

# Battle of Roanoke Island, 1862

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The opening phase of what came to be called the Burnside Expedition, the **Battle of Roanoke Island** was an amphibious operation of the American Civil War, fought on February 7–8, 1862, in the North Carolina Sounds a short distance south of the Virginia border. The attacking force consisted of a flotilla of gunboats of the Union Navy drawn from the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, commanded by Flag Officer Louis M. Goldsborough, a separate group of gunboats under Union Army control, and an army division led by Brig. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside. The defenders were a group of gunboats from the Confederate States Navy, termed the Mosquito Fleet, under Capt. William F. Lynch, and about 2,000 Confederate soldiers commanded locally by Brig. Gen. Henry A. Wise. The defense was augmented by four forts facing on the water approaches to the island, and two outlying batteries. At the time of the battle, Wise was hospitalized, so leadership fell to his second in command, Col. Henry M. Shaw.

During the first day of the battle, the Federal gunboats and the forts on shore engaged in a gun battle, with occasional contributions from the Mosquito Fleet. Late in the day, Burnside's soldiers went ashore unopposed; they were accompanied by six howitzers manned by sailors. As it was too late to fight, the invaders went into camp for the night.

On the second day, February 8, the Union soldiers advanced but were stopped by an artillery battery and accompanying infantry in the center of the island. Although the Confederates thought that their line was safely anchored in impenetrable swamps, they were flanked on both sides and their soldiers were driven back to refuge in the forts. The forts were taken in reverse. With no way for his men to escape, Col. Shaw surrendered to avoid pointless bloodshed.

Roanoke Island remained in Union control for the rest of the war. Immediately after the battle, the Federal gunboats passed the now-silent Confederate forts into Albemarle Sound, and destroyed what was left of the Mosquito Fleet at the Battle of Elizabeth City. Burnside used the island as staging ground for later assaults on New Bern and Fort Macon, resulting in their capture. Several minor expeditions took other towns on the sounds. The Burnside Expedition ended only in July, when its leader was called to Virginia to take part in the Richmond campaign.

After Burnside left, North Carolina ceased to be an active center of the war. With only one or two exceptions, no notable military actions took place until the last days of the conflict, when the Battle of Fort Fisher closed Wilmington, the last open port in the Confederacy.