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SPECIAL CIVIL WAR ISSUE

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The *Journal of the New Bern Historical Society* is a semiannual publication of the New Bern Historical Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of the rich heritage of New Bern. Articles, letters, photographs, and memorabilia relevant to the history of New Bern and Craven County may be submitted to the editor for review. (Post Office Box 119, New Bern, North Carolina 28563 or nbhistoricalsoc@coastalnet.com).

THE BATTLE OF NEW BERN--MARCH 1862

Part I: Burnside's Amphibious Landing at Slocum's Creek

Mike McCulley

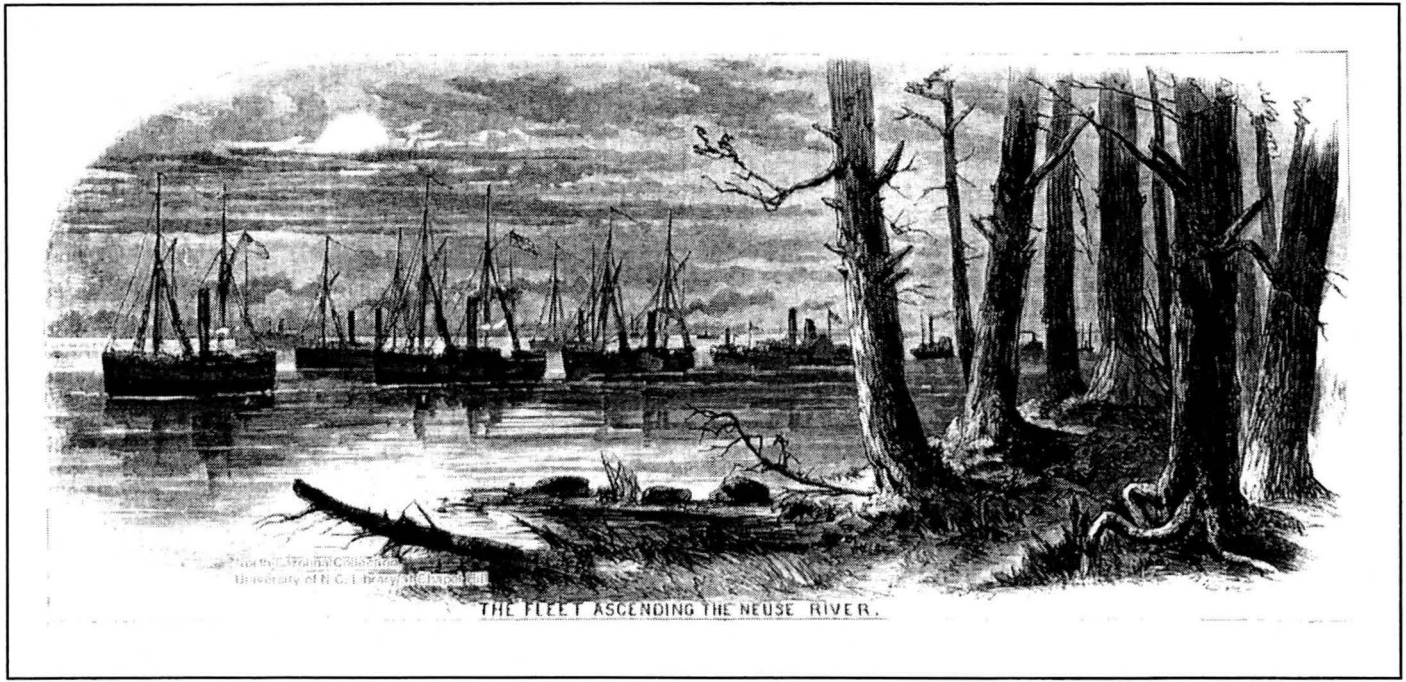
The sounds of a Civil War battle were first heard in North Carolina in August 1861. Small vessels called the "Mosquito Fleet" used North Carolina's coastal inlets to venture offshore and harass Federal shipping. A Federal attack at Hatteras closed the inlet to the Confederate raiders. With unopposed access to the sounds and rivers, the stage was set for an invasion of the northeastern portion of North Carolina by a land and sea expedition under the command of Brig. General Ambrose Burnside. Roanoke Island was captured in February 1862. Burnside's Coastal Division then quickly took both Elizabeth City and Edenton in the same month and completely destroyed the Mosquito Fleet.[1] The Federal force now prepared to attack New Bern. The 10,000 Federal officers and men got underway at Roanoke Island on March 11th and headed for a late afternoon rendezvous with 14 gunboats from the Atlantic blockade fleet anchored at Hatteras Inlet. Commander S. C. Rowan was the senior Naval officer commanding the motley fleet of shallow draft steamers, sailing vessels, tugs, ferries and barges, each carrying four to six guns. Rowan's flagship was the USS *Philadelphia* and most of the ships involved in the Roanoke Island victory were with him. [2]

Burnside's embarked forces entered the mouth of the Neuse River at around 2:00 p. m. on March 12th, halting for an hour while the gunboats scouted ahead for enemy shore positions and vessels. Burnside made his headquarters aboard the *Alice Price,* and the lead gunboat was the *Picket.* As the men later recalled, this day was one of the

most beautiful they had seen since late 1861. There was not a cloud in the sky. The wind was calm and the Neuse River looked like a mirror. As one soldier from Pennsylvania described it, "All was blue--blue overhead--blue underneath--blue all around."[3] As over 50 vessels moved up the Neuse in two parallel columns, their decks were crowded with men enjoying the journey. The scene reminded one Rhode Island soldier of "our summer steamers with excursionists."[4] The colorful signal flags flying from the ships' halyards further enhanced the festive nature of the event. Several transports were even decorated with patriotic bunting. To some soldiers, the Federal fleet "appeared more like a pleasure outing than an attack force."[5] The Federal fleet proceeded up the wide river unimpeded. Along the Neuse's southern shore were signal bonfires, warning the Confederate forces defending New Bern that they would soon be facing Federal troops and ships.

Burnside was concerned that the Confederate forces were retreating south from Manassas, Virginia, and might soon be arriving in the area to reinforce the troops of Confederate General Lawrence Branch around New Bern.[6] At Roanoke Island, Burnside used an amphibious landing to move troops, equipment and artillery ashore. After the troops were transferred to launches, they were towed in a long line behind steamers moving at full throttle. The steamers approached the beach closely and on signal released their troop launches, whose momentum carried them forward until they ran aground. The men then jumped overboard into waist-deep water and waded ashore. It was Burnside's intention to use the same technique to capture New Bern.

Information from spies indicated that Branch had reinforced the Croatan earthworks in anticipation of the Federal troops coming ashore at Fisher's Landing, about 6 miles downriver from New Bern. Burnside decided to land his army several miles farther east at the mouth of Slocum's Creek, now part of Marine Corps Air Station,



"The fleet ascending the Neuse River." UNC print.

Cherry Point. The gunboats would be used to neutralize the coastline in preparation for the landing and then would proceed toward New Bern just ahead of Burnside's forces, firing naval artillery at each Confederate fort while the Federal army assaulted the inland flank. To avoid a catastrophic mistake, a code using rockets was devised to notify the gunboats about the troops' position, when they were advancing, and whether their artillery shots were off target.[7]

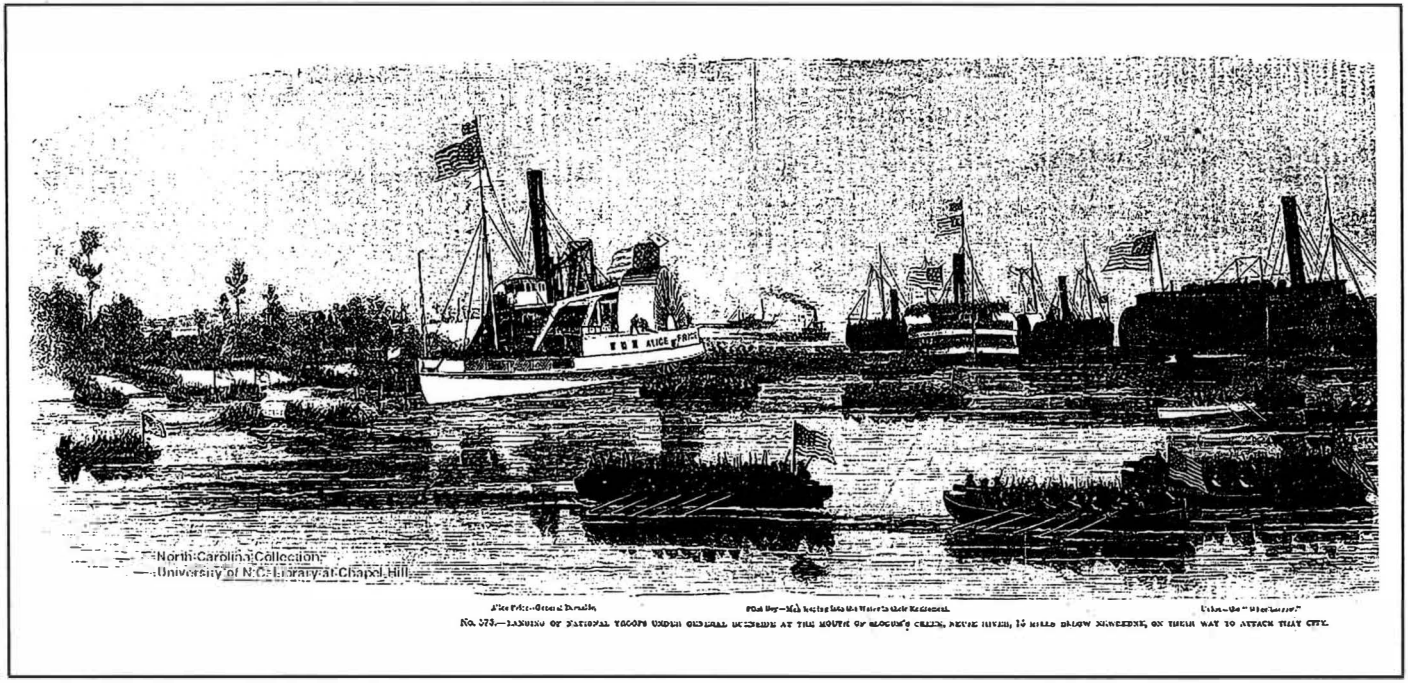
When the fleet approached Slocum's Creek, the sky turned dark and ominous. As the rain began, the transports and gunboats anchored at dusk. A premature report was delivered that Burnside had been promoted to major general and rumors quickly spread from ship to ship. Soon hundreds of soldiers and regimental bands gathered on the lighted decks in the rain, singing songs that were heard by the increasingly nervous and drenched Confederates huddled in their positions upriver at Fisher's Landing. Burnside and his commanders decided their men would be landed the next morning, regardless of the weather.[8]

On the morning of March 13th, the rain had slowed to a drizzle. At dawn Rowan's gunboats began a barrage of the nearby shoreline, which later proved unnecessary because the Confederates were not there. The transports offloaded the men into shallow draft launches that headed ashore for an unopposed landing. Two steamers entered the shallow mouth of Slocum's Creek. The lead steamer *Delaware*, with Rowan aboard, had a man on the bow sounding the depth of the shallow water. Next was *Alice Price* with the 51st Pennsylvania aboard. On her deck was Burnside, who sent a detachment of men in a small boat to reconnoiter the shoreline.[9] The schooner *Crocker*, with part of the 1st Rhode Island Artillery Battery aboard, also attempted to enter Slocum's Creek but ran aground. Steam tugs came to her assistance, but she remained aground all day and into the night. Finally, on the morning of the 14th the *Crocker* was re-floated and sailed to a point farther up-

river to offload the guns. The battery arrived too late to take part in the battle of New Bern because of the tremendous difficulties encountered getting there.[10]

Meanwhile, Rowan and his ships continued upriver looking for apparent earthworks at which to fire their large guns. Overlooking the Croatan earthwork, he first saw the line of rifle pits at Fisher's Landing, manned by the 35th North Carolina Regiment of Lt. Col. James Sinclair. However, even before Burnside's men had finished wading ashore at Slocum's Creek six miles down river, Sinclair and his men fled back toward New Bern, passing false stories that Federal troops had come ashore near Fisher's Landing. This erroneous report led Branch to order the abandonment of the more easterly and substantial Croatan line, where a strong defense would have made Burnside's advance much more difficult.[11]

At Slocum's Creek the landing began with the 51st Pennsylvania competing with the 24th Massachusetts to be the first regiment ashore. The 24th Massachusetts had been the last to land at Roanoke Island and was determined to be first this time. As their launches ran aground among marsh grass, the infantry leaped into the cold, shallow and brackish water. Once across the narrow beach, the troops climbed up steep banks and began assembling. The terrain was low and flat with tall pines climbing above a thick blanket of palmettos and briars. By mid-morning the entire force of men, horses, artillery and supplies had been landed. Wet from both the rain and wading ashore, they began their march toward New Bern. A few officers were mounted, but most were on foot, sharing the grueling march with the men. All of Burnside's regiments from the Roanoke Island battle were there, except the 9th New York that had been left holding Roanoke. Morale was high and the recollection of their recent victories spurred them on. Not more than two miles into the march through the dense woods, the 24th Massachusetts came upon some houses. The men were startled by the unearthly-sounding screech of a peacock and brought their muskets to the ready, until



