.

When Captain Jesse Taylor, in the service of the Confederate States of America, arrived at Fort Henry, he was dismayed by the selection of ground upon which the engineers had elected to build the fort. Taylor, who learned from farmers living in the area that the winter flood waters of the Tennessee would inundate the fort, quickly appealed to General Leonidas Polk for the right to select a more commanding site. His appeal was passed back and forth among Polk, General A. S. Johnston, and state officials concerned with the defense of Tennessee. This hesitation was to prove fatal, as time would not allow the lengthy consideration of this matter by the powers-that-be.⁵

Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman, the officer commanding Fort Henry, also understood how grave the error of the Confederate engineers had been. "The history of military engineering records no parallel to this case," he said.⁶ Tilghman understood that if the gunboats did not subdue Fort Henry, nature would finish the job for the Federals. Something had to be done, and rapidly. The general thought he had his answer when he discovered a high bluff, across the Tennessee River and on the Kentucky shore, which could command and give protection to the ill-situated Fort Henry.

Tilghman sent Colonel Adolphus Heiman, commander of the Tenth Tennessee Regiment, and his chief engineer, Major J. F. Gilmer, across the river to judge whether the high ground could accommodate the necessary artillery. Both officers concluded that the bluff and surrounding high country would offer effective protection for Fort Henry. The ground was approximately one and one-half miles from the fort, and situated almost directly across the Tennessee River. They reckoned that if the heights could be fortified in time, the United States gunboats could be caught in a deadly crossfire. Too, if the flood waters of the Tennessee forced the evacuation of Fort Henry, the new fort would at least give the confederates an artillery position much more suited to the effective contesting of the passage of Foote's gunboats. Tilghman accepted their conclusions.

5. Captain Jesse Taylor, C. S. A., "The Defense of Fort Henry," *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*. (4 vols., New York, 1956), I, 369; Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. (New York, 1971), 247-8.

6. *Official Reports of Battles*, published by order of the Confederate Congress. (Richmond, 1862), I, 37; see, also, Report of Brig. Gen. Lloyd Tilghman, February 12, 1862, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (70 vols. in 128, Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. I, vol. VII, 136-44.

The Twenty-seventh Alabama and the Fifteenth Arkansas regiments were sent across the Tennessee to aid in the construction of the fort, which was named after Colonel Heiman. They set about digging rifle pits and building abatis. They also set about building platforms on which the artillery, brought across the river by steamers, would be mounted. Tilghman was pleased with the progress of the work, and hoped that by the beginning of the second week in February, 1862, he could be able to have the guns mounted on Heiman's heights. His one concern about the strategic position of the fort was that it was on the Kentucky side of the river and within twenty-five miles of Murray, Kentucky, at this time held by United States infantry. But he had confidence in his position, maintaining that,

. . . notwithstanding the fact, that all my defenses [Fort Henry] were commanded by the high ground on which I had commenced the construction of Fort Heiman, I deemed it proper to trust to the fact that the extremely bad roads leading to that point would prevent the movement of heavy guns by the enemy, by which I might be amazed.⁷

Fort Heiman was, then, defended against infantry attack in her front by her 150 foot-high bluffs and in her rear by impassable roads. It was an admirable defensive position, a marked contrast to Fort Henry.

On the third of February, Tilghman made his final trip to Fort Heiman, and was satisfied with the progress evidenced by the soldiers' work. He said, "I completed the inspection of the main work, as well as outworks at Fort Heiman, south of Tennessee River, as far as I had been able to perfect them . . ."⁸ Tilghman hoped that he would be able to place the big Parrott guns on Heiman ahead of schedule. But the whims of time and fortune were even then beginning to run against the Confederates in the west. The fort which might have stopped the passage of Foote's gunboats down the Tennessee was not destined to be completed.

