

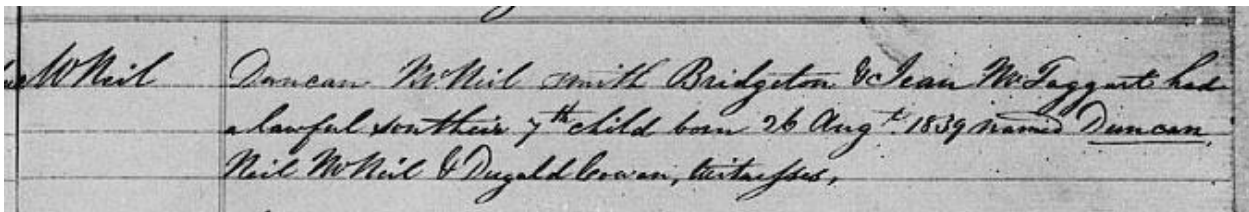


Duncan McNeil (1839-1865), Civil War Soldier and His Legacy

Only one of our direct ancestors, Samuel Sawyer, is known to have served in the U.S. Civil War. Duncan McNeil, the brother of Samuel's wife Ellen, is the only relative in our family tree known to have been killed during the Civil War.

Duncan McNeil's Birth and Early Years

Duncan McNeil was the seventh child born to Duncan McNeil, a Glasgow blacksmith, and Jean (Jane) McTaggart on August 26, 1839 in Bridgeton, Barony, Glasgow.



"McNeil, Duncan McNeil, smith, Bridgeton & Jean McTaggart had a lawful son their 7th child born 26 Augt 1839, named Duncan. Neil McNeil & Dugald McCowan, witnesses." [sic]

His older siblings included James, who died in 1832, John, Jean (Jane), James Clark, Neil, who died in 1836, and Helen (Ellen) Clark.

His father Duncan died in Glasgow on December 5, 1840. Mother Jean (Jane) and her five surviving children were recorded in the 1841 U.K. Census.

In the early 1840s, the family emigrated to Canada, settling in the Eastern Townships area of Quebec, just north of the province's border with Vermont. At some point, mother Jane married James W. Sanders, a mason, likely after he emigrated to Canada from England.

In early 1845, their daughter Anna was born in Henryville, Quebec.

- For more about the McNeil family, see [The McNeils of Glasgow, Lanarkshire, Scotland.](#)

The Move to New York

Oldest surviving brother John had moved on or died at some point. James Sanders died in the early 1850s, leaving brother James Clark as the oldest male in the household. At 18, he migrated to the Fort Edward area of New York state where he found work at a sawmill. Once he was settled there, he sent for his mother and siblings, who moved to New York in 1853. They were living together in Fort Edward in 1855, according to the 1855 N.Y. Census.

By 1860, sisters Jean, now Jane, and Helen, now Ellen, had married and moved out. Brother James Clark was doing farm work, and Duncan worked as a sawyer, both while living with their mother and sister Anna.

Duncan Enlists

After the election of Abraham Lincoln to the U.S. presidency in 1860, southern states began seceding from the Union, and the U.S. Civil War started in April 1861.

Duncan enlisted in the U.S. Army on August 15, 1862 as a private to serve for three years. He served in Company D, 169th New York Infantry Regiment starting on October 6, 1862 and transferred to Company E three weeks later.

His company fought most of its battles in Virginia and North and South Carolina. Wikipedia summarizes the regiment's battle service as follows:

Left New York for Washington, D. C, October 9, 1862. Duty in the defenses of Washington, D. C., until April 18, 1863. Ordered to Suffolk, Va., April 18. Siege of Suffolk April 20-May 4. Edenton Road April 24. Siege of Suffolk raised May 4. Expedition into Matthews County May 19-22. Expedition to Walkerton and Aylett's June 4-5. Walkerton June 5. Dix's Peninsula Campaign June 24-July 7. Expedition from White House to South Anna River July 1-7. South Anna Bridge July 4. Ordered to the Department of the South, arriving at Folly Island, S.C., July 12. Siege of Forts Wagner and Gregg, Morris Island, S.C., and operations against Fort Sumter and Charleston August 12-September 7. Bombardment of Fort Sumter and Charleston August 17-23. Capture of Forts Wagner and Gregg September 7. Operations against Charleston and picket duty on Folly and Black Islands, S.C., until February 1864. Expedition to Johns and James Islands February 6-14. Ordered to Jacksonville, Fla., February 20, and duty there until April. Expedition to Cedar Creek March 2. Ordered to Yorktown, Va., April 21. Butler's operations on south side of the James River and against Petersburg and Richmond May 4-28. Port Walthall Junction, Chester Station, May 6-7. Chester Station May 10. Operations against Fort Darling May 12-16. Battle of Drury's Bluff May 14-16. Port Walthall Junction May 16. Bermuda Hundred May 16-27. Moved to White House, then to Cold Harbor May 28-31. Battles about Cold Harbor June 1-12. Before Petersburg June 15-18. Siege operations against Petersburg and Richmond June 16 to December 7. In the trenches before Petersburg and on the Bermuda Hundred

