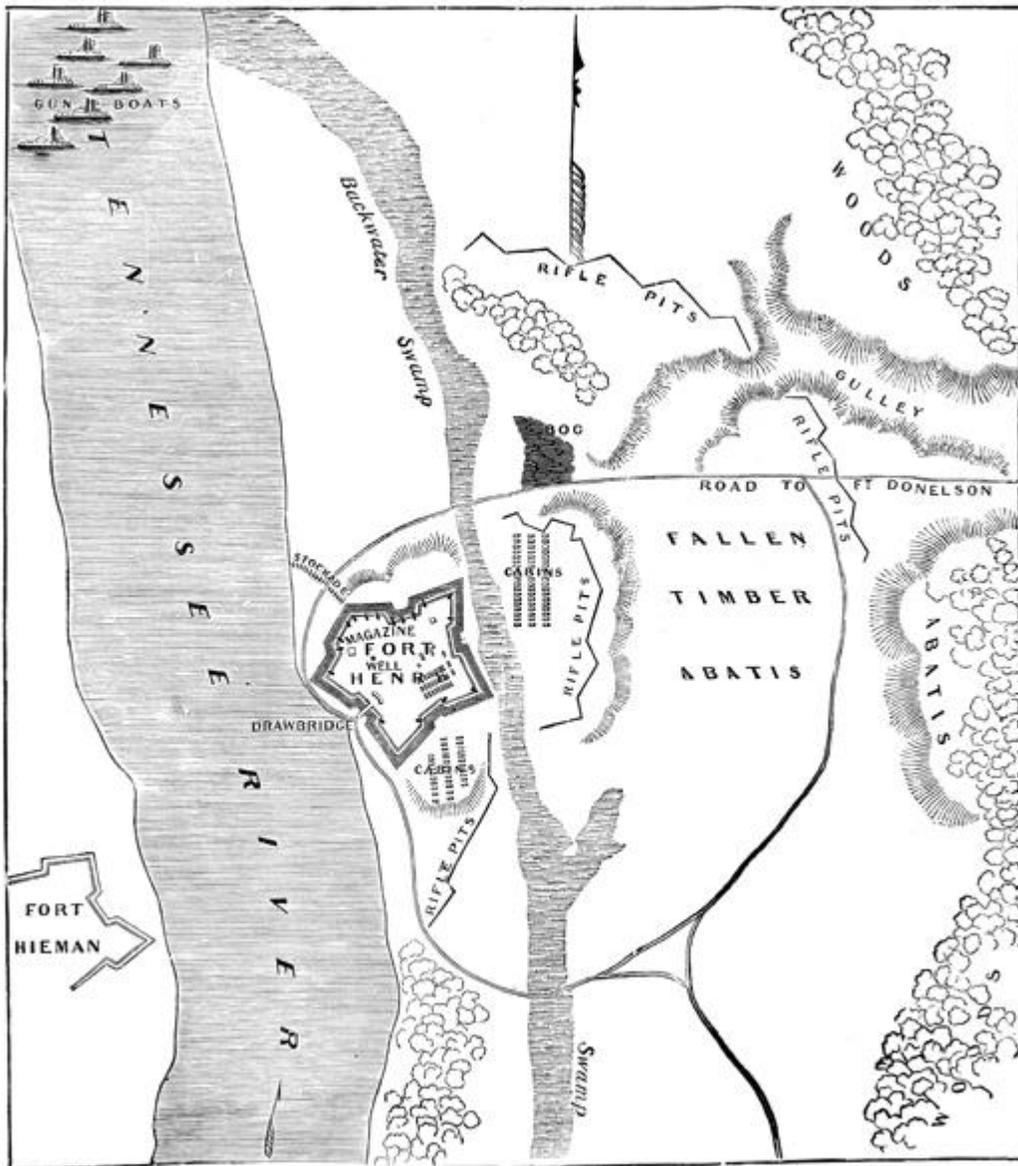


Jamie Harper at the The Battles for Forts Heiman and Henry



Historians and other astute readers will notice that the capture of Forts Heiman and Henry do not appear in the text of Harper's Donelson where one might expect them to be. In the event, Confederate General Tilghman evacuated the majority of the troops at Forts Heiman and Henry to Fort Donelson, leaving about a hundred artillerymen at Fort Henry to fight a delaying action. Tilghman remained at Fort Henry and shared the fate of the rearguard. We omitted these battles because they did not make a significant contribution to the story of Harper and his battalion. The story of this battle is told in this extract.