"Grant and the high water approached Fort Henry about the same time."⁹ By the fourth of February, General Grant had debarked approximately 17,000 troops at Bailey's Ferry, about three miles upstream

7. *Ibid.*, 37; See also, Fletcher Pratt, *The Civil War on Western Waters* (New York, 1956), 32, 55, 47.

8. *Ibid.*, 37.

9. Charles Moss, *Forgotten Fort Heiman, Land of Late Victory*. (Reprinted from the *Nashville Banner*). (Nashville, 1957), 3.

from Forts Heiman and Henry. Tilghman, who had thus far been unable to move the big guns to Fort Heiman, now realized the necessity of evacuating the unfinished bastion. While Grant was concerned with the debarkation of his troops at Bailey's Ferry, the Confederate troops were ferried across the river to Fort Henry. From there, they were sent to participate in the defense of Fort Donelson. Fort Heiman was evacuated none too soon, for ". . . [during] the night [February 5th], General C. F. Smith was sent across the river to take Fort Heiman, but it was evacuated . . ." ¹⁰

Fort Henry proved to be no match for the gunboats. The rising winter waters of the Tennessee had come to the very banks of the fortification, making it possible for Foote's seven gunboats to direct their fire on a level flight into the seventeen-gun fort. The fifty-four man garrison served the antiquated guns with surprising accuracy, disabling the United States gunboat, *Essex*. But the garrison was outgunned and in an ill-protected fortification which did not have adequate command of the river:

Two of the [Confederate] 32-pounders were struck almost at the same instant, and the flying fragments of the shattered guns and bursted shells disabled every man at the two guns. His [Foote's] rifle shot and shell penetrated the earthworks as readily as a ball from a navy Colt would pierce a pine board, and soon so disabled other guns as to leave us but four capable of being served. ¹¹

Within an hour after the action had commenced, Tilghman realized the futility of the situation and surrendered on the afternoon of February 6.

When Grant's infantry occupied Fort Henry, they found only the skeleton garrison which Tilghman had maintained to work his artillery. "Guarding the rear of the retreating force from Henry was Col. Heiman and his fighting Irishmen. On the rising, sandy road to Dover, he turned and looked back to see the enemy in the fort that bore his name, the fort that he had built on a rock, but was lost for want of time and men and guns." ¹² The fortification which might have indefinitely blocked Federal penetration of the upper waterways of the South was never completed. The way was now open for the passage of Foote's gunboats and Grant's infantry. The fall of Fort Donelson was not to be long in

10. Force, *From Fort Henry to Corinth*, 29.

11. Taylor, *Battles and Leaders*, 37.

12. Moss, *Forgotten Fort Heiman*, 3.

coming. The Confederate strategists had made a grave error in the selection of Fort Henry, and they would pay a dear price for that error.

Though Fort Heiman had fallen into Yankee hands, her role in the war was far from terminated. Only one Federal commander enjoyed a period of relative peace in the fort, and his time of occupation was short. General Lew Wallace commanded the fort for a few days until ordered by Grant to aid in operations against Donelson.¹³ Wallace ferried his brigade across the Tennessee River, and marched up to join the army under Grant, encamped at that time about three miles west of Fort Donelson.

If the stay of Wallace was short and peaceful, that of another Federal command was long and turbulent.

It was the Fifth Iowa Cavalry, known as the Curtis Horse, that was to know travail and suffering at the fort on the hill. It was made up of men from Iowa, Missouri, Minnesota and the then Territory of Nebraska. In command was Col. W. W. Lowe, a regular Army officer who had trained his men at Benton Barracks near St. Louis.¹⁴

Lowe's command was charged by Grant with the responsibility of keeping Fort Heiman in Federal control after the fall of Donelson. The responsibility was to prove a weighty one, as Confederate partisans filled the country. As troublesome as the partisans were to the Curtis Horse, though, their activities were only bee stings compared to ever frequent encounters with ranging Confederate cavalry, often under the command of the feared General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

The Federals realized that the retention of Fort Heiman was imperative. Once deserted by blue-clad troops, the Confederates could turn their artillery upon Union gunboats making their way up the Tennessee carrying supplies to Union troops operating south of that point. Without these vital foods, ammunition, clothes, and other army staples, Federal armies operating south of Fort Heiman would be forced to gather necessary supplies from a hostile people. Even then, they would be pressed to meet their barest needs. Consequently, the Fifth Iowa held the fort from early February of 1862 until March of 1863. During this period, there were occurrences which have grown into legends preserved yet by the people living in the area.