"Landing of National Troops under General Burnside at the mouth of Slocum's Creek, Neuse River, 15 miles below Newberne, on their way to attack that city." UNC print.

the country boys told the city boys what had made that sound.[12]

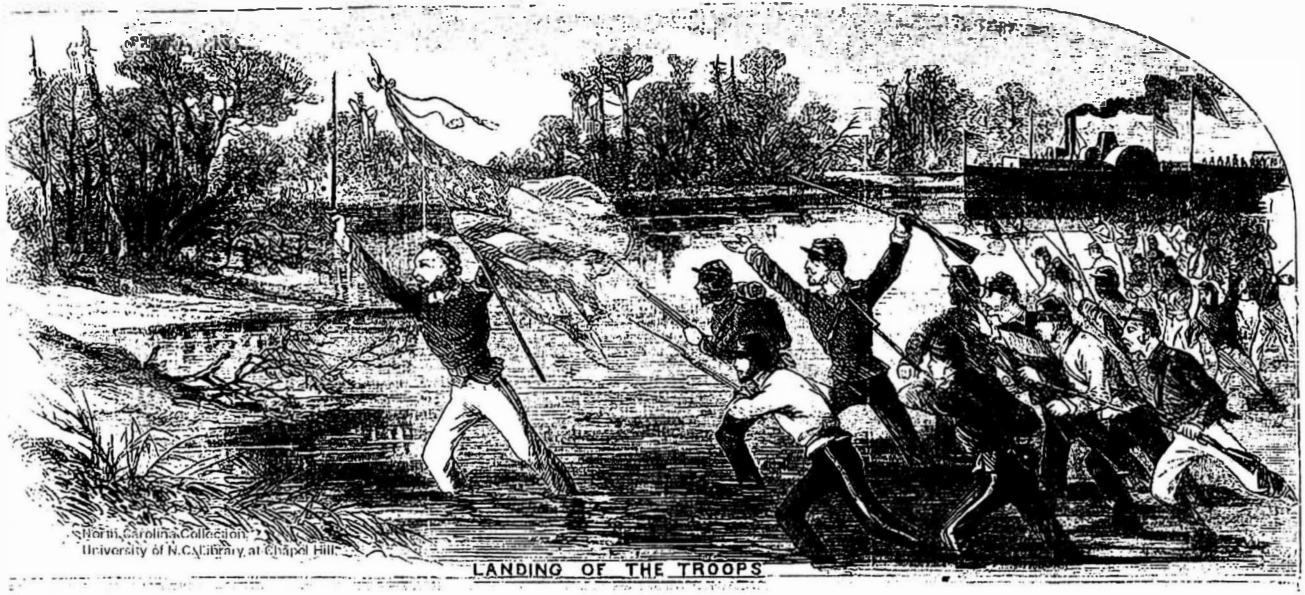
An especially detailed account of the landing at Slocum's Creek and the subsequent march to New Bern is described in the journal of Levi E. Kent, a captain in the 4th Rhode Island Regiment embarked aboard the *Wheelbarrow*. His entry for March 13th reads as follows:

> Among the first, I took my color guard ashore with the colors. We worked the boat up as far as possible through the grass and then jumped out and waded ashore, planted the colors and thus made a rallying point for the men as they came on shore. We were soon in line and the march commenced. . . . All that day at times weary and tiresome the rain falling at times heavy. Our first halt for rest was opposite a deserted farm house. The occupants had fled. . . . Lieut. Greene and I paid the house a visit. The troops before us had turned everything upside down. The furniture once nice was a complete wreck. Some few articles of food were left to which the boys helped themselves & somebody brought Greene & myself some pickles that were good. . . . The rain & drizzle wet us through. At about four (o'clock) in the afternoon we passed through quite an extended earth work of the enemy which covered the Rail Road, the country road, and terminated in quite a formidable earth fort upon the Neuse. No guns were in position except at the River but probably in a few days the extensive work would have been in shape to have given us great trouble & held us in check for a while.[13]

There was only one small detachment of Marines--an Artillery Battery from the 1st New York who brought six guns. Once ashore the 51st Pennsylvania was assigned to help move the heavy cannons through the mud created by the thousands of feet treading ashore. The Pennsylvanians called the knee deep clay-like muck "the muddiest mud

ever invented."[14] The Marine Artillery was followed by the 23rd Massachusetts who were assisting with the movement of howitzers from some of the ships. Capt. Bennett of the *Cossack* and several of his sailors, who had landed a howitzer from their ship, were struggling with the big gun, the last in Burnside's "train" of artillery. Later, when the Pennsylvanians caught up with them, Bennett, with his heavy gun mired to the middle of its wheels, pleaded for their help. Already exhausted from their own grueling ordeal, the soldiers were reluctant to lend a hand, even though they had grown to know and respect the captain from the many weeks they had spent together on his ship. As one observer described the moment, Bennett went into a frenzied rage, threatening to "blow his brains all over Carteret County" (where he mistakenly thought he was) if they refused to help him. Fearing that Bennett meant what he said, the reluctant soldiers grabbed the ropes and wheels of the gun and moved it onward. Burnside and his staff walked among the men encouraging them not to dispose of their equipment. Each man carried three days rations, 40 rounds of ammunition, an overcoat, and rubber or wool blankets rolled up and worn over the shoulder. The men were reminded that there would be no resupply until they had taken New Bern. One particularly troublesome piece of clothing was the heavy wool overcoat, which got even heavier after being soaked with rain.

Early in the afternoon, the skirmishers who had been sent ahead of the advancing column discovered the deserted Croatan earthworks and Sinclair's rifle pits at Fisher's Landing. Rowan's heavy naval bombardment had interrupted the breakfast that still lay on the tables. The other reason for the hasty departure was Branch's order to withdraw because reinforcements had failed to arrive. The Federal troops were amazed that the Confederates had abandoned such an impressive defensive position. As one man later wrote to his family, "We could have held it with 5,000 troops against all the soldiers in North Carolina."[15] Burnside called a halt to the march and rested his advanc-



"Landing of the Troops." UNC print.

ing infantrymen there. While many ate their own rations, and perhaps the abandoned Confederate breakfasts, other soldiers inspected the nearby farmhouses. A humorous scene of Rhode Islanders raiding a barnyard full of pigs quickly turned to tragedy when a soldier trying to bag some fresh pork accidentally shot and killed his own sergeant.[16]

Burnside sent out a party to reconnoiter led by his engineer Capt. Robert Williamson. The scouting party, who had run directly into the Confederate forces, followed them until discovered by patrols. Concluding that a continued advance would soon encounter another Confederate fortification, Burnside ordered his brigades to bivouac.

An interesting custom, especially during the early months of the Civil War, was for some wives to accompany their husbands on campaigns. One such woman was Kady Brownell, the wife of Sergeant Robert Brownell. She was not the typical camp follower. She trained with her husband and became an excellent marksman. She didn't expect special treatment because of her sex, choosing instead to march alongside Robert in a self-styled outfit and carrying a sergeant's straight sword.[17] A corporal from the 5th Rhode Island Volunteers told a story about Kady's soggy march to New Bern in his diary:

> About 6 o'clock a halt was ordered, and the battalion turned into the woods at the right of the road and bivouacked for the night. We were now, as we afterward found, about a mile from the enemy's line, and we were wet to the skin by the drizzling rain, which had been falling all the afternoon. We were an uncomfortable set, but the most thoroughly uncomfortable of all, seemed to be Mrs. Kady Brownell. She had started the march with a pair of ladies' ordinary walking shoes, but as these soon became saturated with water, one of the soldiers gave her a pair of calf-skin boots of a small size, which he took from a house on the line of our march. These she put on, but of course they soon

wet through also, and any one who has ever tried the experiment of marching in wet calf-skin leg boots, can readily imagine the blistered condition of her feet at night. As she sat with her back against a tree, weeping with her head on her husband's shoulder, I imagine she was sighing for the flesh pots of Camp Sprague, and thinking like the rest of us, that there must have been some mistake about the wording of the recruiting posters, which said "No Hard Marching"! [18]

At the bivouac site on the evening of March 13th, Burnside positioned Brig. General Foster on the right, across the Beaufort Road, and put Brig. General Reno on the left at the railroad, parallel to the road, but farther inland. Brig. General Parke's brigade was placed in reserve behind Foster. Most of the soaked Federal troops straggled into camp by 9:00 p. m., but the men hauling the howitzers did not arrive until much later. Some of the men tried cooking over campfires, but the majority were too tired to eat. The rain continued through the night and the troops on both sides were miserable. An often-quoted parody may have been on the minds of many:

Now I lay me down to sleep, in mud that's many fathoms deep;
If I'm not here when you awake, just hunt me up with an oyster rake.[19]

Burnside had a general idea of the Confederate defenses from the reports of his spies and numerous deserters. One Rhode Islander speculated that, aside from the landing at Slocum's Creek and the prearranged coordination with the gunboats, Burnside had no specific plan of attack. He relied on information provided on the spot by his engineer Capt. Williamson, who was dispatched at dawn on March 14th and soon encountered Confederate pickets.[20]

Meanwhile, the equally rain-drenched Confederates were struggling to extend their line of defense. Branch had

deployed four regiments in the earthworks between Fort Thompson and the railroad, but for some unexplained reason, he did not expect to be attacked along the railroad and posted only a small, untrained garrison of state militia there to guard it.[21] A creek called Bullen's Branch broke the terrain on the west side of the tracks over to Brice's Creek. Two batteries of field artillery supported Fort Thompson. The rain finally stopped at daybreak and the blue-clad soldiers awoke "cold, wet, stiff, sore and hungry," as one man recalled.[22] Burnside had his generals in the saddle at 6:00 a. m. After a hasty breakfast of hardtack and water from their canteens, the Federal troops resumed the advance at 7:00 a. m. through dense fog. Levi Kent, whose regiment was behind the 21st Massachusetts near the railroad tracks, described the moment in his journal:

> We were early in line and very soon advancing. The exact distance marched I could not tell but we were soon in front of another line of rebel works in the midst of musketry & cannon. We now (marching by flank) filed left, moving from the county road which passed through very near the center of the enemy's line of works. I was so completely exhausted that all movements were sort of mechanical. I moved more like a machine than a man & I almost feared the machine would break down. But I kept up and held together through it all for which I am thankful. [23]

The excessive moisture had spoiled much of the ammunition. Consequently, many of the men on both sides would have nothing to fight with except their bayonets.[24] Foster led the Federal attack from the right between the Neuse River and Beaufort Road. Reno's troops were west of the road extending across the railroad tracks. Still in reserve, Parke's brigade closed up near the railroad but where they could reinforce either column. Foster's brigade emerged from the fog on the Beaufort Road around 7:30

a. m. A shot from one of the Fort Thompson guns broke the morning stillness.

Kady Brownell saved the lives of many fellow Rhode Islanders before the first shot was fired. She was officially the 5th Rhode Island laundress but also acted as the unofficial color-bearer and field nurse. After enduring the march to New Bern, Kady was permitted to carry the regimental colors at the head of the column when the final advance started on the morning of March 14th. Some of the 5th Rhode Island's officers foolishly led the regiment in an unexpected direction while the other regiments in the brigade were taking their positions to charge the rifle pits at Fort Thompson. Thus, in the reduced visibility of the fog, they were mistaken for Confederates. When the Federal troops prepared to open fire on them, Kady courageously ran to the front in a clear area, waving the colors to identify them as friendly.[25] The same Rhode Island Volunteer who told Kady Brownell's story earlier, now describes those last few hours before the fighting started:

> With feeble attempts to forget our wetness and fatigue, the night wore away, and by seven in the morning, we were moving to the front again. Before starting, we were cautioned to pick out the nipples of our rifles and fresh cap them, a wise precaution, and even with this, many of the pieces missed fire on account of the dampness. . . . Soon the volleys and file firing of the First Brigade told us that the battle had begun.[26]

NOTES

[1] Richard Iobst, *Battle of New Bern* (Raleigh, N. C.: The North Carolina Confederate Centennial Commission, circa 1962) 1-2.
[2] John G. Barrett, *The Civil War in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963) 98.
[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.
[5] David J. Eicher, *The Longest Night* (New York, N. Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2001) 200.
[6] William Marvel, *Burnside* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 65.
[7] Ibid.
[8] John W. Hinds, *Invasion and Conquest of North Carolina: Anatomy of a Gunboat War* (Shippensburg, Pa.: Burd Street Press, 1998) 130.
[9] Marvel, *Burnside*, 66.
[10] Richard A. Ward, An Amphibious Primer—Battle for New Bern." *Marine Corps Gazette*, 1952: 13.
[11] Marvel, *Burnside*, 67.
[12] Fred M. Mallison, *The Civil War in the Outer Banks*, (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland, 1998) 91.
[13] Levi E. Kent, *Journal* (by permission of William Clements Library, University of Michigan), entry dated March 12, 1862.
[14] Marvel, *Burnside*, 68.
[15] Ibid., 69.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Frank Moore, *Women of the War: their heroism and self sacrifice* (Hartford, Ct.; S. S. Scranton & Co., 1866) 56.
[18] Mary L Thornton, A *Southern Town Under Federal Occupation* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1959) 3-4.
[19] Mallison, *Civil War in the Outer Banks*, 92.
[20] Marvel, *Burnside*, 69-71.
[21] Mallison, *Civil War in the Outer Banks*, 94.
[22] Sauers, *A Succession of Honorable Victories*, 262.
[23] Kent, *Journal*, entry on March 14th.
[24] Augustus Woodbury, *Major General Ambrose E. Burnside and the Ninth Corps* (Providence, R. I.: Sidney S. Rider & Brother, c.1866) 57.
[25] Moore, *Women of the War*, 59-64.
[26] Thornton, *A Southern Town Under Federal Occupation*, 4.

