

150th Anniversary Tribute To The Defenders of Fort Henry

“And this excellence of practice was attained by a lot of Tennessee lads who only a few weeks previous had been following the plow, standing behind the counter, or sitting on the rough benches of an old field school-house.” – Captain Jesse Taylor, 1886

Introduction

February 6, 2012 is the 150th Anniversary for the battle of Fort Henry which took place along the Tennessee River here in Stewart County, Tennessee. Several of the men who defended it against Federal ironclad gunboats on February 6, 1862 were local “homeboys” from Stewart County, including the four cousins George Wesley Byrd (http://www.oocities.org/enlistedman/gw_byrd.html), Albert C. Brigham Jr. (<http://www.oocities.org/enlistedman/abrigham.html>), Marion McDonald Bailey, and Thomas H. Bailey. As described by their captain Jesse Taylor in the above quote and more detail below, these local lads were trained and practiced with short time before the Federal ironclads attacked. With perhaps excusable hyperbole, some historians have compared the brave defenders of Fort Henry on February 6, 1862 with the Spartans at Thermopylae, but as detailed below by Captain Taylor in his article from Lindsley’s 1886 *Military Annals of Tennessee*, none can doubt the patriotism, tenacity, and courage of the brave men who fought there that day. Peace To Their Ashes.

- Kenneth E. Byrd December 31, 2011

In *Military Annals of Tennessee*, by John Berrien Lindsley (1886) pp. 860-864

FORT HENRY

By Jesse Taylor, Jackson, Tenn.

About the 1st of September, 1861, while commanding a camp of artillery instruction (Weakley) near Nashville, Tenn., I received a visit from Lieut.-col. Milton Haynes, First Regiment Tennessee Artillery, who informed me of the escape of a number of steamers from the Ohio, and of their having sought refuge

under the guns of Fort Henry; that a "cutting out" expedition was anticipated from Paducah; that, as there was no experienced artillerist at the fort, the Governor, I. G. Harris, was anxious that the deficiency be immediately supplied; that he had no one at his disposal unless I would consent to give up my "Light Battery " (subsequently Porter's and later still Morton's) and take command at Fort Henry. Anxious to be of service, and believing that the first effort of the Federals would be to penetrate our lines by the way of the Tennessee River, I at once consented to the exchange, to the loudly expressed disapproval and wonder of my friends.

Arriving at the fort, it required only a glance at its surroundings to convince me that extraordinarily bad judgment or worse had selected the site for its erection. I was surprised to find it situated in a bottom commanded by high hills on both sides of the river, within good rifle range. The fact was at once communicated to the military authorities of the State, who replied that the " location had been selected by a competent engineer, and with reference to mutual support with Donelson." Knowing that the crude ideas of a sailor concerning fortifications were entitled to but little consideration when brought in conflict with those entertained by a West Pointer, I decided to quietly acquiesce, and to submit to whatever the fates or blundering stupidity might hold in store. But an accidental observation of a water-mark left on a tree caused me to carefully examine for this sign above, below, and in the rear of the fort, and from the result to become convinced that we had a mightier and more irresistible foe to contend with than any the Federals could bring against us. This enemy was the river itself. Continuing my investigation by making inquiry of the old settlers, I was confirmed in my fears that the fort was not only subject to overflow, but that the highest point in it would be, in the usual February rise, at least two feet under water. This alarming fact was also submitted to the proper State authorities, and elicited a curt notification that the State forces had been turned over to the Confederacy, and

that I should communicate with Gen. Polk on the subject. This suggestion was at once acted on — not only once, but frequently, and with the urgency the importance of the subject demanded— which finally resulted in being referred to Gen. A. S. Johnston, who, on the matter being brought to his attention, immediately dispatched an officer of engineers (Maj. Gilmer) to investigate; but it was now too late to effectually remedy the defect, though an effort was made by beginning to fortify the heights on the west bank, immediately opposite the fort.

The armament of the fort at the time I assumed command consisted of six smooth-bore thirty-two pounders and one six-pounder iron field-piece, manned by Co. B, First Regiment Tennessee Artillery, Lieut. Stanckievitch commanding. By Feb. 1, 1861, this armament had been increased, by the persistent exertions of Gen. Lloyd Tilghman, Col. A. Heiman, and myself) to two forty-twos, eight thirty-twos, one one hundred and twenty-eight pounder (Columbiad), five twenty-four-pounder siege-guns, and one six-inch rifled gun. We had also six twelve-pounders, but of such a "pot-metal" appearance that it was deemed best to subject them to a test before giving them position; and as two of them burst when tried with an ordinary charge, the others were set aside as useless. Much of the powder supplied was of a very inferior quality, so much so that it was deemed necessary to adopt the dangerous expedient of adding to each charge a proportion of quick-burning powder. That this was required will, I think, be admitted when it is understood that to obtain a range of one mile — the distance from the fort to a small island below — it was necessary to give an elevation of anywhere from eight to fifteen degrees.