13. *Ibid.*, 4.

14. *Ibid.*, 4; see, also, Lurton Dunham Ingersoll, *Iowa and the Rebellion* (Philadelphia, 1866), 441-56.

Men of the Fifth Iowa seldom left the protecting abatis and rifle-pits of Fort Heiman unless they comprised a force of several hundred mounted men. Besides the danger of bushwhackers and partisans, there were also frequently large bodies of Confederate cavalry in the vicinity. The duty of preventing the enemy from gathering in numbers large enough to invest the fort was a primary objective of the Fifth Iowa. On one occasion, a Captain Croff led a force of about 400 Federals out from Heiman with the objective of dispersing a rapidly growing Confederate force assembled in Paris, Tennessee, only about 20 miles from the fort. The Confederates, numbering about 500 men and under the leadership of a Colonel King, were driven from the town, but only after a considerable Union loss. As soon as the Federals returned to their bastion, the Confederates reoccupied the town. The Federals simply did not have enough men to hold a comfortable amount of territory around the fort. This was a problem which would plague them throughout their occupation of Fort Heiman.¹⁵

Federal cavalry units found that they were not even safe when operating in large numbers and close to the fort. On February 15, 1862, a company of Federal cavalry were sent out on a reconnoitering mission. They were only about a mile and a half from Fort Heiman when they met a large body of Confederate troopers near Mt. Carmel Church. The Federals dismounted and took refuge in and around the church. Led by a Colonel Miller, the two brigades of Confederates pressed the attack. But the fire from the church was both rapid and accurate, and when the Confederates withdrew to regroup for a new attack, the Federals successfully made a hasty retreat for the safety of Fort Heiman. Bullet holes in the walls of the church were for many years reminders of the sharp action which took place there. A new structure was built about 50 years ago on the foundation of the old church.¹⁶

On May 5, 1862, Major Schaefer of the Fifth Iowa was sent toward Paris, Tennessee with a body of about 300 horsemen to dispute a rumored Confederate invasion of that town. The Federals, apparently feeling that their numbers guaranteed safety from attack, did not bother to send ahead riders as scouts. For their lack of caution, the group paid the price of a deadly surprise. The Seventh Tennessee Regiment,

15. E. McLeod Johnson, *A History of Henry County Tennessee*. (N. P., 1958), 86-87.

16. *Ibid.*, 85-86.

mounted and under the command of Colonel John G. Ballentine, fell upon the unprepared Federals with every advantage, inflicting many casualties and taking close to 100 captives.¹⁷ A surviving member of the Federals had this to say:

I looked up and we were being attacked by probably a thousand men, the major was not present so I gave the order to retreat across the bridge. The enemy was upon us their shotguns and rifles blazing away, and we had only sabres and pistols. We fled in wild disorder.¹⁸

The Confederates could keep the United States cavalry from straying too far from the fort, but the gray-clad soldiers never attempted an assault upon the fort itself. While the Fifth Iowa might be very vulnerable to a successful attack once outside the confines of the fort and the range of her light artillery, when inside her defenses the Federals apparently had little to fear. The commanding position, crowned with abatis and long lines of rifle-pits, afforded protection both from land and water assaults. While Fort Henry lay unoccupied and often partially covered by water, Fort Heiman proved her worth as an admirable base for both offensive and defensive operations. Her owners might be defeated on open battlefields, but found safety within the fort's works. The Federals could be stung, but not destroyed.