THE BATTLE OF NEW BERN--MARCH 1862

Part II: Burnside Attacks

Mike McCulley

General Ambrose Burnside's plan of attack to capture New Bern was relatively simple--charge Confederate General Lawrence Branch's earthworks below the town in a frontal assault. It was a bold move that depended on Burnside's men maintaining their discipline and dedication. Approximately 4,000 men manned the Confederate defensive positions. Fort Thompson had 13 cannons, but only three were aimed inland to counter a Federal advance from the south. Col. Reuben Campbell, who had been a classmate of Burnside's at the U. S. Military Academy, commanded the Confederate right wing. Burnside sent a message to Campbell, saying, "Reub, quit your foolishness, and come back to the Union Army." Leaving no doubt where his loyalties lay, Col. Campbell replied, "Tell General Burnside to go to the devil where he belongs."[1]

Col. Charles Lee commanded the Confederate left wing, comprised of the inadequately armed and untested 27th, 37th, 7th and 35th North Carolina Regiments. The artillery batteries of Captains Brem and Latham manned the fort and earthworks that extended west to a brickyard. Adjacent to the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad tracks, the brickyard was guarded by a poorly trained detachment of local militia. Branch believed that the Federal attack would come primarily from the Neuse River; consequently, no big guns guarded the railroad that intercepted the Confederate line at a right angle.

Despite several other Confederate forts located along the Neuse, the primary responsibility for New Bern's de-

fense would rest with the troops manning Ft. Thompson and its extended works. Because of his relatively small force and lack of laborers to construct more works, Branch shortened his line by swinging it back at the railroad. This fateful decision caused what would prove to be an unprotected gap in the middle of the Confederate line. A series of redans (V-shaped parapets) extending west of the railroad were hastily constructed. Branch had requested reinforcements, but they were approved too late and would not arrive in time to help repel the oncoming Federal onslaught.[2] In his report on the battle, Branch described the condition of the town's defenses:

> The defensive works were located and constructed before I assumed command. The troops under my command had performed a large amount of work, but it was mainly on the river defenses, which were not assailed by the enemy. They had been originally planned for a force much larger than any ever placed at my disposal, and I was for six weeks engaged in making the necessary changes to contract them, but the failure of all my efforts to obtain implements and tools with which the troops could carry on the work prevented me from making any satisfactory progress.[3]

The 26th North Carolina manned the line of small redans along the right wing. Branch established his headquarters with the 33rd North Carolina a few hundred yards to the rear of the line and slightly east of the railroad.

The first shot of the Battle of New Bern was fired at approximately 7:30 a. m. on the fog-shrouded morning of Friday, March 14, 1862. It came from a gun fired by an officer in Capt. Latham's battery on the Confederate line. Burnside ordered his line of battle with General Foster's brigade on the right and General Reno's on the left. General Parke's brigade was in reserve at the center, but all the Federal forces became engaged almost simultaneously.[4] Foster assembled his Massachusetts regiments in line with

the 25th Massachusetts on the right, followed by the 24th, 27th and 23rd. Parke's 10th and 11th Connecticut troops followed behind to help move the six howitzers. Parke's brigade advanced directly behind Foster's with the 4th Rhode Island at the head of the column. Capt. Levi Kent's journal entry describes his regiment's next actions:

> We moved through a young growth of pines & soon came upon musketry again. After lingering for a survey of the situation we marched along cautiously, down grade and came upon the Rail Road and within a very short distance of their works. It seems in order to strengthen his Right & Left assailed now by Foster & Reno, the enemy had withdrawn everything from his center. This was our fortune. There was nothing directly in front very near to us.[5]

Offshore on the Neuse River, Commander Rowan's gunboats had already bombarded Fort Dixie, the lowest fort down the river, and were moving into position to support Foster in his assault of Fort Thompson.[6] The lingering fog obscured any view of the Confederate positions as well as those of Burnside's troops. But when he heard the battle begin, Rowan aimed his ship's guns in the general direction of the Confederates.[7] The effect of shooting with restricted visibility was mostly psychological to the Confederates as Rowan's shells passed overhead ripping the tops off trees. However, many of the rounds fell short, to the consternation of terrified Federal soldiers. As one soldier commented, the shells "came whizzing over us and around us."[8] Rowan later wrote to his superior Admiral Goldsborough:

> Foster assaulted the line around Ft. Thompson. This part of the battle raged on at close quarters for over two hours. Foster's forces fought to a standstill while suffering considerable casualties.[9]

With his offense stymied, Foster sent a message to Burnside asking him to order Parke's 10th and 11th Connecticut Regiments into action to replace not only the 27th Massachusetts, but also the 23rd, when they began "running in every direction toward the rear." [10]

Meanwhile, Reno ordered his brigade to attack the break in the main Confederate earthwork through which hundreds of Federal troops began to pour. In spite of attempts by Branch and his staff to rally them, the inept and overwhelmed militia defending that part of the Confederate works quickly retreated from their rifle pits as the 21st Massachusetts, led by Reno himself, charged the Confederate line. Col. Avery's 33rd North Carolina was ordered to support the militia, but, although holding its own, was unsuccessful in stopping the flight of the green troops. Avery and at least 200 of his troops were captured. Branch's official report described what happened after he ordered the 33rd North Carolina into battle:

> Col. Avery's regiment . . . opened a terrific fire from their Enfield rifles. The whole militia, however, had abandoned their positions, and the utmost exertions of myself and my staff could not rally them. Col. Sinclair's regiment very quickly followed their example, retreating in the utmost disorder. This laid open Haywood's (7th North Carolina) right, and a large portion of the breastwork was left vacant. I had not a man with whom to reoccupy it, and the enemy soon poured in a column along the railroad and through a portion of the cut down ground in front, and marched up behind the breastwork to attack what was left of Campbell's command.[11]

Reno was unaware of the presence of Col. Zebulon B. Vance's 26th North Carolina across Bullen's Branch. A fierce volley of fire from the artillery and infantry of Vance's regiment met the 21st Massachusetts, temporarily

"... Final and Successful Charge of the National Troops under General Burnside on the Rebel Fortification, Their Capture, and Utter Rout of the Rebel Army, March 14." UNC print.

forcing them back.[12] As Vance, who later became the "War Governor" of North Carolina, wrote in a letter to his wife:

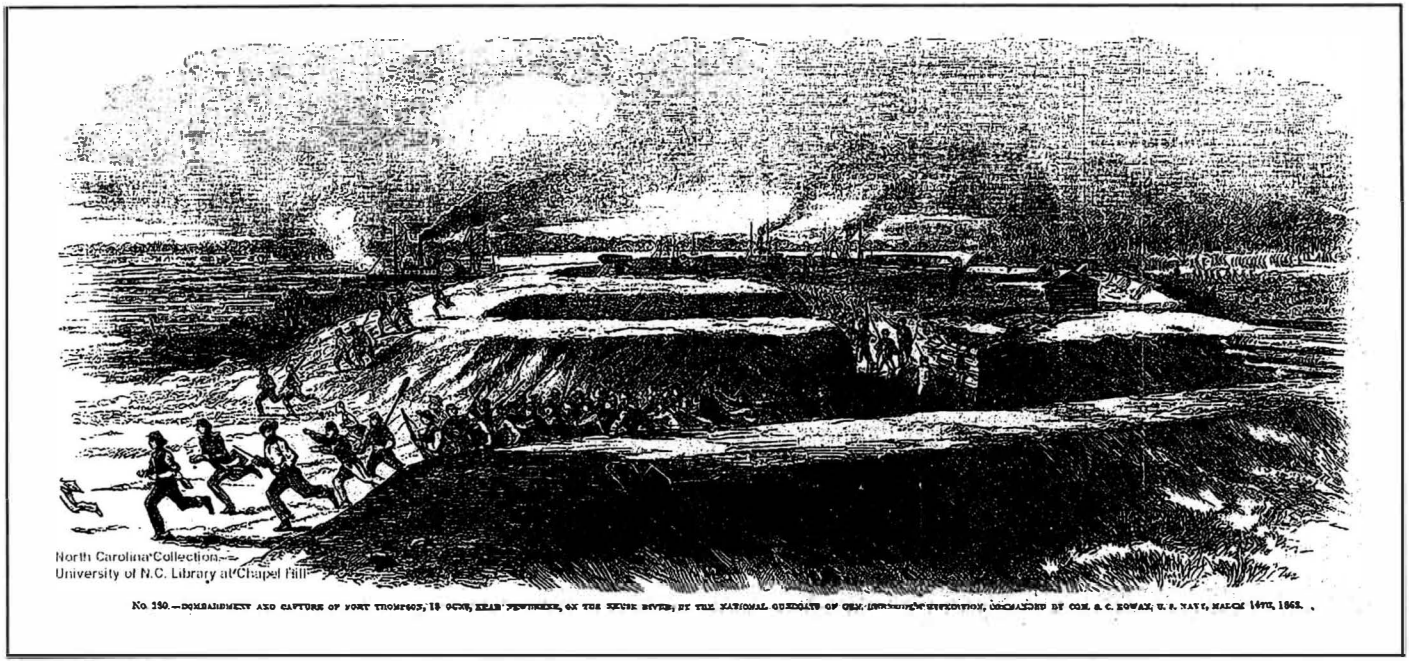
> I cannot speak of the thousand dangers which I passed through--Balls struck all around me, men were hit right at my feet--My men fought gloriously--the first fire was especially magnificent--It was a dark foggy morning and the men were situated in small half moon redans, they fired by company beginning on the left, and the blaze at the muzzle of the guns was bright and glorious--Many of the Yankees tumbled over & the rest toddled back to the woods--For five hours the roar of the small arms was uninterrupted, fierce and deafening.[13]

Burnside ordered what was left of Parke's brigade forward, with Col. Isaac Rodman's 4th Rhode Island taking the lead. The Confederate position held by the militia had been abandoned. Without waiting for orders from Parke, Rodman led his regiment over the top of the entrenchment and into a surprised 35th North Carolina. Lt. Col. James Sinclair's men lived up to their reputation and promptly retreated.[14] The militia commander Col. Clark said that "

> . . . a panic seized my command and part of them broke ranks. Believing it impossible to reform under the fire of those sharpshooters at this moment of confusion, I commanded a retreat in order, which was succeeded by a stampede of most of the command."[15]

Rodman sent a message to Parke regarding his intentions to assault. Parke moved the remainder of his brigade forward in support.[16] As Levi Kent explains in continuing his account of the charge by his regiment, the 4th Rhode Island:

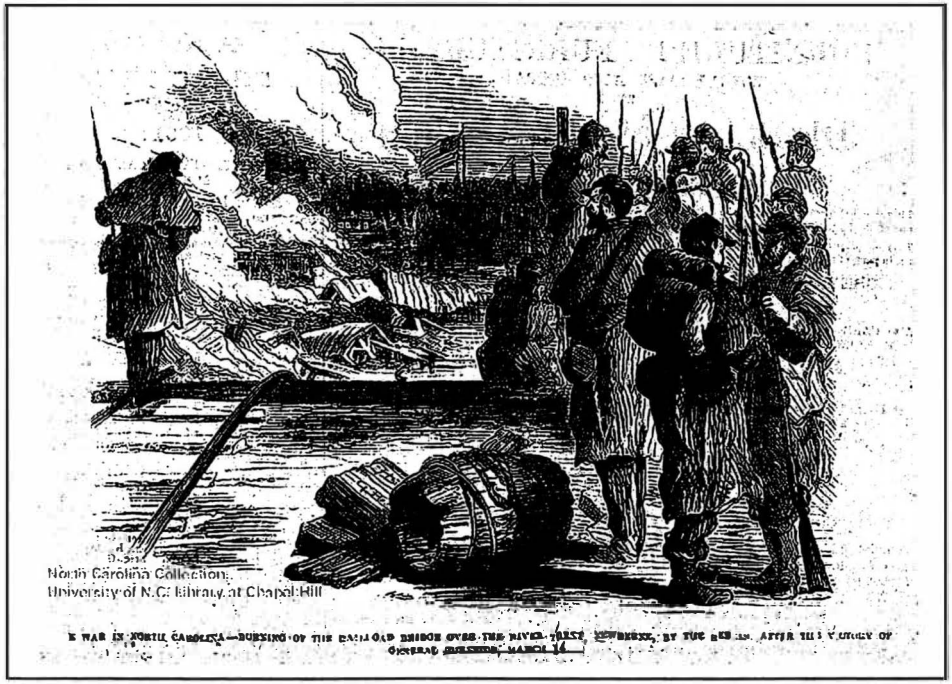
> Lt. Col Hall (I think) of the 24th Mass. came down to the R. R. from directly in front of the rebels main force where he had been skirmishing four companies of his



"Bombardment and Capture of Fort Thompson, 18 Guns, near Newberne, on the Neuse River, by the National Gunboats of Gen. Burnside's Expedition, Commanded by Com. S. C. Rowan, U. S. Navy, March 14th, 1862." UNC print.