February 6th, 1862

Except for a collection of abandoned and runaway slaves, the over-land column of the Fourth Illinois Cavalry and the First Iowa Mounted Rifles found Fort Heiman unfinished and deserted when they arrived on the evening of February 5th, 1862. The next day they waited at the fort to reunite with the remainder of Second Division.

Expecting an idle afternoon, Lieutenant James Harper of the First Iowa Mounted Infantry Volunteers strolled around the perimeter of the fort trying to find a place where he could sit and attend to the morning's paperwork produced by Corporal Powell. He found a spot along the south-facing wall where the sun had created a dry patch on a gun embrasure.

Satisfied, he drew several sheets of paper from the satchel hanging from his shoulder and sat cross-legged so that he could watch the winter scenery of West Tennessee stretching away below him for more than twenty miles. Once seated, he drew the pencil from his breast pocket. It would be best to use a pencil for the first draft of the apology to Elder Magnusson which would get him released from arrest.

“Boss man soldah, sah. Has you gots anythin' for this niggah t' eat, cap'n?”

Harper looked up at the large negro standing in front of him. The man's clothes were dirty from his work of the previous days, but they were intact. Hardly the rags that the Abolitionists would have people believe. The man rubbed his stomach and steeped his brows while waiting for Harper to answer.

Like the rest of the column, Harper had drawn six days rations for the march from Paducah. This was the sixth day and all that Harper had left was a partial loaf and less than a quarter-pound of cheese. These were in his saddlebags back in the stabling area.

“No. I'm fresh out.” Harper turned and pointed to the command group of the Illinois regiment. “You need to ask those men over there.”

“'Bliged, missa.” The man ambled away.

Harper watched the man's back, grateful that the colonel commanding the Illinois regiment outranked Lieutenant Colonel Monroe. That made the captain who was the adjutant of the Illinois regiment the man responsible for dealing with the two hundred or so negroes the Confederates had left behind.

The slaves came from nearby farms, confiscated by the Confederate army. They were the property of local civilians. Grant's prior orders were to leave the civilian population of Kentucky unmolested and that order extended to their slaves. But no order had come for treatment of escaped slaves from Tennessee. Since Tennessee had joined the rebellion, logic predicted that there would be different rules, especially for escaped slaves or those who had aided the Confederate army. But until new orders arrived, the men whom the Confederates had left behind would have to wait for their lunch until the rest of Smith's division climbed the seven miles from the landing site upriver with more supplies.

"Mister Harper, sir." It was Corporal Powell, Harper's assistant in the adjutant office. "Ya might want to come watch this." Powell pointed across the fort to the gun ports.

"What is it?"

"Sir, it looks like the Navy is gettin' ready to attack the fort."

"That was the plan all along. The Navy moves upriver from the landing spot while the Army comes up overland."

"Yes, sir." Powell looked back at the parapet. "I think the Navy is ready but the Army is still a ways away."

"Really?" It seemed that Grant's plan for the Army and Navy to cooperate might be coming apart. Or the Navy might be trying to steal a victory. Either way, Harper's curiosity was up and a naval gun battle would certainly be more interesting this afternoon than writing an apology a Quaker minister in Salem, Iowa.

From their vantage point above the river, the men of the advanced expedition watched the Battle of Fort Henry unfold on the river below them. They could see the layout of the fort among the mudflats across the river quite clearly. As a result of mid-Winter floods, water now filled the ditch in front of the walls of the star-shaped fort, providing a moat to further protect the occupants. Its Water Gate was already partially submerged.

The Tennessee River circled Henry's mudflat on the south, west, and north sides. Flooded marshland restricted access from the east to a single track, elevated on a causeway, leading from the fort up a bluff to the main Confederate barracks to the east. The wood for those buildings had come from a ring of cleared timber surrounding the barracks compound and reaching about a mile beyond the field works surrounding the

barracks. The horsemen at Fort Heiman could see how the position of Fort Henry gave the Confederate gunners an excellent firing range down-river. The Tennessee River curved nearly due north for several miles after it passed Fort Henry.

Five miles lower on the river and beyond the range of Henry's guns, riverboats landed Federal troops and supplies on both banks of the river. The woods on the eastern shore of the Tennessee River hid the movement of First Division's brigades from the men at Fort Heiman, but occasional rifle smoke rising through the trees on that shore showed where McClelland's lead skirmishers fought. No one opposed the march of Second Division on the western shore.