The Fifth Iowa was stung by one man in particular. An assorted set of legends still persist about his activities against the Federals at Fort Heiman. His name was Jack Hinson, and he was a man who had good reason to hate the Yankees. Colonel W. W. Lowe, commander at Heiman, had hung Hinson's two sons on a charge of bushwhacking. In revenge:

. . . Jack Hinson would kill enough men in blue from ambush to hold a fort or fill a gunboat crew. Old man Hinson, with his long rifle, became a gory legend whose reality was written in the notches on his gun. He knew every trail and spring, every hill and valley, in the river country. Many a Yankee soldier on patrol died in the middle of a sentence or a syllable. And by the time he'd slumped to earth . . . an old man in the brush would move away without a sound.¹⁹

He often built blinds on the banks of the Tennessee, and when the steamers came near, he would pick off the ship's pilot or some other

17. *Ibid.*, 112-13.

18. Charles C. Nott, *Sketches of the War*. (New York, 1865), 103-104.

19. Moss, *Forgotten Fort Heiman*, 5.

✓ officer. His rifle, now in the hands of Mr. Ben Hall McFarlin of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, weighs seventeen pounds and seven ounces and has thirty-six notches on the stock. Though Lowe offered a large reward for his capture, Hinson escaped every search party dispatched by the Fifth Iowa during their stay.²⁰

War is not all death, tragedy, and hatred. There were some humorous experiences which the Fifth Iowa enjoyed while at Fort Heiman. A legend persists among those living near the old fort about a youth known simply to history as "John," and his horse, "Red Buck," supposedly the fastest horse in the State of Tennessee. One night the horse was taken by the Federals while its master slept, and became the property of a proud Yankee captain at Fort Heiman. Unknown to the Yankees, the former master was a Confederate partisan who was determined to regain his horse.

John's opportunity came unexpectedly one day while scouting with several other Confederate partisans. They came across a group of Yankees escorting a young woman. Firing their pistols, the Confederates charged the horsemen who rapidly retired leaving the woman at the mercy of John and his associates. The lady, under questioning, turned out to be the wife of the Yankee captain who had stolen his horse. They had just been married only two weeks, she explained, and she was living at New Concord, Kentucky, about five miles northwest of Fort Heiman. A messenger was sent to her husband, explaining that John regarded the return of his horse as a fair exchange for the captain's bride. A meeting was arranged, and both parties went away satisfied with the trade.²¹

The stay of the Fifth Iowa ended on March 6, 1863. It had been a generally bleak year for the Federals at Fort Heiman. They had never dared venture from the fort without risking the non-return of many of their comrades. The little cemetery in the confines of the fort had grown to be depressingly large. Their only safety had existed within the protecting works of Fort Heiman. As notes from a Federal bugle sounded over the fort for the last time, it seemed likely that her rifle-pits had seen the last of uniformed men.

The gods of war decreed that Fort Heiman should once again have her rifle-pits filled with soldiers. But this time they would be the

20. *Ibid.*, 10.

21. Johnson, *A History of Henry County*, 111-12; Ingersoll, *Iowa*, 445.

butternut-clad warriors of the Confederate States of America. Protected by her towering bluffs, they were to participate in one of the most unusual military campaigns of the American Civil War. Her fortifications unoccupied for a year, Fort Heiman was to demonstrate how well she could play the role of an important barrier to the supply of Yankee forces by way of the Tennessee River. But this time, it was not the problem of stopping Foote's gunboats as it was in 1862. Rather, it was how to stop supplies from reaching General William T. Sherman and his forces operating far to the south of Fort Heiman, and the year was 1864.