Regt. and had been forced to retire after having gained a slight foothold (I think he said they drove them from one gun) within the enemy's works. On my own hook, joined by Capt. Buff I went up to the Breastwork & digging steps with my sword I mounted it. I could distinctly see the rebel Colors on my right on the hill & the heads of a few men. But from the density of the atmosphere (we had thick weather all day) and the smoke I could see nothing more. But their Colors I could distinctly see planted on the very line of works on which I was standing. . . . The right wing was soon over the rebel works. . . . The right was pretty well formed and the left was to work up into line as quick as possible. With the order came the yell and up the hill we went with a tiger and a yah! The rebels evidently thought bedlum was not only loose but upon them. They did not stay to receive us but their backs & heels were shown instead as they retreated on a double-double quick, through the woods. . . . On halting on the top of the hill we had formed a column by divisions and had just completed the formation when Gen'l Burnside rode into the works and up to our Regt. inquiring if we were mostly Rhode Island Troops (and) being answered in the affirmative said, "I knew it." And away he rode to prepare a new job for us.[17]

The 4th Rhode Island was then ordered to support Reno along the railroad. The 8th Connecticut followed closely with the 5th Rhode Island bringing up the rear. This caused the Confederates to completely abandon their works near the brickyard. Foster ordered his troops to advance along the entire front, joining the 11th Connecticut along the way. The now demoralized Confederates did not wait for the attack, but quickly retreated, as Fort Thompson and its adjacent earthworks all the way to the railroad fell into the hands of Burnside's troops. The rifle pits on the west side of the railroad were still occupied by



". . . Burning of the Railroad Bridge over the River Trent, Newberne, by the Rebels, after the Victory of General Burnside, March 14." UNC print.

the Confederates. The final charge of the battle was conducted by the 4th Rhode Island against the 26th North Carolina, which began a hasty retreat.[18] Branch and the bulk of the Confederates had already crossed the bridge over the Trent River and set it afire. Most, stopping in New Bern only long enough to torch many of the buildings, escaped to Kinston in a waiting train. As Zebulon Vance wrote on March 20th to his wife:

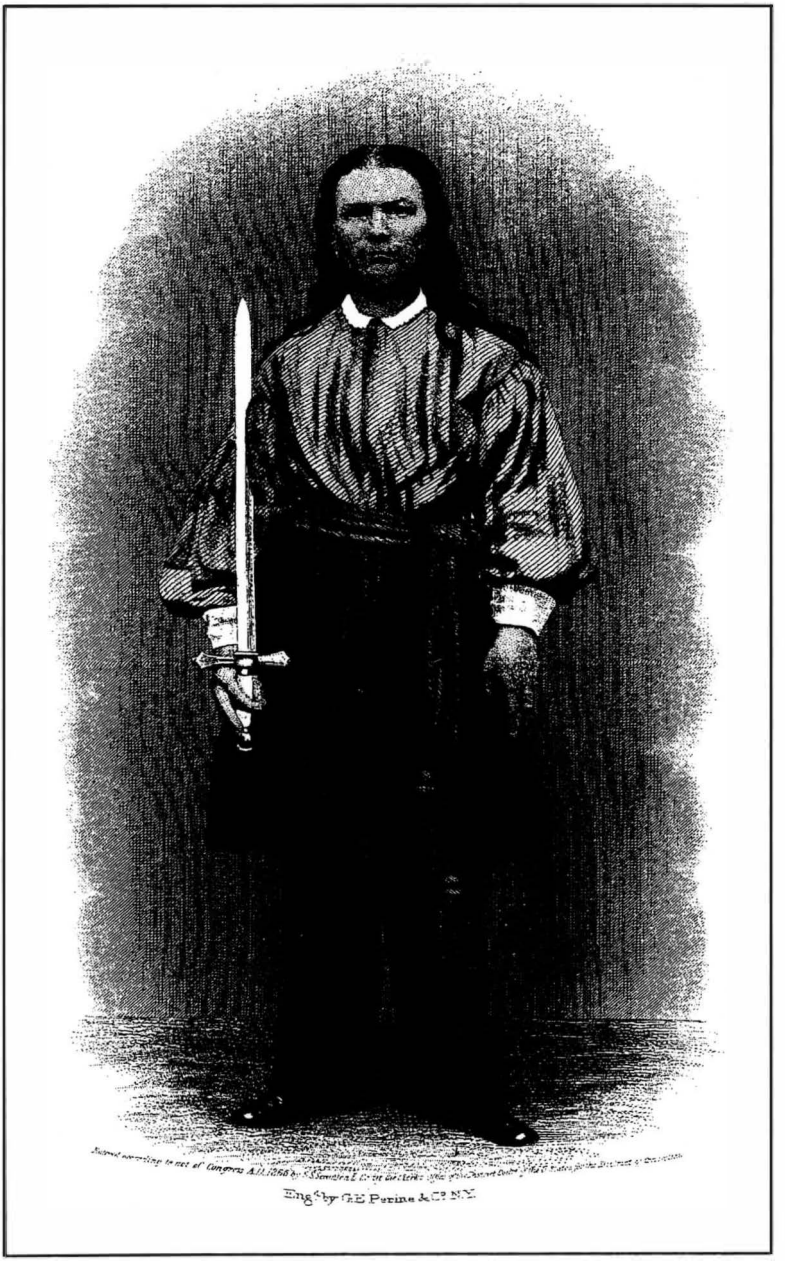
> By 11 (o'clock) every one of our regiments had left except mine, the enemy had crossed the trenches on my left gone through my camp and got a half mile in my rear toward New Bern before I was aware of it. . . . Gen. Branch had left without giving me any orders and when I finally started and got in sight of the River I saw the bridge in flames! After getting all the troops over but my regiment they deliberately left me to my fate! Fortunately, I knew something of the country, and striking to the left up the Trent I came to a large creek called Brier's (Brice's) Creek . . . and there we found only one small boat that would carry three men at once. The Yankees by this time drawn up just one mile away! I jumped my horse in to swim him over but when a little way he refused to swim, sank two or three times with me and I had to jump off and swim across with my sword, pistols and cartridges box on. Once over I rode about a half mile to a house and got three boats which we carried on our shoulders to the creek and after four hours of hard labour got them all over but three poor fellows who were drowned.[19]

The 5th Rhode Island was in the center of the Federal line of battle. Caleb Barney, who was a soldier in that unit, summarizes the key engagement of the four-hour battle:

> We were firing perhaps half an hour although it did not seem a quarter of that time, when a rumor came to us that the Twenty-first Massachusetts had made a

> charge and succeeded in getting inside the rebel works, but was driven out again. . . . All at once, we received orders to cease firing, and we noticed the Fourth Rhode Island marching by the right flank to our left and rear. This was the beginning of the celebrated charge which decided the fate of the day. . . . Once inside the lines we were in the enemy's rear, and as the head of our column entered the gap the rebels abandoned their works and fled. . . . This decided the possession of Newbern.[20]

In the rear of the advancing Federal troops, Kady Brownell was busily tending to the wounded. She received word that her husband had been seriously wounded and lay bleeding in the brickyard. She immediately ran to where Robert had fallen and found him lying on the ground with his thigh torn open by a musket ball. Wanting to help make her husband and other wounded Rhode Islanders more comfortable, she gathered blankets from the dead who were along the earthwork. Seeing several soldiers lying helpless in the mud and water of the brickyard, she helped them up and they dragged themselves to dry ground. Her fiery temperament surfaced while unselfishly treating a Confederate engineer whose foot had been crushed by a shell fragment. In spite of her kindness and assistance, the engineer shook his fist at her and exclaimed, "Ah, you damn Yankee, if ever I get on my feet again, if I don't blow the head off your shoulders, then God damn me!"[21] Kady angrily grabbed a musket with the bayonet fixed and plunged it in the direction of the profane and ungrateful engineer. But a wounded Federal soldier who lay nearby caught the point of the bayonet in his hand and pleaded with Kady not to kill a wounded enemy, in spite of what he'd said. Kady spared the ungrateful engineer. She remained in New Bern until late April, treating both Federal and Confederate wounded. She nursed her husband until he was able to travel and then accompanied him to New York. For the rest of her life, she kept and



"Kady Brownell in Army Costume."
Photo from Moore: *Women of the War.*

cherished the colors she proudly carried for the 5th Rhode Island and the sergeant's sword she had worn at her side.

Lt. Col. Edward Haywood's 7th North Carolina regiment was the last to continue fighting. They fought valiantly but were forced to fall back by the overwhelming assault of Federal troops. Many were captured. One Confederate soldier aptly described the final engagement of the battle:

> They flanked us on the right another time with such strong force that we were obliged to give way. We were ordered to retreat. We were obliged to run or be prisoners. I came very near being taken myself. I had been sick a day or two before the battle and had to run so much that I gave out. The Yankees were within about 32 yards of me, the minie balls flying around thick as hail and my company left me and I was obliged to shift (for) myself.[22]

Branch had high praise for the 7th North Carolina's stand, saying:

> The brave 7th met them with the bayonet and drove them headlong over the parapet, inflicting heavy loss upon them as they fled; but soon returning with heavy reinforcements, not less than five or six regiments, the 7th was obliged to yield, falling back slowly and in order. Seeing the enemy behind the breastwork, without a single man to place in the gap through which he was entering and finding the day lost, my next care was to secure the retreat.[23]

The rest of Branch's men who managed to outrun the pursuing Federal troops had clamored aboard the last westbound train steaming out of town. When it was apparent that the Confederate force was in full retreat, the townspeople panicked and left with only the possessions they could carry, many of which were discarded in the

streets. Many houses and other buildings were on fire. The Federal army occupied a mostly deserted town that was looted for two days by soldiers and some residents who remained. Capt. Drake of the 9th New Jersey aptly described the scene as he arrived when he said, ". . . the windows of the houses were darkened and it appeared as if the destroying angels were hovering over the place." Levi Kent and one of his lieutenants, Charly Green, went into town from the captured Confederate encampment of Camp Lee. Kent made these comments in his journal:

> It is a pretty little town and must have been a lovely place in time of peace. Several valuable buildings were destroyed by the rebels as they passed through on their flight. One of the enterprising sutlers accompanying the fleet has opened the "Gaston House" formerly, now the Union House. Its bar is well patronized. Capt. Belger whose Battery is quartered in the city invited us to the Union House when we had a good lunch and a glass of Blackbery wine which we were very thankful for, for its medicinal qualities.[24]

We can only wonder how the course of the battle might have differed had Branch received the requested reinforcements. Burnside's invasion of New Bern was not a large battle compared to many during the Civil War. However, the town's occupation was extremely important to the Federal effort to interrupt the Confederate railroad connection to coastal ports, and to establish a base for future operations in North Carolina. Several attempts were made by the Confederates later during the war to recapture New Bern, but all were unsuccessful.

NOTES

[1] Richard A. Ward, "An Amphibious Primer--Battle for New Bern," *Marine Corps Gazette*, 1952: 16.
[2] John G. Barrett, *The Civil War in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963) 96-97.
[3] Richard Iobst, *Battle of New Bern* (Raleigh, N. C.: The North Carolina Confederate Centennial Commission, circa 1962) 4.
[4] Augustus Woodbury, *Major General Ambrose E. Burnside and the Ninth Corps* (Providence, R. I.: Sidney S. Rider & Brother, c. 1866) 64.
[5] Levi Kent, *Journal* (by permission of William Clements Library, University of Michigan), entry dated March 18th, 1862.
[6] Iobst, *Battle of New Bern*, 9.
[7] William Marvel, *Burnside* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 72.
[8] Barrett, *The Civil War in North Carolina*, 101.
[9] Iobst, *Battle of New Bern*, 9.
[10] Barrett, *The Civil War in North Carolina*, 102.
[11] Ward, *An Amphibious Primer*, 18.
[12] Marvel, *Burnside*, 73.
[13] W. Buck Yearns and John G. Barrett, eds., *North Carolina Civil War Documentary* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980) 39.
[14] Marvel, *Burnside*, 73-74.
[15] Iobst, *Battle of New Bern*, 9.
[16] Woodbury, *Major General Ambrose E. Burnside*, 61.
[17] Kent, *Journal*, entry on March 18th, 1862.
[18] Woodbury, *Major General Ambrose E. Burnside*, 61- 62.
[19] Yearns and Barrett, *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*, 39.
[20] Mary L. Thornton, "New Bern, North Carolina, 1862-1865: A Southern Town Under Federal Occupation" Chapel Hill, N.C., 1959 (Typewritten), p. 5.
[21] Frank Moore, *Women of the War: their heroism and self sacrifice* (Hartford, Ct.: S. S. Scranton & Co., 1866) 60-62.
[22] Iobst, *Battle of New Bern*, 10.
[23] Ward, *Amphibious Primer*, 18.
[24] Kent, *Journal*, March 18th, 1862.