During the winter of 1861-62 the gun-boats made frequent appearance in the Tennessee, and, coming up under cover of the island already mentioned, would favor us with an hour or more of shot and shell; but as their object was evidently to draw our fire, and thus obtain the position and range of our guns, though often

sorely tempted by the provoking accuracy of their fire, we deemed it best not to make any return.

On Feb. 4 the Federal gun-boats, followed by countless transports, appeared in the river below the fort. Far as eye could see the course of the river could be traced by the dense volume of smoke issuing from the vast flotilla, indicating that the long-threatened attempt to penetrate our lines was to be made in earnest. The gun-boats took up position about three miles below, and opened a brisk fire on the fort, at the same time furiously shelling the woods, thus covering the debarkation of their army on the east bank of the river. The 5th was a day of unusual animation on the quiet waters of the Tennessee. All day long the flood-tide of arriving and the ebb of returning transports never ceased. Late in the afternoon three of the gun-boats, two on the west side of and under cover of the island and one to the east near the fort, took position and opened a vigorous and well-directed fire which was received in silence until a loss of one killed and three wounded induced me to order the Columbiad and rifle to open. Six shots were fired — three from each piece — and with such effect as to force the boats to drop out of range.

At night Gen. Tilghman called a council of his most trusted officers. Cols. Heiman, Forrest, and Drake, Maj. Gilmer and Capt. Hayden, of engineers, are all the names I can now recall as having been present. The strength of the Federals was variously estimated, the lowest placing their force at twenty-five thousand. To oppose this force Gen. Tilghman had less than four thousand men, mostly raw regiments armed with shot-guns and hunting-rifles; in fact, the best equipped regiment in the command — the Tenth Tennessee — was armed with old Tower of London flint-lock muskets that had done the State service in the war of 1812. The general opinion and final decision were that successful resistance to such an overwhelming force was an impossibility, and that the army should fall

back and unite with Pillow and Buckner at Donelson. Gen. Tilghman, recognizing the difficulty of withdrawing undisciplined troops from the front of an active opponent, turned to me with the question, "Can you hold out for one hour against a determined attack?" I replied that I could. "Well then, gentlemen, rejoin your commands and hold them in readiness for instant movement."

The garrison left at the fort consisted of a part of Co. B, First Tennessee Artillery, Lieuts. Watts and Weller, with fifty-four men, First Lieut. Stanckievitch and thirty men having been detached with some light field-pieces to aid in the retreat.

The forenoon of the 6th was spent by both sides in making preparations for the coming struggle. The gun-boats formed line of battle abreast under cover of the island. The "Carondelet," thirteen guns; "Louisville," thirteen guns; "Essex," thirteen guns; and "St. Louis," or "Mound City," thirteen guns (I am doubtful as to the name), formed the van or front. The "Conestoga," seven guns; "Lexington," seven guns; and "Tyler," seven guns, formed the rear line. So soon as the line of battle was developed I assigned to each gun the vessel to which it was to devote its compliments, and directed that the guns be kept constantly trained on the advancing boats. Accepting the volunteered services of Capt. Hayden, of the engineers, to assist at the Columbiad, I repaired to and took personal supervision of the rifled gun.

The gun-boats opened fire while under cover of the island, and, advancing steadily, increased its rapidity until, as they swung into the main channel above the island, they appeared one sheet of leaping, living flame. The fire, though exceedingly rapid, was very accurate. The van being now less than a mile distant, the command was given to fire. And just here let me say that as pretty and as simultaneous a broadside was delivered as I ever saw flash from the sides of a "crack "

frigate. After the first command to fire the order was, "Load and fire at will."

The action had now become general, and for the next twenty or thirty minutes was as hot, rapid, and accurate as one could wish, the advantage evidently inclining to the fort.