By the time Harper found a place among the other soldiers on the glacis of the unfinished fort, seven gunboats had taken position alongside a narrow island in the middle of the river. Flag-Officer Foote's gunboat flotilla formed in two lines abreast, four ironclads formed the first line followed by three timberclads. The ironclads were easily distinguished even from a distance by their unusual appearance. No such craft had ever before traveled on the Mississippi or its tributaries. They appeared more like floating gun emplacements than proper boats. Each had a small fore deck and after deck, like a normal boat, but the middle of each consisted of four sloped, black walls, broken only by the gun ports and covered by a metal-plated superstructure deck. The exterior bulkheads, dark in the sunlight and covered with iron plate, extended beyond the gunwales.

When the flotilla moved closer, the men watching could see the two boats on the eastern end of the front line, *Carondelet* and *Saint Louis* had lashed together. Some of the men made a joke about the Navy having to tow a boat into battle, but Captain Charlie Matthews, a former riverman, enlightened them. Because the river channel here was so narrow, he surmised that the captains of the two boats decided to lash them together to avoid colliding or grounding.

When the flotilla cleared the long, narrow island in the river, the flagship *Cincinnati* fired the opening round from the center of the front line, followed quickly by the guns from all seven of the Union vessels. Nine guns responded from Fort Henry.

Fort Henry had just eleven guns that could be brought to bear on ships moving southward, up-stream, while six more could be used against boats coming down-river or abreast of the fort. Of those facing the gunboats, only one black-barreled rifle and one enormous Columbiad were of modern design. The other nine guns were smoothbores of the design that had been used aboard ships since before the last war with England five decades earlier – barely useful against ably-handled ironclad gunboats. No crews stood-at two of the larger smoothbores and there were no cannonballs stacked at their positions.

A large Confederate national flag flew from a tall mast in the center of the fort, its two red stripes and one white an imitation of the flag of the *United States*. The blue field showed a circle of stars for thirteen states of the Confederacy.

Initially, Confederate fire was on target with solid shot from the smoothbores denting or shattering pieces of iron plating on the gunboats and occasionally flying through an open port. The shots from the rifled gun penetrated the armor plating and followed through into the vessels, while those from the Columbiad gun battered the plating on the gunboats, sometime bouncing high into the air, but occasionally penetrating through into the interior of the ship.

The Navy brought sixteen guns to bear from their forward-facing gun ports: eleven from the ironclads in the front row and five from the fore decks of the timberclads behind them. Their guns slowly and steadily dismantled the walls of the earthen fort and its sand-bagged gun ports but the Confederate gun crews continued to fire furiously.

Navy paddlewheels left bright, foaming, white wakes in the brown water while the gunboats closed the range against the strong river current. Each ironclad suffered multiple hits, damaging much of their topside structure and exposed small boats in addition to their iron plating.

Fort Henry had become a shambles. In some places, the earthen casements had been shattered, burying guns and crews. One crew was destroyed entirely when a single case-shot from an ironclad exploded over their embrasure. Other gunners came to take their place, pulling away the dead and injured and re-manning the gun. An hour had passed.

WHUMP!

The men on the hills above the river felt the blast from a large explosion before they heard it. The small ironclad *Essex* on the western end of the line was surrounded by a dense white cloud and wavelets rippled around her hull. The smoke in the cloud erupted from all of the gun ports and many other smaller openings in the iron plating of the ship.

“A boiler hit,” Charlie Matthews said. “That’s the only thing which could do that.” The other officers stared in silence at the cloud of steam forming around the helpless vessel. “A lucky shot must have got and hit the ship’s boiler.” Matthews made the Sign of the Cross. “Poor bastards.”

Men crawled through the gun ports and dove into the river to escape the horror of live steam filling the inside of the vessel.

The shock of the explosion caused a momentary pause in the battle. Stunned at the effect of the Confederate fire, both sides watched the drama unfold around the stricken ironclad, every man on either side knowing the fates of the men caught inside *Essex*. The little ship slowed to a stop and drifted down river in the current. Those watching from Fort Heiman could hear the Confederate gun crews cheering from inside the fort.

Steam continued to pour from the *Essex* for several minutes more. Then Cincinnati fired again and the deadly exchange resumed. Minutes later, the large rifled gun inside Fort Henry exploded at the breech killing or injuring a dozen men in its immediate vicinity and sending out an explosive report to equal that of the disaster aboard the *Essex*. The Confederates at the other guns continued their fire without pause.

The rounds from the flotilla now penetrated the shattered earthworks with ease, smashing into the buildings inside the fort. The large Columbiad fell silent. Its gun captain climbed onto the barrel to work on the primer lodged in the touch-hole. As he began his work, the powder inside ignited, probably from the heat of the barrel, throwing him under the front wheel of the gun as it recoiled.