WOOD'S RAID

Charles K. McCotter, Jr.

After its capture early in the Civil War, New Bern became a military operations center and supply depot for the Union Forces in North Carolina. A fleet of Federal warships was stationed at New Bern on the Neuse and Trent rivers. In January 1864 General Robert E. Lee and Confederate President Jefferson Davis ordered an attack on New Bern. One element of the attack was a bold and daring raid by water on the fleet of Federal warships. Although the attack on New Bern was unsuccessful, Commander John Taylor Wood's swashbuckling raid on the Union Fleet resulted in the capture of the USS *Underwriter*, the largest Union gunboat in North Carolina. This is the story of Wood's fearless raid as told by Confederate and Union participants.

Lee and Davis selected General Pickett to lead the land attack with 13,000 Confederate troops. This was the largest Confederate army that had operated in North Carolina up until that time. The Union had less than 5000 men in New Bern.

New Bern would be difficult to take. Located at the confluence of the Trent and Neuse Rivers, it had been in Federal hands for nearly two years. The Yankees constructed a line of earth-works, anchored by Fort Stevenson on the northeast, to protect the only land approach to the town; in front of these fortifications they cut all the trees for two miles, furnishing their artillery a clear field of fire. Fort Anderson, built just across the Neuse, could provide an effective crossfire. Three or four of the warships constantly patrolled the rivers, ready to use their guns in the town's protection or to ferry supporting troops.

President Davis confided the naval cooperation to his own naval aide John Taylor Wood, a nephew of President Davis, grandson of General Taylor, one of the most gallant and successful Confederate officers. Wood held the dual rank of Commander in the Navy and Colonel in the Army. Commander Wood was accompanied by Lieutenant Benjamin P. Loyall, another gallant officer. Wood's force consisted of about 300 men including 25 marines.

Wood had distinguished himself as a swashbuckling coastal raider. Wood used "cutting out" expeditions in which cutters (similar to whaleboats) were hauled over land by wagons and then launched in rivers or streams in the middle of the night. Fifteen to twenty men in each cutter would row up to an enemy boat, overpower the crew with revolvers and cutlasses, then sail away in the vessel *(John Taylor Wood Swashbuckling Coastal Raider).* Wood had also served as an artillery officer on the CSS *Virginia* (formerly USS *Merrimac*) in the famous battle with the *Monitor.*

On January 31, 1864, Commander Wood's raiders secretly rowed their cutters down the Neuse from Kinston to New Bern. Wood and his sailors and marines heard the rumble of artillery fire while they waited unseen on the Neuse on the morning of February 1. Pickett's troops were making their major push that morning against the Federal defenses. They approached New Bern from three directions. Brigadier General Seth M. Barton crossed the Trent River and moved along its right or southern bank to Brice's Creek. He sought to cut the railroad running from New Bern to Morehead City, thereby depriving the Federal commander Major General John James Peck of the ability to bring up reinforcements. Barton's movement was rapid and the approach of his column was a surprise; but when the redoubts were reached, instead of making an immediate assault, he engaged in an artillery duel without making any further effort to pursue attack. Colonel James Dearing led another force down the left or northern bank of the Neuse and was to attempt to overwhelm the defenders of Fort Anderson. By taking Fort Anderson, Dear-

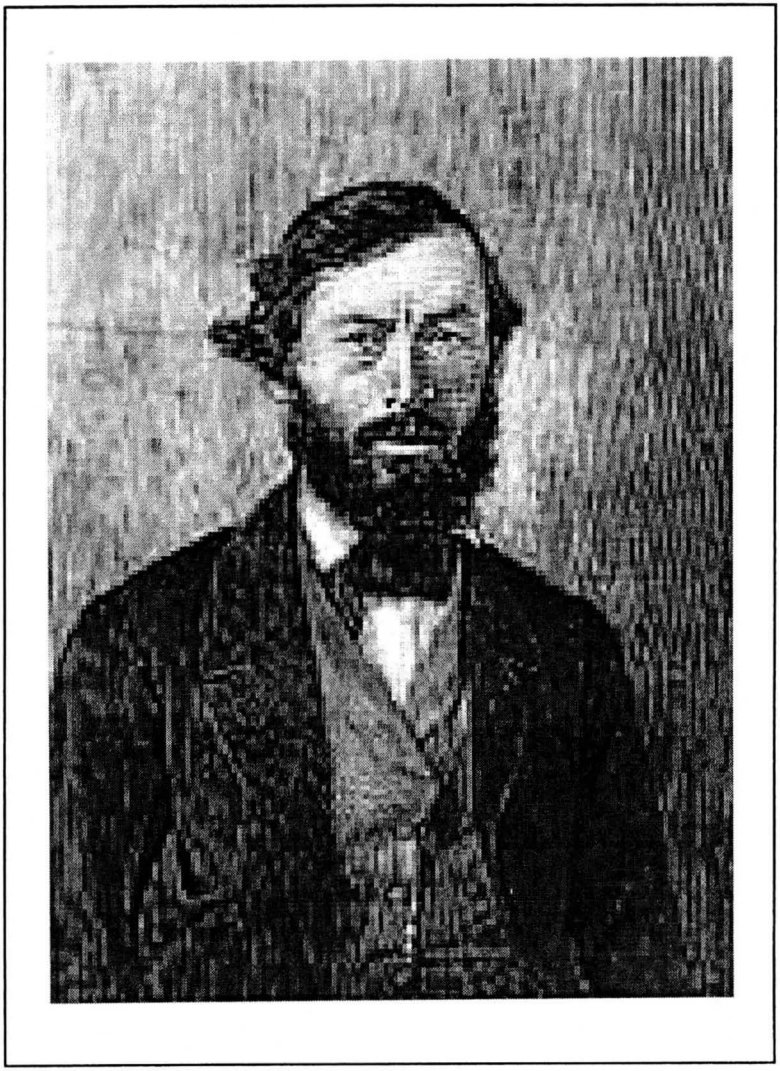
ing would have a direct line of fire upon the town. Finally, Pickett marched the main body of the attacking army directly toward Peck's defenses on the peninsula between the Neuse and the Trent near the outskirts of New Bern.

Lieutenant G. W. Graves, commander of the three gunboats in the New Bern estuary and captain of the USS *Lockwood,* also heard the guns opening Pickett's offensive. Graves ordered the USS *Underwriter* to steam up the Neuse and anchor about 100 yards below Fort Stevenson to command the cleared plain outside the Union works. The *Hull* would take position above her. Although the *Underwriter* arrived on station at 9:00 a. m., the *Hull* drove solidly aground prior to reaching her designated defensive position. Notified that the Rebels were erecting a battery near Brice's Creek, off the Trent, Graves steamed the *Lockwood* up that river as far as the shallow channel would permit.

General Barton was to cross Brice's Creek, take the forts on the banks of the Neuse, cross the railroad bridge, and enter New Bern. However, Barton failed to cross Brice's Creek. Pickett feared the arrival of reinforcements from Morehead to augment the force at New Bern. Pickett did not know that General Martin had already cut the railroad at Newport. By late afternoon on February 1, the Federals had been driven back inside their works in front of New Bern, but Pickett had heard nothing from Barton.

Wood, on the river, hearing Pickett's attack on the Federal outer works, located the position of the *Underwriter,* anchored close up to the right flank of the outer fortification.

The USS *Underwriter* was a 341-ton side-wheel steamer built in 1862 at Brooklyn, N. Y. The *Underwriter* was 170' long with a 23' 7" beam and an 8' 1" draft. Mounting two 8-inch shell guns, and a 30-pound and a 12-pound howitzer, she carried a crew of 84. Assigned to the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, the *Underwriter* had participated in the capture of Roanoke Island and Elizabeth City in February 1862. The *Underwriter* assisted in the capture of New Bern, N. C., on March 13 and 14, 1862, knocking out a Con-



John Taylor Wood, Captain, C. S. N.
1830-1904
U. S. Dept. of the Navy photo.

federate battery along the Neuse River during the attack. She remained in the Neuse River off New Bern performing various reconnaissance and dispatch assignments, occasionally moving to different points in the North Carolina sounds.

At 11:00 p. m. on February 1, Wood assembled the men for their final instructions. The night was dark. On every boat the commanders handed out short, tapered, white pine dowels provided by the expedition's carpenter; they would soon come in handy.

As the raiders approached the *Underwriter* with muffled oars, sheets of rain began to fall, obscuring her for a time. Then, at 300 yards, her black hull stood out. Nearing the gunboat, the raiders suddenly heard the ship's bell ring out five times: 2:30 a. m. At about 100 yards came a sudden, nervous shout, "Boat ahoy! Boat ahoy!" Wood did not answer. Then the lookout sprung the battle rattle, calling the crew to quarters. Wood yelled, "Give way! Give way strong!" The cutters shot forward. Using grappling hooks, the raiders fastened to the *Underwriter* and attacked with pistols and cutlasses. After 15 minutes of close and furious hand-to-hand fighting, the Confederates took the ship.

The raiders tried to get the *Underwriter* underway and convert her into a Confederate cruiser. However, one piece of bad news after another reached Wood. The engine room reported the fires banked and that it would take at least an hour to raise enough steam. The *Underwriter* was chained to a buoy and it would take hours to free her and the ship was likely aground. At almost the same moment, Fort Stevenson, alerted by both the sounds of the battle and some escaped seamen, began firing on the ship with small arms and cannon, heedless of Yankee sailors still aboard.

The *Underwriter* had become a trap and Wood had no choice but to burn the ship and withdraw upriver. Enveloped in flames, the *Underwriter* lit up the night sky for miles with her flashes. After two hours, at 5:00 a.m., the flames reached her magazine, and she exploded with an

earth-shaking roar, scattering burning debris for hundreds of yards before settling to the river bottom.

The raiders pulled up the Neuse about eight miles to Swift Creek where they made camp. As they examined the cutters, they no doubt thanked their carpenter for his white dowels. The boats probably would not have made it to safety without them, for an average of 14 had been used in each craft to plug bullet holes.

After waiting most of the day of February 2 in vain for Barton's assault, Pickett withdrew. Wood, on his return to Richmond, told President Davis that had the expedition been under the command of General Robert F. Hoke it would have succeeded.

Lieutenant Benjamin Loyall, Wood's second in command, gave the following vivid account of the capture of the *Underwriter*. Lieutenant Loyall's detailed account was written in 1901. Other accounts are Commander Wood's much shorter description of his mission at New Bern as well as other contemporary reports of the *Underwriter* attack from both Union and Confederate sources.

CAPTURE OF THE "UNDERWRITER"
New Bern, 2 February, 1864.
By B. P. Loyall, Commander C. S. N.

After the fall of Roanoke Island in the winter of 1862, the Federals had control of the sounds of North Carolina, and some of the rivers emptying into them. They had occupied all the towns situated on the water, and among them New Bern, which lies at the confluence of the Neuse and Trent Rivers, occupying an angle between the two--a place easily defended by the power having control of the water. They had built strong earthworks on the land side, stretching from river to river, and had several gunboats cruising about to protect the place on the water side.

Among these gunboats one was the *Underwriter* which had been a heavy ocean tugboat at New York, and purchased by the United States Government, had been converted into quite a formidable vessel of war. She was the ship that fired the first gun in the attack upon Roanoke Island, where the writer (B. P. Loyall) had the misfortune to be captured, and it may be said there was something like the rule of compensation when he had a hand in capturing her. She was armed with two 8-inch guns, one 3-inch rifle and one 12-pounder howitzer, and had a crew of about 85 all told.

Picture to yourself a steamer about the size of the *Northampton*, with very low guards and stripped of her sides or bulwarks, except a wooden rail with rope netting from that to her deck. The quiet possession of New Bern by the Federals had distressed and worried the patriotic people of North Carolina, and General Hoke, than whom there was not a more competent or brilliant officer of his rank in the Confederate Army, strongly advanced a quick movement upon the place by the Army, assisted by the Navy on the water, predicting certain success, and large reward in stores, munitions and prisoners.

The matter took definite shape in January 1864, and it was decided to send General Pickett with as much of his division as might be available to make the attempt. On Friday, 29 January, 1864, orders were received by the four ships lying at Drewry's Bluff, each to fit out a cutter fully armed for service on a secret expedition. No one in the squadron knew of our destination, except myself and Captain Parker, serving on the *Patrick Henry*, and we were ordered to take five days' rations. I was put in command of that part of the expedition, with confidential orders to report to Captain John Taylor Wood (his naval rank) at Kinston, N. C.

To escape notice as much as possible we pulled down James River to the Appomattox, and reached Petersburg before daylight. There was a railway train waiting for us, and we hauled our boats out of the water, and by hard work loaded them on the flat cars before the people were up and about.