In early autumn of 1864, General Nathan Bedford Forrest was assigned the duty of interfering with transport vessels loaded with supplies and headed for Sherman's army in Georgia. This was not Forrest's first attempt to separate Sherman from his supply bases, but it was to be one of the greatest successes of his military career. By the sixteenth of October, he had left his Mississippi headquarters and headed for West Tennessee. He had with him about 3,500 men and a battery of artillery under Captain John Morton.²²

By the twenty-fourth of October, he turned toward the Tennessee River, considering that river as vital in the supply system of Sherman. He turned north toward the Kentucky-Tennessee state line and "the once active but by this time neglected neighborhood of Fort Heiman on the left bank of the river. . . ."²³ General Abraham Buford, second-in-command to Forrest on the expedition, was sent ahead to plant artillery batteries at Fort Heiman, and at Paris Landing, Tennessee, 20 miles below Fort Heiman. In addition to Morton's light field artillery, two twenty-pound Parrott guns had been brought up by rail from Mobile and placed at Fort Heiman.²⁴

From the heights of the fort, the gunners let several tempting targets slip by that day because their officers deemed them empty ships returning down river to take on a new load of supplies. Because the Tennessee River flows north at this point, "upriver" is south. "The next morning, [October 28] about half past eight, the transport

22. Robert Selph Henry, *"First With the Most" Forrest*. (Indianapolis, 1944), 369-71.

23. *Ibid.*, 371.

24. Andrew Nelson Lytle, *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company*. (New York, 1931), 345-56.

Mazeppa, heavily laden and with a barge in tow, churned into sight. They let her pass the first battery . . . then the middle battery opened on her. The Parrotts followed."²⁵ In a very short time, the ship's machinery was disabled, and she drifted to the opposite shore. One of Forrest's men dove into the Tennessee and swam to the helpless vessel. The naked man, a few minutes later, accepted the surrender of the vessel from her dumbfounded captain.

From Fort Heiman's bluffs came great volleys of cheers. The fort had passed its first test, though others would follow. As the *Mazeppa* was towed back, the soldiers on the banks grew playful. When General Buford inspected the boat, he found it to be laden with flour, shoes, hardtack, blankets, axes—and one bottle of red whiskey.

The boys called to him not to drink it all, but to save them some. The Kentucky general shook his head—"Plenty of meat, boys, plenty of hardtack, shoes, and clothes—all for the boys, but just enough whiskey for the general."²⁶

Buford's men quickly unloaded the *Mazeppa* and set her afire. Preparations were rapidly made for the imminent duel with the expected avenging gunboats. The guns were masked and cavalymen were posted behind the high bushes along the river bank.

Early the next morning, the Confederate artillerists thought they had an easy target in the steamer *Anna*. But Buford wanted to capture her uninjured, and the steamer's captain agreed to surrender without a fight. But just as the jubilant gunners ran to the banks of the Tennessee to greet their supposed captive, she sharply turned down stream and steamed full speed ahead to Paducah. The gunners scrambled up the bluffs to their weapons as rapidly as possible. But they were not in time. But next time, there would be no such treachery.

A short time later, the gunboat *Undine*, mounting eight 24-pounder brass howitzers, was sighted by a small Confederate battery located about 600 yards upstream. The battery opened fire on the *Undine*, but the gunboat managed to slip by the gunners, and was met a few minutes later by the well-positioned Parrotts on Heiman's bluffs. The boat was caught in a deadly crossfire. "Nearly the entire crew lay dead, or wounded around the guns when the boat was captured."²⁷ Another

25. Lytle, *Bedford Forrest*, 346.

26. Henry, "*First With The Most*," 372.

27. Johnson, *A History of Henry County*, 89.

transport, the *Venus*, attempted to run by Fort Heiman's guns and suffered heavily. She was also captured when the *Undine* surrendered. The gunboat *Tawab*, intent on the rescue of the damaged Federal boats, found the fire from Fort Heiman too severe and was forced to retire out of range of the fort's guns.²⁸

After the battle at Fort Heiman, Forrest decided to organize a Confederate Tennessee River Navy. He repaired the *Undine* as best he could, and placed the two twenty-pound Parrotts from Fort Heiman on the *Venus*. Before his soldiers could agree to serve on the boats, Colonel William Dawson made Forrest promise that, "if we lose your fleet and come in on foot, you won't curse us out about it."²⁹ Actually, Forrest only wanted to use the two boats as a diversion to bring the Federal gunboat fleet at Johnsonville, Tennessee out of its harbor while his cavalry raided the town. Though Forrest's gunboats were indeed sunk, the diversion, and for that matter the entire campaign, was highly successful.