The iron-clad "Essex" had dropped out of the fight disabled. The fleet had hesitated, halted, and seemed falling back, when a succession of untoward and unavoidable accidents happened in the fort which restored the confidence and advance of the flotilla— viz.: the rifled gun, from which I had just been called by duty, burst with disabling effect, not only to its own detachment, but to the guns near it. Going to the Columbiad as the only effective gun remaining, I met Gen. Tilghman, and for the first time knew that he had returned to the fort, he having crossed to the west bank of the river that morning, and was, I supposed, with the retreating army. While consulting with him, a sudden exclamation of anger or surprise called my attention to the Columbiad, which I found spiked with its own priming-wire. The wire, having been too hastily inserted, was caught by the ram-home blow of the rammer, and so bent in the vent as to effectually spike the gun for that day. The Federal commander, observing the silence of the two heavy guns, renewed his advance and increased the accuracy of his fire. Two of the thirty-twos were struck almost at the same instant, and the flying fragments of the shattered guns and burst shells disabled every man at the two guns. His rifle-shot and shell, penetrating the earth-works as readily as a pistol-ball would a pine plank, so disabled other guns as to leave us but four capable of service.

Gen. Tilghman held a hasty consultation with Maj. Gilmer, Lieut. Watts, and myself. The decision reached was that continued resistance would only result in useless loss of life, and that, the object of the defense being accomplished, the only thing remaining to be done was to surrender. He thereupon ordered me to strike the colors, now become a dangerous as well as painful task. The flag-staff had

been struck a number of times. The topmast hung so far out of the perpendicular that it seemed likely to come down by the run at any moment. The flag hal-yards had been cut, but fortunately "fouled" at the cross-trees. Beckoning — for it was useless amidst the din to call — to Sergt. Jones, an old man-of-war man, to follow, we ran across to the flag-staff and up the lower rigging to the cross-trees, and by our united efforts and habit of manipulating ropes succeeded in doing that which, though I fully recognized the necessity, was the most painful duty it had ever been my lot to perform— lower the flag under which I had been fighting.

The view from that elevated position was at that time grand, exciting, and striking. At our feet the fort, with her few remaining guns, was sullenly hurling innocuous shot against impervious sides. The fleet — now within two hundred yards of the fort, in perfect security from harm — was sending, with the accuracy of target-practice, her missiles of destruction, which swept the fort from "stem to stern." To the north and west, on both sides of the river, were the hosts of "blue-coated gentry," an anxious and highly interested army of spectators of the drama going on before them. To the east was to be seen the feeble force of the Confederacy making its way toward Donelson.

In the morning we were assured that the February rise in the river had come and was coming with a boom. When the action began the lower parts of the fort were already flooded. When the colors were struck the water was waist-deep there. When the Federal cutter came with the officers to receive the formal surrender contrary to all established precedent it pulled in at the sally-port. Between the fort and where the infantry support had been was a sheet of water a quarter of a mile or more wide, and running like a mill-race. If the Federals had delayed forty-eight hours, I believe there would not have been a single hostile shot exchanged. The Tennessee would have accomplished the work — the magazine would have been flooded.

Well, the fight was over, and we, the little garrison, were prisoners of war, but our small army had been saved. It had been required of us to hold out for one hour. We had held out, by Federal time, over two hours. I had been too actively employed to make much note of time, so set down the Federal report. We went into action with nine guns. We had two more (forty-twos), but without shot or shell for them. Of the fifty-four men who went into the fight nine were killed and sixteen seriously wounded. Several more were slightly hurt. Of the Federal loss I shall only say that when the "Essex" dropped out of line I could see her men wildly throwing themselves into the swollen waters of the Tennessee; that Admiral Foote reported his boat, the flag-ship, as struck thirty-eight times; that the commanding officers of the different gun-boats, with most of whom I enjoyed a warm personal friendship, complimented me most highly on the accuracy of our practice.

This I do firmly believe, that with effective guns the same accuracy of fire would have sunk or driven back the fleet sent against us. And this excellence of practice was attained by a lot of Tennessee lads who only a few weeks previous had been following the plow, standing behind the counter, or sitting on the rough benches of an old field school-house. My personal connection with Co. B was severed by the surrender, though I heard with pride of its doing good and gallant service at Fort Hudson and again at Mobile.



Fort Henry, Tennessee illustration from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper (1862)



General Lloyd Tilghman



Captain Jesse Taylor, Co. B, 1st Tennessee Artillery



Private George Wesley Byrd
Co. B, 1st Tennessee Artillery



Private Marion McDonald Bailey
Co. B, 1st Tennessee Artillery