We started off at once, and it was a novel sight to see a train like that--Jack sitting up on the seats of the boats and waving his hat to the astonished natives, who never saw such a circus before. Many of them had never seen a boat. We reached Kinston on Sunday morning, and immediately got the boats in the water of the Neuse River, dropped down a short distance below the village and put things in shape for the trial of battle. Captain Wood met us at Kinston (where we were joined by three boats fully armed from Wilmington, N. C.) and took command of the expedition. About 4 o'clock in the afternoon we shoved off from the riverbank and started down for New Bern, which is about forty miles distant by the river.

When we had gotten some two miles below the town orders were given for every man to put a band of white cotton cloth on the left arm, above the elbow, and the name "Sumpter" was given as the watchword.

These precautions are necessary in a night attack, as there are no flags in sight to rally upon. Every man was armed with a cutlass and navy revolver.

Before dark the commander ordered all boats to assemble together, and, as we floated down the quiet stream, he offered up the petition from the prayer book to Almighty God for those about to engage in battle. It was a solemn and impressive scene--just as the shades of evening were falling--this unusual assemblage of armed men. Then, with muffled oars a

single line was formed, and we pulled with measured stroke down the stream. The river is narrow and full of turns, winding in and out, with low sedgy banks. Here and there huge cypress and water oak trees, which almost lock their heavy branches over the stream.

The night was so dark that we could not see each other, and often the leading boat ran into a shoal point, got aground, and the whole line would be jammed in a crowd.

After 2 o'clock in the morning the river widened, and we began to see better around us. Soon we reached the mouth of Swift Creek and sniffed the salt air from the sound. Every eye was strained to see a ship. We pulled in the direction of the Town of New Bern, and searched in vain to find something afloat, although we got close enough to the wharf to hear talking, probably sentries on the dock.

There was nothing to be done but find some refuge out of sight until the next night, but it was hard letting down from the pitch of excitement and expectation we had been under--the unbending of the bow that had been strung for action. We moved up the river some three or four miles to Bachelor's Creek where among the reeds and rushes we tried to hide ourselves and rest until the next night and try it again. We felt very uneasy lest we should be discovered, and our purpose known; for unless our attack should be a surprise, it would be useless and madness to undertake it.

No force in small boats, except in overwhelming numbers, can capture an armed ship, unless by taking her unawares. We spent a day of tedious waiting. Officers and men laying low, spinning yarns and talking about our prospects. I happened to hear the talking of

one of the groups, where a fine young officer said: "Fellows, where will we be this time to-morrow?" He was among the killed, and it was such a lesson on the uncertainty of human life. Among those present were Hoge and Gardner and Henry Cooke and Gill and Palmer Saunders and Goodwin, from Virginia, and Gift and Porcher and Scharf and Williamson and Kerr and Roby, all trained at Annapolis and true as steel--among these three were from Norfolk and Portsmouth.

In plain sight of us was a tall crow's nest, occupied by a lookout of the Federal Army on their picket line, and I assure you it gave us a creepy, uneasy feeling to think that our whole movement and intention might be discovered. And here let me remark that this very situation determines and exemplifies what I judge to be a man of war--a leader who does not allow his plans to be upset by what he thinks the enemy is going to do. He must be always combative and not calculating chances. Wood paid no attention to doubts and surmises, but had his eye fixed upon boarding and capturing that ship, and doing his part in the fall of New Bern.

We were in full hearing of Pickett's dashing attack upon the Federal outerworks that day, and knew that he was driving them from the advanced line of fortifications. Before sunset Wood called for the swiftest boat, and with the writer in company, pulled cautiously down the river, keeping close under the banks. We had not gone two miles, when simultaneously we both cried: "There she is."

We discovered a black steamer anchored close up to the right flank of the outer fortifications of New Bern, where she had come that day, and having located her exactly, we returned to our hiding place, with the un-

derstanding that we would attack her between 12 and 4 o'clock in the morning. Orders were given accordingly, and all hands were made to know the order of battle, and what they had to do.

In rushing pell-mell upon the side of the ship with boats, they naturally rebound and leave a gap that is not easy to get across, so each bow oarsman was ordered to be ready to jump overboard with a grapnel as soon as she struck, and make her fast, and our coolest men were picked for that duty, which you will easily see is risky. Some time after midnight we got underway and pulled slowly down the river in two columns of four boats each, Wood to board her forward with his boats and I to board her aft with mine.

The night was very dark and gloomy, and we could not see a light anywhere, except an occasional glimmer about the town, but we knew pretty nearly where the vessel was, and without glasses in the evening had made out her build and structure. The stroke of the muffled oars was almost noiseless, and suddenly the dark hull of the ship loomed up, and it seemed almost at the same moment there came from her the shout: "Boat, ahoy!"

Then we heard the loud cheering cry from Wood: "Give way, boys," which was caught up and echoed along both lines of boats. Then rang out loud and sharp from the ship the rattle, calling the men to quarters for action, and now the fight was on. No need for orders now to these disciplined men. I suppose the distance was about one hundred yards, and, while our men were straining at their oars, we heard the sharp click of rifles, and the only reply we could make was by the marines (three or four being in each boat) who delivered their fire with great coolness.

It seems to me now that of all the uncomfortable things a fighting man might have to do, that of pulling an oar with his back to his foe must be the most trying and disheartening, but not a man weakened. In less time than is required to tell of this we were into her. Our boat struck the vessel just abaft the wheelhouse, where the guards make a platform, an admirable place for getting on board.

The ship's armory, where all the small arms were kept, was in a room just there under the hurricane deck, and they did not stop to reload, but loaded guns were handed to the men, as fast as they could fire. It seemed like a sheet of flame, and the very jaws of death. Our boat struck bow on, and our oarsman, James Wilson, of Norfolk, (after the war with the Baker Wrecking Company) caught her with his grapnel, and she swung side on with the tide.

As we jumped aboard Engineer Gill, of Portsmouth, among the first, was shot through the head, and as he fell dead our men gave a yell and rushed the deck, with the crews of the two other boats close behind. Now the fighting was furious, and at close quarters. Our men were eager, and as one would fall another came on. Not one faltered or fell back. The cracking of firearms and the rattle of cutlasses made a deafening din. The enemy gave way slowly, and soon began to get away by taking to the ward room and engine room hatches below.

They fell back under the hurricane deck before the steady attack of our men and at that time I heard the cheers and rush of our comrades from forward, and I knew we had them. They came along from forward with the cutlasses and muskets they had found, clubbing and slashing. In a short time I heard the cry: "We surrender."

They could not stand the force and moral effect of an attack like that, and, remember, they were not Spaniards we were fighting.

Wood gave the order to cease firing, and after a brief consultation, we ordered the two firemen we had with us to go down into the engine room to see if they could get her under way and take her up the river, where we might put her in shape, and, as she was the largest vessel at New Bern, we could have temporary command of the river.

It was in the fight on the forward deck that the intrepid young Palmer Saunders gave up his life for his country. He attacked a stalwart sailor with his cutlass and killed him, but had his head split open and a shot in the side. I wish I could relate the deeds of individual prowess and gallantry, but in such a melee as that one has all he can do to keep on his feet and look out for himself.

We found the fires banked and not steam enough to turn the wheels over. At this juncture Fort Stevens [Stevenson] opened fire upon our vessel, regardless of their own people. One shell struck part of her lever beam, went through a hencoop near where the marines were drawn up, and passed through her side. Upon further consultation we decided to burn her, and gave the order to man the boats, taking special care of our own and the enemy's wounded, and our dead, and all prisoners we could get hold of.

I thought it very strange that the captain of the vessel could not be found, but upon inquiry among his men we learned that he had been wounded in the leg and had jumped overboard. He was drowned.

Poor Palmer Saunders was carefully placed in a blanket, and laid in the bow of my boat, where he could be better supported than aft. He was breathing, but entirely unconscious. Of course, some of the men missed their boats, as nobody stood upon the order of his going in the face of the firing from those forts.

After seeing all the boats under my charge get away, we shoved off and pulled away from the ship. The duty of setting fire to the *Underwriter* had been assigned to Lieutenant Hoge, of Wheeling, a talented young officer of fine attainments and undaunted courage. When we had gotten half mile from the ship Wood pulled up towards our boats and asked if I had ordered the ship set afire. I said: "Yes," but it looked as if it had not been done successfully. Just then Hoge came along in his boat, and said he had set fire to her.

Wood ordered him to go on board and make sure of it, and he went promptly. He was trying to perform, wildly, of course, as big guns cannot be aimed well at night, but you can never tell where they are going to strike.

In about ten minutes we saw a flame leap out of a window forward of the wheelhouse, where the engineer's supplies were kept, and Hoge pulling away. In a very few minutes the whole expanse of water was lighted up, and you may be sure we struck out with vim to rendezvous at Swift Creek, about six miles up the river, on the opposite side from New Bern, where General Dearing had a small calvary camp.

As we were pulling up, we could hear now and then the boom of the guns of *Underwriter* as they were discharged by heat from the burning ship, and just before reaching our landing place we heard the awful explo-

sion of the sturdy vessel, when the fire reached her magazine.

After daybreak we reached the place on the bank of the creek, where there was a clearing, and landed our cargo of dead and wounded and prisoners.

As we were taking Saunders out of the boat he breathed his last, and so passed into the presence of God the soul of that young hero.

As soon as the surgeon had made the wounded as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, the prisoners were drawn up in line to make a list of them. As I passed down the line, a strapping big fellow, without any trousers on and barefooted, said: "My Lord, is that you?" I looked him over and recognized him as an old quarter-gunner that had been shipmate with me in the frigate *Congress* ten years before, and, among the wounded I was called to have a greeting from a young fellow who had been a mizzen-topman in the same ship, and after the war got me to give him a certificate to secure his pension.

Our casualties had been six killed, twenty-two wounded, all of them brought away. Two were missing and afterwards accounted for. The Federal loss was nine killed, eighteen wounded, and nineteen prisoners--about thirty of her crew escaped.

The wounded and prisoners were promptly taken care of by General Dearing's command, and sent up to Kinston. Captain Wood proceeded to Richmond at once. As soon as proper arrangements could be made the command was summoned to pay the last rite of burial of the dead. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, under the stately pines that bordered the stream, I read the church service for the burial of the dead, and the

bodies of our lamented comrades were tenderly laid in mother earth, there to rest until we shall all be summoned to the great assize.

General Pickett's plans miscarried, it was alleged, by the failure of one of his brigadiers to make an attack at the appointed time on the Trent River side of the defense. He withdrew his force leisurely and retired upon Kinston.

I could never understand why the other gunboats at New Bern did not attack the *Underwriter* after her capture by us. Instead of that, two of them got under way and steamed around into Trent river as fast as they could go. While we were getting ready to abandon the ship, it worried us very much to see one of those boats coming directly toward us, but she soon turned and went in the other direction, much to our relief.

In speaking of our casualties, it was said that there were two missing, and it was from laughable circumstances. When we took to our boats two of the men rushed to the stern where they saw a boat made fast, and they slided down into her. In a few moments other men piled into her, and "shove off" was the word. It soon developed that the boat had eight Yankees and two rebels on board, and these two poor fellows set up a fearful cry for help. We heard them howling from our boat, but could not see, nor imagine what it meant. The poor fellows were rowed ashore to New Bern by their Yankee prisoners--so to speak. They were afterwards exchanged and I met one of them in Richmond. He said he never felt so mean in all his life, and he almost split his throat hallooing for us to get them out of the scrape.

The attack upon New Bern was well planned, and we all know that the assault of that intrepid division was

irresistible, but here was another case where somebody had blundered. If General Pickett's orders had been carried out, there would have been another exemplification of the power of a navy, by its very absence in this case; for the neutralizing of the help given by the *Underwriter* in the defense of New Bern would have made General Pickett's assault upon the right flank of these defenses a very different affair.

Referring to this capture Admiral Porter, United States Navy, wrote at the time: "This was rather a mortifying affair for the navy, however fearless on the part of the Confederates. This gallant expedition was led by Commander John Taylor Wood. It has to be expected that with so many clever officers who left the Federal navy and cast their fortunes with the Confederates, such gallant action would often be attempted, and had the enemy attacked the forts, the chances are that they would have been successful, as the garrison was unprepared for an attack on the river flank, their most vulnerable side."

That night our command pulled up to Kinston, tired and fagged from four days of work and unrest, and so we went back to our ships at Richmond.

B. P. LOYALL.

Norfolk, Va.,
2 February, 1901.
(Clark, pp. 325-333)

Commander Wood and Confederate Lieutenant George W. Gift gave the following reports of the capture of the *Underwriter*.

REPORT OF COMMANDER WOOD, C. S. NAVY

Kinston, February 4, 1864

SIR: The force under my command boarded and captured last night the U.S. gunboat *Underwriter*, 4 guns, 90 men and officers. Her position within musket range of several strong works, one of which was raking the vessel during the time we had possession, and not having steam caused me to burn her. Our loss is 20 killed and wounded and 4 missing. The enemy's unknown.