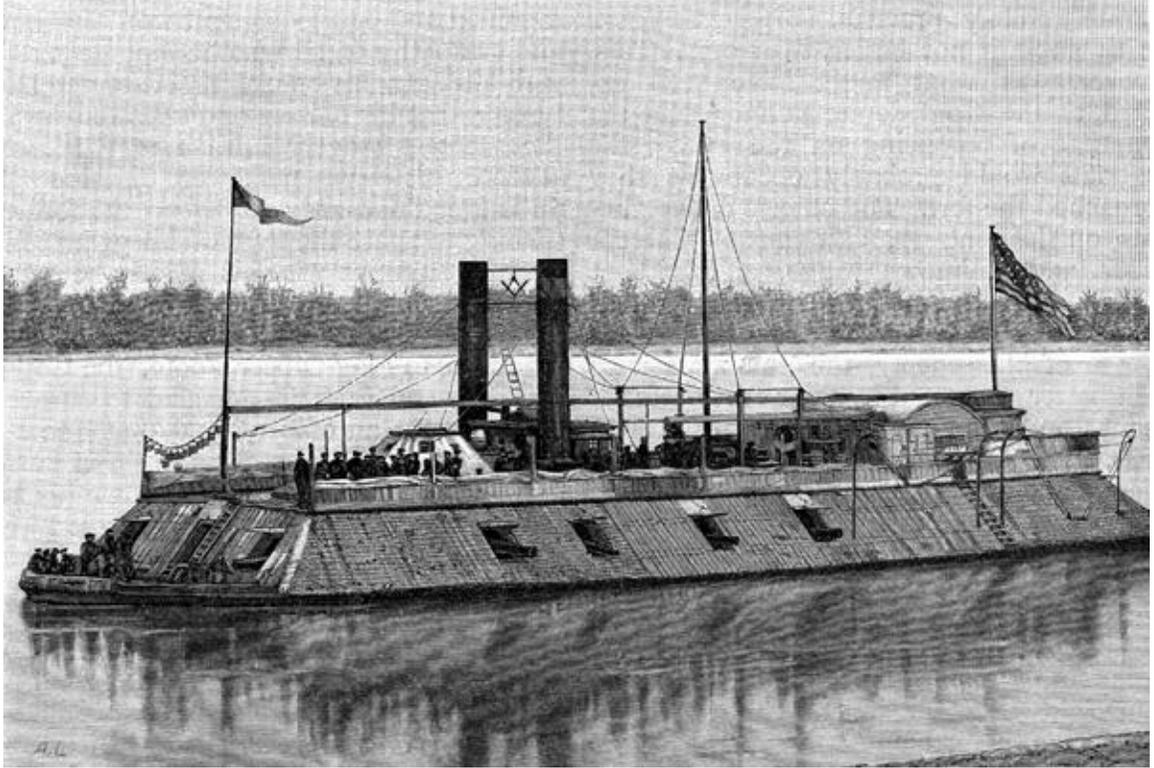
With the two largest guns in the fort now silent, the flotilla approached closer. In quick order, two smoothbores shattered into fragments after being hit, setting off nearby ammunition and killing or injuring most of the men of these crews. Union solid shot dismounted a third smoothbore by breaking its gun carriage.

The *Carondelet* and the *Saint Louis* unlashd from each other and followed the *Cincinnati* to within four boat-lengths of Fort Henry. They turned to show their broadside batteries. The increasing roar of Union fire flooded the fort with a volume of shot which forced surviving Confederates to take shelter. The fleet continued to fire at the silent Columbiad gun, eventually breaking the muzzle, then burying it with sand. Less than two hours into the battle, only four of the smaller smoothbore guns were left firing and these were having negligible effect against the armor of the ironclads, even at close range. The end of the battle was near.

The men across the river watched Henry's commanding officer, Captain Jesse Taylor, climb the flag-mast to its crosstrees, assisted by his senior sergeant. Taylor tried to clear the halyards from the broken top-mast so they could recover the flag, while the heavy firing continued from the flotilla.

Eventually the two men cleared the ropes and quickly lowered the enormous Confederate flag. Within seconds, the guns of the flotilla and those inside the fort went silent. Cheers came from within the gunboats and from the Union troops on the western bank. The battle was over. Fort Henry had surrendered to a diversion by the Federal Navy.

Two days later, the Spring flood completely inundated Fort Henry, so that only the splintered flag-mast and the outline of the fortifications marked the spot where the fort once stood.



USS Saint Louis
(Image is in the public domain.)