

The Civil War in New Bern, North Carolina

Introduction

New Bern, North Carolina, played a significant role in the American Civil War due to its strategic location at the confluence of the Neuse and Trent Rivers and its access to key railways and waterways. Its occupation by Union forces early in the war made it a major base for operations in eastern North Carolina and profoundly affected the town's economy, population, and architecture.

Strategic Importance of New Bern

- Geography: Located 35 miles from the Atlantic Ocean, New Bern offered vital access to inland areas via rivers and was a key point for Confederate supplies.
- Transportation Hub: The Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad connected the town to inland military and supply routes.
- Economic Role: Prior to the war, New Bern was a thriving port with a population over 5,000, including a sizable free Black community. It exported timber, turpentine, and naval stores.

The Battle of New Bern (March 14, 1862)

Commanders:

- Union: Brig. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside
- Confederacy: Brig. Gen. Lawrence O'Bryan Branch

Summary:

- Over 11,000 Union troops advanced on New Bern by land and river.
- Defended by approximately 4,000 Confederate soldiers along a 1.25-mile-long line with 13 redoubts.
- Despite being outnumbered and poorly equipped, the Confederates held briefly but were

eventually overrun.

- Union forces captured the town and held it for the remainder of the war.

Aftermath:

- Confederate forces retreated, abandoning artillery and supplies.
- Union forces gained control of a key foothold for further inland campaigns.
- About 90 Union and 64 Confederate soldiers were killed, with hundreds more wounded.

Union Occupation and Life Under Federal Control

- Military Rule: New Bern became a Union stronghold and the seat of Federal authority in eastern North Carolina.
- Freedmen's Colony: Thousands of formerly enslaved people fled to Union lines in New Bern, forming one of the largest wartime refugee camps.
- Economic Changes: The port was reopened for Union commerce; trade and shipping resumed under Federal control.
- Architecture and Infrastructure: Much of historic New Bern's architecture remained intact, unlike many Southern cities, because it was occupied rather than destroyed.

Confederate Attempts to Recapture New Bern

- Multiple Confederate efforts to retake the town (notably in 1863 and 1864) failed.
- Most notable was General George E. Pickett's 1864 campaign, which included a failed assault on Fort Anderson and the execution of 22 Union soldiers of North Carolina origin, labeled as deserters by the Confederacy.

Legacy and Historic Sites

- Cedar Grove Cemetery: Burial site of both Confederate and Union soldiers.

- New Bern Battlefield Park: Preserved battlefield with walking trails and educational signage.
- Tryon Palace: Served briefly as a Union headquarters.
- African American Heritage Sites: Including the site of the Freedmen's colony and early Black schools and churches.

Impact on the Local Population

- White Confederate residents were displaced or lived under military watch.
- Freed African Americans built communities, joined the Union Army, and laid the groundwork for postwar Reconstruction efforts.
- Cultural shifts occurred due to the long-term Union presence and migration of Northern aid workers and missionaries.

Conclusion

New Bern's Civil War history is unique among Southern towns. Captured early and held throughout the war, it became a symbol of Union control, African American freedom, and the complexity of wartime occupation. The legacy of these years lives on in the town's preserved buildings, cemeteries, and cultural institutions.

Sources & Further Reading

1. National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=NC004>
2. New Bern Historical Society: <https://newbernhistorical.org>
3. North Carolina Civil War and Reconstruction History Center
4. United States Colored Troops Records, 1863-1865
5. *A History of New Bern and Craven County* by Alan D. Watson