Respectfully, &c., your obedient servant,

J. Taylor Wood.

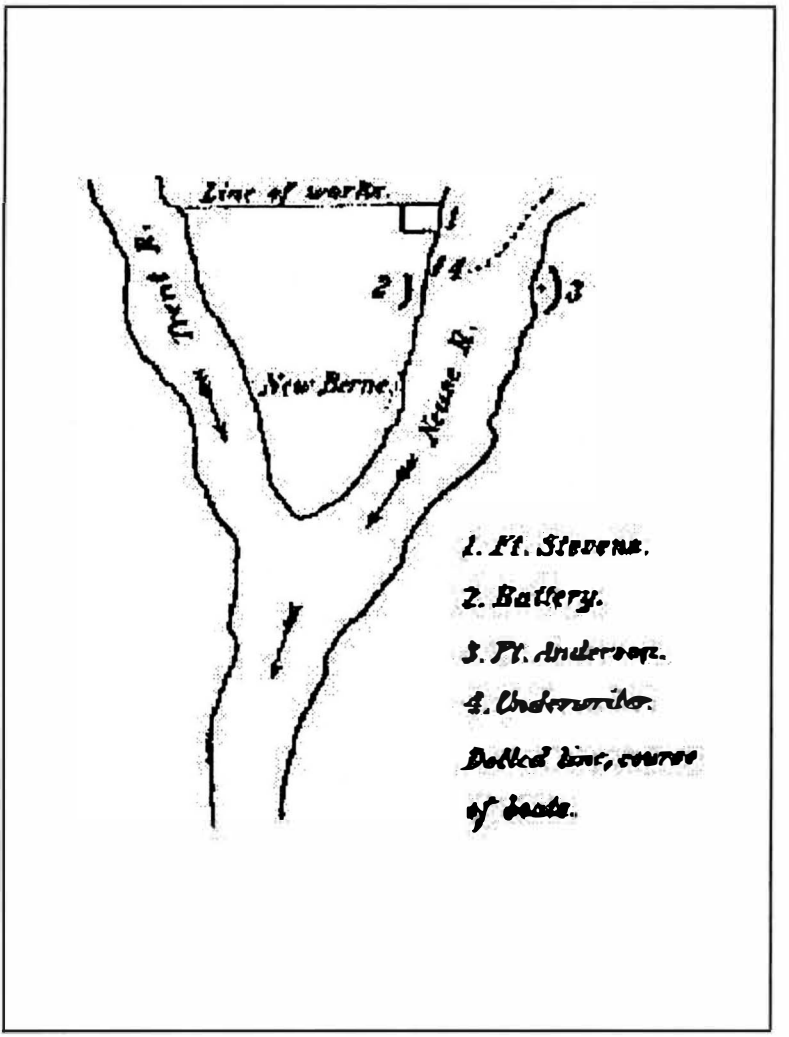
President Jefferson Davis, and
Hon. S. R. Mallory, Secretary of the Navy.
(*Official Records*, p. 451)

UNOFFICIAL LETTER OF LIEUTENANT GIFT, C. S. NAVY, TO COMMANDER JONES, C. S. NAVY, MAKING REFERENCE TO EXPEDITION.

Richmond, Va., February 13, 1864.

Dear Sir:

I was with Wood in his late expedition to New Berne, N. C. which resulted in the cutting out and destruction of the U. S. gunboat *Underwriter*. It was a bold design and well executed, and Wood deserves much credit. All is due to him and Loyall, as the bulk of the work fell upon the two leading boats. The enemy were up in good season, but could not train their great guns,



Lieutenant Gift's "Diagram."
Map from *Official Records*.

but their fire from small arms was quite severe. Our loss was about 20 in killed and wounded; theirs about the same. I make the following diagram to explain the matter better.

As soon as the firing ceased on board Fort Stevens [Stevenson] opened with a heavy rifled gun, her first shot striking the upper works and walking beam. The vessel had no steam, and we could not slip her chain and tow her off with the boats. Therefore we were compelled to abandon and fire her and thread our way back from under the forts. Our force consisted, I think, of about 250 seamen and landsmen, 25 marines, and about 30 officers, in twelve cutters and surfboats and two launches, the latter carrying 45 men each and two 12-pounder boat howitzers. But a small portion of our men were engaged. The weight of the fighting fell on Wood and Loyall, and right nobly did they enact their parts. I am all admiration for Wood. He is modesty personified, conceives boldly and executes with skill and courage. The original design was to attack and cut out some four or five vessels that were unaccustomed to lay in the river, but unfortunately this one was all that could be found.

I trust that I have not tired you by this long and disjointed recital of my own wants and expectations. I hope to hear from you soon after getting to Columbus.

I am, with great respect, your friend and obedient servant,

George W. Gift

[Commander Catesby ap R. Jones]
(*Official Records*, p. 453)

Wood's raid on the *Underwriter* is described in the *History of the Fifth Regiment of Rhode Island Heavy Artillery.*

> On Monday morning the *Underwriter,* one of the smallest but most useful of our gunboats, had been ordered to a point in the Neuse, just below Fort Stevenson, where she dropped anchor, beat to quarters, and trained her guns so as to sweep the plain in front of our works, at the same time cross-firing with the guns of the forts on any attacking force. About dusk the gig of the gunboat was sent up the river to see if any movement was being made by the enemy, and at the same time to try to communicate with some of our pickets at Batchelder's Creek, which had been cut off the day before. It seems that while this boat was running up the channel south of Fleache's Island, the rebel boats were coming down the channel on the north side, and they thus passed each other in the darkness. One of the *Underwriter's* officers, after his exchange, gave this description of the fight that ensued: "Two o'clock, Tuesday morning, the lookout forward saw the bow of a boat coming out of the heavy fog which had settled on the river, and hailed her. Receiving no answer, he fired, killing the man in the bow, although he believed it was our boat returning, yet the rule was, 'obey orders if you break owners.' Immediately after the shot was fired some dozen boats shot out from under cover of the fog, at a distance of only fifty yards, and, dividing into two divisions, attempted to board us fore and aft. The alarm was quickly given by the officer of the deck. The crew rushed promptly to their stations and obstinately disputed the rebels in their attempt to board. At last they were compelled to give way, overpowered and outnumbered four to one. I am unable to give the exact number of our loss. It was not far from twenty. The captain was killed in the first

part of the action, and two of our officers severely wounded. The heavy fog enabled them to come so near that we could not use our nine-inch 'barkers,' which would have turned the tide in our favor."

The rebel crew went at once to their quarters; some to the fire-room to get up steam, some to the engine-room, and others to the guns. It is stated that they paid out the anchor cable to let her drop down the stream, so that if discovered the guns of Fort Stevenson would not be able to get her range before they got up steam enough to give her steerage way, and she swung in shore and went aground. During the struggle on her decks one of the crew jumped into the river, swam ashore, made his way into Fort Stevenson, and informed the commanding officer, Captain Landers, of Company H, the cause of the conflict he had heard on the *Underwriter*. He at once trained one of his largest guns on the boat and sent three shells into her. The enemy, finding that she was hard aground, that they had been discovered and were being raked by the shell from Fort Stevenson, set her on fire and took their boats, leaving their own as well as our wounded, and escaped in the fog and darkness. At four o'clock the fire reached her magazine, and she blew up. All of the wounded left by the retreating enemy were either drowned or killed in the explosion. Captain Landers, in speaking of this short and exciting struggle said: "It seemed hard to fire into her when our wounded were groaning and crying for help, but it was my duty to shell the rebels out, and burn and sink her." He did all three. (Burlingame, pp. 192-193)

Edgar Allen, an engineer on the *Underwriter* described his colorful escape from Confederate capture in his report to his superior.

USS *Lockwood*, off New Berne, N. C.,
February 2, 1864

Sir: I have the honor to report that about half past 2 o'clock this morning, while the USS *Underwriter* was lying at anchor in the Neuse River above our line of works, several boats filled with men were seen coming down the river. The night was very dark, and they were not seen until they had approached within 100 yards of the vessel. They were hailed as soon as seen, but instead of answering, cried out, "Give way; give way strong." We then found out that they were filled with the enemy. The rattles were immediately sprung for all hands to get to quarters, but before the guns (which were trained on the port bow so as to command the bridge crossing the river) could be brought to bear upon them they had approached so near our starboard bow and quarter that we attacked them with small arms. They appeared to number 150, while there were not over 40 men all told upon the vessel. We repelled them successfully for fifteen minutes, when they overpowered us and captured all the men and part of the officers on deck, driving the remainder down into the wardroom, where they followed with cutlasses and revolvers, demanding us to surrender, which, as nothing could be gained by resistance, we did.

We were immediately ordered into the boats under guard; I, together with 18 or 20 of the crew, being put into the whaleboat belonging to the *Underwriter*. After we were all in the boats they stripped the vessel of everything they could carry off, and then set fire to her fore and aft.

While they were doing this Fort Stevenson opened on the vessel, the first shell going through the port wheel-

wheelhouse and signal box and bursting, wounded several of the enemy.

We then shoved off and were proceeding up the stream, the boat I was in being astern the rest, when I discovered that in their hurry to get off they had put only two men as guard in the boat. This fact I discovered by the one in the stern steering (by whom I was sitting) hailing the other boats, which were some 50 yards ahead of us, and asking them to take off some of us, as the boat was overloaded it could make no headway, also saying they wanted a stronger guard, as all but two were prisoners. One of the other boats was turning to come back when I snatched the cutlass from the belt of the guard and told the men to pull for their lives. Some of the men, the other guard among them, jumped overboard and swam for land. I headed the boat for the shore and landed at the foot of the line of breastworks, delivered my prisoner to the commanding officer, and, procuring an ambulance, took one of the disabled men to the hospital. At daylight, I reported on board the *Lockwood*.

At 5 a. m. the magazine of the *Underwriter* blew up, and at this time she lies burned to the water's edge.

G. Edgar Allen, Acting Third Assistant Engineer, U. S. Navy. (To G. W. Graves, U. S. Navy, Acting Volunteer Lieutenant and Senior Officer Present.)
(*Official Records*, pp. 440-441)

CONCLUSION

The Confederate attack on New Bern was a bold plan. The attack would have succeeded if Generals Pickett and Barton had pressed forward. Pickett, overly cautious and uncertain of the situation, withdrew. General Hoke com-

mented: "We now know the place was within our grasp, which was seen before leaving the town. The enemy was thoroughly routed and demoralized." (Shingleton, p. 107.)

Wood's Raid is a little known, but exciting part of New Bern's rich history. New Bern was a strategic location during the Civil War because of its land and water transportation facilities. Three battles were fought for possession and control of New Bern. Fortunately, the town survived these attacks practically unscathed.

The remains of the *Underwriter* lie at the bottom of the Neuse River at New Bern in 9-12 feet of water. An archeological dive was made on the *Underwriter* in 1990. Artifacts from the *Underwriter*, including a gun carriage and grappling hooks, are located at the Tryon Palace Museum in the New Bern Academy Building on New Street.

John Taylor Wood continued his gallant and successful naval career as Captain of the Confederate Blockade Runner CSS *Tallahassee*. Upon the fall of the Confederacy, Wood made a daring escape to Cuba in a small sailing vessel. After the war, Wood settled in Halifax, Nova Scotia where he became a prominent citizen and merchant.

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NEW BERN'S CIVIL WAR BATTLEFIELD: A CONFEDERATE DISASTER AND A CONTEMPORARY TREASURE

Richard Lore

For too long, New Bern's rich Civil War heritage has been virtually ignored. Certainly, most Tarheels know that their state was involved in that war and a few are even aware that perhaps some few battles occurred on North Carolina soil. But even native North Carolinians often do not consider visiting Civil War sites in their home state. Rather, they venture to Richmond, Charleston and any number of other out-of-state battlefields and museums. Sadly, even native New Bernians are more likely to be better informed about New Bern's long colonial history and its role as the first permanent capital of the state. Not surprising then, it is a rare person indeed from another state who visits North Carolina for the express purpose of touring Civil War sites.

The New Bern Historical Society intends to develop the land where the Civil War battle for possession of New Bern was fought. We want both visitors and natives to be able to experience both the anguish and glory of that conflict and the uniquely painful plight of our ancestors as they endured more than three long years of military occupation.

Here, we will not discuss the details of the battle of New Bern. Complete descriptions of the battle can be found in a number of books including those listed at the end of this story and articles penned by other authors in this *Journal*. Rather, the focus here is on the strategic importance of this early Civil War battle, the pristine condition of the existing fortifications, and the significance of the

men and battle units engaged in that fateful conflict on March 14, 1862.

The battle of New Bern took place in a then-obscure site located about five miles southeast of the town. Today one can take Highway 70 East from New Bern and then turn right into the main entrance of the upscale new housing development known as Taberna. At the railroad tracks, start walking south toward Havelock. You are following the very footsteps of the 33rd North Carolina Infantry Regiment as they were ordered from reserve status into action. The railroad line is in the same location today as it was in 1862, and most of the decisive fighting and the Union breakthrough of the Confederate line took place close to the tracks. About 250 yards down the track, the land on the right or west side of the tracks starts to slope gently down into a ravine. Bullen's branch, a small, slow-moving stream, is at the bottom of the ravine. The New Bern Historical Society owns this portion, the right flank, of the Confederate battle line. As we shall see, the valiant 26th North Carolina Infantry Regiment defended this section of the battle line.