. . . Forrest with a force of three thousand men, cavalry and artillery, boldly attacked transports and gunboats and concluded his operations in that quarter by the total destruction of the immense depot of supplies. He said himself that he captured and destroyed . . . four gunboats, fourteen transports, twenty barges, twenty-six pieces of artillery . . . a money value of over six million dollars. He captured 150 prisoners while his own loss was two killed and nine wounded. Altogether, this was one of the most remarkable campaigns of the whole war. . . .³⁰

Forrest proved that with a minimum of artillery, Fort Heiman was well-enough situated to fight the Federal gunboats on even terms. Perhaps if the fortifications had been completed before Foote's gunboats attacked Fort Henry, a very different fate might have developed for the Confederates in that theater of the war. The fort, though, was to have her natural advantages recognized by perceptive men on both sides in the struggle. As it was, her fortifications were to shelter both blue and gray during the war. A fortress largely developed by the slow yet inventive hand of nature, and now all but forgotten by the mind of man, her story is worth recording.

28. Henry, "First With The Most," 374.

29. *Ibid.*, 37.

30. John Milton Hubbard, "Private Hubbard's Notes," *As They Saw Forrest*, R. S. Henry, (ed.), (Jackson, Tennessee, 1956), 209.

When the last of Forrest's cavalry headed for friendly territory, Heiman slipped into the quiet passage of time. Her fortifications were now only susceptible to the work of nature. Foliage began to cover the raw earth, and her rifle-pits were the prey of the shifting red clay soil. Leaves, season upon passing season, accumulated in the redoubts, aiding nature in her process of repairing the scars left by man. But the passage of time was good to the old fort, and nature's work only served to enhance its solemn dignity.

The fort eventually passed into the hands of Dr. Rainey Wells, President of Murray State Teacher's College. He was a man not concerned with restoring the fort as a tourist attraction. To Wells, this would have been a disgrace which would have dishonored the old fort's dignity. And when the Tennessee Valley Authority came to the area, he could sit upon the front porch of his cabin and see the spot where Fort Henry used to be. High water did not scar or cover Fort Heiman, as it did Fort Henry.³¹

But there came a time when the old gentleman could not sit his horse and join with his howling dogs in the glory of a fox hunt:

The good professor's decision to sell Fort Heiman was not easy. However, when the unhappy fact became known around, he was besieged by real estate promoters, princes of the honky-tonk and glib builders of superlative resorts. But Dr. Wells had no idea of releasing his beloved hill into the era of the beer can and the recreation table.³²

He wanted a man who could love her as he had. That man was Albert Jackson, a man who had grown up on the river. He convinced the old man that he would care for her in the proper manner. Jackson got title of the land and he kept his promise.

Now, the old fort basks in the good judgment of her owners. She sits undisturbed by the effects of the New Deal or the Atomic Age or real estate developers. For the few that know and love her, she exists as a piece of history that almost seems relived each moonlight night:

Often the people who come to Heiman hear . . . sounds which actually are not there. It could be the whippoorwills or stray herons flying late to roost upriver. But some will swear quick cavalry commands are floating around the hill, like: "Fall in, Mount. March! By file! Draw sabres by platoons. Left, wheel! Column halt!"³³

31. Moss, *Forgotten Fort Heiman*, 10.

32. *Ibid.*, 10.

33. *Ibid.*, 10.