If one drives just a bit farther down Highway 70 and turns left into the Craven County Fairgrounds, a good portion of the original breastworks on the left flank of the Confederate line are still visible just to the north of the fairground parking area. A thin line of Confederate soldiers behind these mile-long breastworks was able to stop the advance of a much larger Union force.

Although the New Bern battle was not the largest Civil War engagement fought in North Carolina, an excellent case can be made that this single battle was the most important Civil War battle fought in this state. Indeed, one could argue that the successful Union victory at New Bern so early in the war had far-reaching strategic implications that influenced the duration and scope of that brutal war in ways far beyond that of other much larger and bloodier engagements.

First, note that this battle occurred early in the war and the Union victory at New Bern represented a reversal of fortune for the Union forces. Since first Bull Run, the Confederates had gained a series of stunning victories. The capture of New Bern was widely reported in great detail in all the northern papers and provided a much-needed boost in morale for Northern troops and citizens. For example, *The New York Times* ran a lengthy, multiple-page article on the Union victory at New Bern on March 19, 1862.

One obvious consequence of this Union victory at New Bern was the rapid promotion of Ambrose Burnside to be commander of the Army of the Potomac. A relatively obscure brigadier general prior to his successful campaign in eastern North Carolina, General Burnside suddenly found himself promoted to command of the massive Union army that would suffer a terrible defeat at Fredericksburg only months after his New Bern victory.

The early presence of Union troops in the strategic seaport town of New Bern meant that the development of an effective Union blockade of Confederate ports could continue at a much faster rate. New Bern became an important coaling, resupply, and repair depot for United States Navy ships involved in the famous "Anaconda" strategy designed to cut off all foreign trade by the Confederate States.

Further, the presence of such a large Union force at New Bern meant that huge numbers of Confederate troops, desperately needed elsewhere, had to be diverted to guard against Union military action in central North Carolina and southeastern Virginia. The Union forces at New Bern underscored this need by making frequent excursions against such vital targets as Goldsboro, Kinston, Greenville, and Tarboro from their base at New Bern.

Perhaps the most important long-term consequence of New Bern's capture early in the war by Union forces involves the fact that the Confederate army was thereby deprived of the agricultural goods produced by 10 of the

wealthiest counties in North Carolina. No longer could Confederate armies in the field be fed with the pork, beans, cornmeal and salt fish produced in eastern North Carolina. These productive areas, including Carteret, Craven, Beaufort, and Hyde counties were not only capable of producing large amounts of food for the Confederacy, they were also conveniently located close to a well-developed railway system. Accordingly, food produced in this area could be rapidly and efficiently shipped to Confederate armies serving in the eastern theater of operations.

Second, we should note that the relatively remote and obscure location of the battlefield site served to protect the integrity of the site for more than 140 years. The 24-acre section of the battlefield site owned by the New Bern Historical Society rises out of swampy land created by the meandering path of Bullen's Branch onto a series of rugged fingers of land to the west of the railroad tracks. The irregular nature of this land meant that it was never suitable for building or farming. As a consequence, the defensive fortifications built by the Confederates on these five fingers of land come down to us after more than 140 years in pristine condition. A number of experienced visitors to the battlefield have commented on the remarkable state of preservation of the trenches and redans. The intact nature of the fortifications meant that it was a relatively easy matter to qualify for entry into the National Register of Historic Places.

Third, it should be emphasized that the Confederate fortifications on our site were built and manned during the battle of New Bern by the 26th North Carolina Infantry Regiment. This regiment acquired its first battle experience at New Bern and then went on to perform valiantly in battle after battle. No other fighting unit from any state enjoys a more distinguished reputation. The popular Civil War motto of the state reflects the sacrifice of its native sons who fought in that war: "First at Bethel, farthest at Gettysburg, and last at Appomattox." The "farthest at Gettysburg" phrase reflects the gallant performance of this

regiment during Pickett's famous charge at the battle of Gettysburg. The brave men of this regiment almost broke the Union line on that fateful day at Gettysburg but at a terrible price. More than 85% of the hard-charging and disciplined men of the 26th lay dead, wounded, or missing when the battle was finished.

Colonel Zebulon Vance commanded the 26th Infantry at New Bern. Colonel Vance had been a strong Unionist prior to the war but embraced the Confederate cause after North Carolina seceded from the Union. In November of 1862, he would be elected governor of North Carolina and serve the state with distinction through those terrible war years. After the Civil War, Colonel Vance served another term as governor and was elected to the United States Senate. He frequently fought with Jeff Davis and other Confederate commanders in Richmond and was always watchful for the interests of this state during the war years. Today Zeb Vance is considered to be one of North Carolina's most effective governors.

As commander of the 26th, his men adored Vance but he was no military man and he knew next to nothing about military tactics. Lucky for him, his second in command was the brilliantly able Lieutenant Colonel Harry King Burgwyn. Often called the "boy colonel of the Confederacy" Burgwyn was only 20 years old when he fought at New Bern. A native North Carolinian, he was a graduate of both the University of North Carolina and the Virginia Military Institute. Initially, Burgwyn was singularly unpopular with the men of the 26th because he trained them so intensely. They soon realized that their young commander's rigorous training produced an efficient fighting force that won victories and saved lives in combat. Under Colonel Burgwyn's effective leadership, this regiment went on to win distinction in battle after battle. Colonel Burgwyn was killed on the first day of the Gettysburg campaign. Zebulon Vance and Harry Burgwyn are only two of a large number of men--both Union and Confederate--who participated in the battle of New Bern and later

achieved fame. For a more complete account of the subsequent accomplishments of those who fought at New Bern, the interested reader should consult Richard Sauers' book mentioned in the sources below.

Clearly, the strategic importance of the battle of New Bern, the remarkable state of preservation of the original fortifications, and the fame of the units and men who fought the battle justify our effort to preserve the battlefield and render it accessible to future generations of Americans.

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BOOK REVIEW

Swamp Doctor: A Diary of a Union Surgeon in the Virginia & North Carolina Marshes, William Mervale Smith, ed. by Thomas P. Lowry, M. D. (Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 2001. xx, 235 pp., ill., maps. $26.95)

With such a vast array of writings available on the War Between the States, it is difficult at times to know what to read. For me the choice is easy. Anything that is a first person account is my choice. Thankfully, since so many Americans who fought in the war were literate, there are wonderful diaries, letters, and reminiscences of those men and women, soldiers and civilians, who were "there when it happened."

Unfortunately, however, for those of us interested in the medical history of the conflict, there are relatively few diaries or letters from surgeons and nurses on either side. A recent addition to that small collection is Thomas Lowry's serendipitous discovery of the diary of a surgeon of the 85th New York Volunteer Infantry. Lowry is known for his books on various aspects of the less savory side of the war: courts martial, prostitution, and venereal diseases.

Swamp Doctor is the diary of William Mervale Smith, a physician. At 38 years of age, the son of a physician, Dr. Smith organized a company from the southern tier of New York, the counties along the southern border of the state with Pennsylvania, which became Company E of the 85th Regiment of New York Volunteer Infantry. Dr. Smith had served as the county supervisor in 1856, was elected to the State Assembly as a Republican six months later, and was reelected in 1859. Many other politicians, on both sides of the conflict, also formed companies of soldiers and became their officers. As Company E marched off to Washington,

Dr. Smith left behind two motherless boys (both wives had died before 1860) and a fiancée.

His diary is a very personal expression of his thoughts and feelings, and obviously not meant for publication. Unfortunately, Dr. Lowry, a retired professor of psychiatry, cannot resist the temptation to psychoanalyze Dr. Smith based on his writings. This, along with some annoying, small inaccuracies about the New Bern and Washington area, are the few minor drawbacks to an otherwise interesting perspective on the war.

While there is an aggravating tendency for many modern historians to judge mid-Victorians by our present-day standards and to label physicians of the period as inept, Dr. Lowry admits that there were only a few areas of medical knowledge with which competent doctors of the era would be familiar.

Pain control had a long history and, as long as the means were at hand, most doctors did not hesitate to use opium or morphine for pain and ether or chloroform for anesthesia. The use of mercury compounds in the treatment of syphilis and quinine as a preventative and treatment of malaria were common by the 1860s. Vaccination for immunization against smallpox had been in use for more than 70 years, as had the treatment and prevention of scurvy by the addition of fruits and vegetables to the diet. All of these were known and used by the medical men who treated soldiers and sailors on both sides of the conflict.

The diary opens with Smith's return to the regiment after a 30-day furlough to find the 85th with McClellan on the peninsula of Virginia. It is not long before Dr. Smith considers himself overworked and under appreciated: "There is no position in the army more arduous--whose duties are more incessantly taxing, than those of the Regimental Surgeon." Nevertheless, Dr. Smith shows himself to be conscientious and concerned about the men under his care. He feels that the campsite for the regiment is unhealthy and makes a report requesting a change, which is

granted. He often mentions walking while letting sick or weary soldiers ride his horse, and the diary is full of information concerning his feelings for his patients.

His opinion of some of the leading generals and officers is of interest. "If General McClellan has no other quality of a good commander, he certainly has that of secretiveness." Typical of most members of both armies, the doctor's opinions on policy pepper the reading, as do his negative comments of McClellan, which may stem from political animosity: McClellan was a Democrat.

The regiment leaves the peninsula and spends several months near Newport News and at Fortress Monroe. More than six months after New Bern fell to the Union, the 85th New York is sent on to Suffolk, then Franklin, Virginia. While on this campaign, Dr. Smith receives word that he is embroiled in a controversy at home. He believes that "political enemies" are conspiring to blacken his name during his tour of duty. At the same time, he loses his Assistant Surgeon Dr. Lewis, who was reported to have overstayed his furlough and is dismissed from the army. The machinations of a major in the regiment and the workings of Dr. Smith's imagination make this section suitable for a Victorian novel with its involved plot.

In December of 1862 the regiment is sent to New Bern by marches and boats down the Chowan, the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds, and up the Neuse.

> The town looks antiquated--very little like a Northern city. . . . The streets . . . are well shaded with the elm . . . [and] has much more of a business appearance than any other towns I have seen in the South, except Baltimore and Washington.

Dr. Smith, his company, and regiment see only a small amount of fighting while in North Carolina. They participate in the battles of Kinston, Goldsboro, and the siege of Washington. Because they are involved in garrison duty, the soldiers suffer more from disease than they do from

wounds. The occasional skirmish or picket accidents are the usual causes of gunshot wounds until they leave for Kinston. The description of this battle from a surgeon's point of view is of interest. After the battle Dr. Smith meets two Confederate surgeons who came from Kinston under a flag of truce to receive the wounded rebels.

Things settle down again in New Bern for several months, giving Dr. Smith ample leisure time to ruminate about his fiancée's indifference (which he believes is illustrated by his not receiving frequent letters), to worry about his two boys, and to decide to begin an "industrious course of study" that will improve his mind and lead to an examination for promotion. The promotion he might receive is actually not the motivating factor. Instead he wishes to go to Washington, D. C., to try to straighten out the mess regarding the accusation of stealing government supplies, and to "secure a position in charge of a hospital." (Included in an appendix is the examination with questions and Dr. Smith's answers. Most interesting.)

When he returns to Carolina, Dr. Smith finally has an adventure as he tries to rejoin his unit, which is now stationed in Washington, N. C. The run past the rebel blockade in the Pamlico River is a suspenseful and daring mission. While in Washington, he is called upon to visit a fellow physician who is dying of pneumonia. We then discover another of Dr. Smith's talents: embalming.

With the help of Union gunboats (and General R. E. Lee's requesting troops be forwarded to Virginia), the Confederate forces under Major General D. H. Hill are run off and the siege lifted. During his stay in Washington, Smith casts judgment on many of the officers with whom he associates. Generals Wessel and Foster are two of the few of whom he speaks well. Many of his comments are colored by a stern moralistic view, not uncommon for the times.

In May of 1863 the 85th New York is sent to Plymouth, N. C., in which town Dr. Smith is called "to visit a sick woman in a house occupied by some females of notoriously bad reputation." His distaste for dealing with the

immoral of society does not prevent him from treating and pitying the poor wretch. He who is reading *Oliver Twist* is confronted with an American story that would rival that of the British master.

Before the month is out, Dr. Smith has resigned from the army and is headed back to Allegany County, New York. He is a fortunate man. Before the end of another year, the 85th New York is involved in the Battle of Plymouth in which most of the regiment is captured and sent to Andersonville prison, where many men died. The "Plymouth Pilgrims," as they called themselves, are the subjects of two other books worth reading: *The Plymouth Pilgrims*, by Wayne Mahood, and *Charlie Mosher's Civil War*, edited by Wayne Mahood.

William M. Smith, M. D., went on to live a full and useful life, and we are indebted to Thomas Lowry, M. D., for introducing him to us.

Lynda L. de Nijs