front until August. Demonstration north of the James River August 13–20. Dutch Gap August 13. Strawberry Plains August 14–18. Battle of Chaffin's Farm, New Market Heights, September 28–30. Battle of Fair Oaks October 27–28. In the trenches before Richmond until December 7. Expedition to Fort Fisher, N.C., December 7–27. **2nd Expedition to Fort Fisher, N.C., January 3–15, 1865. Assault and capture of Fort Fisher January 15.**

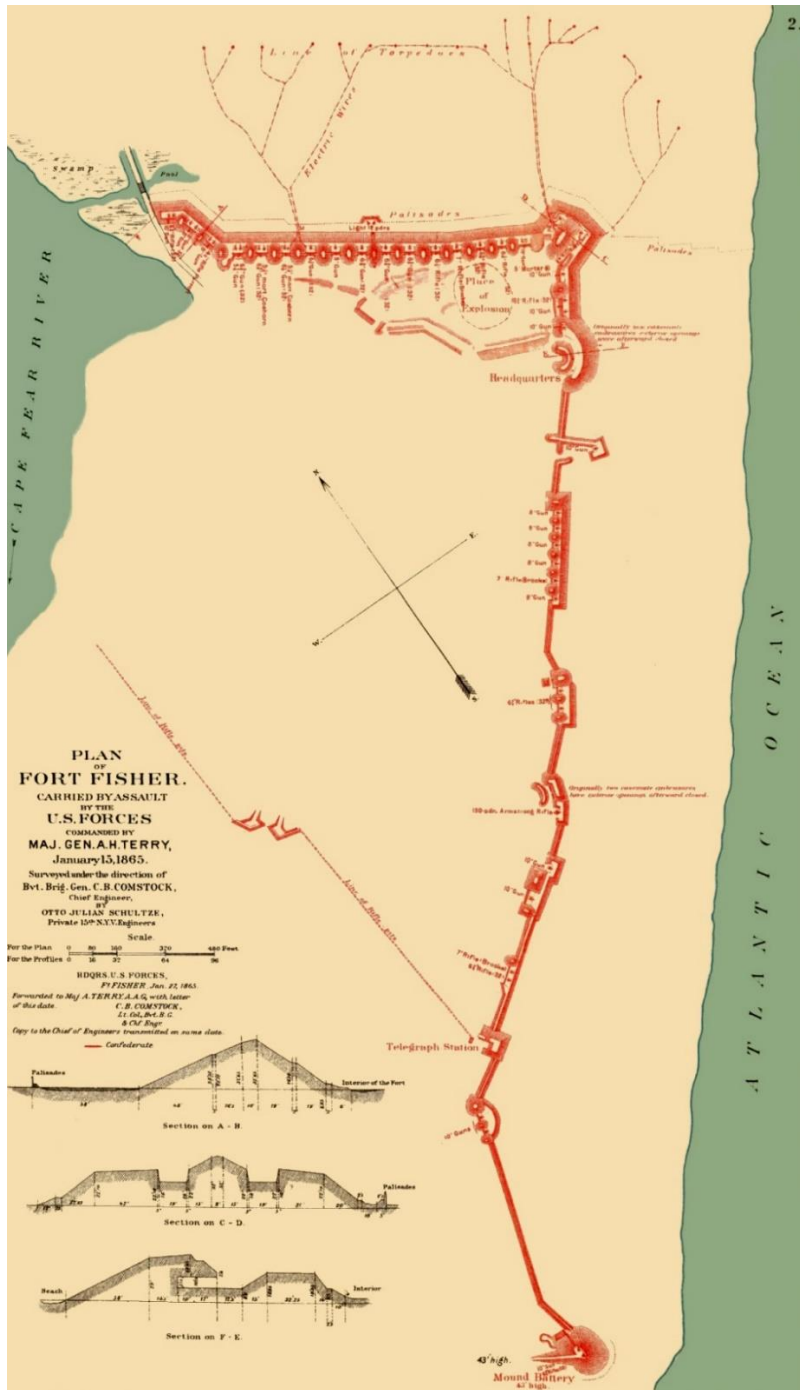
Duncan was killed at Fort Fisher, North Carolina on January 16, 1865. The regiment's service continued through the end of the Civil War:

Cape Fear Entrenchment's February 11–13. Sugar Loaf Battery February 11. Fort Anderson February 18–19. Capture of Wilmington February 22. Carolinas Campaign March 1-April 26. Advance on Goldsboro March 6–21. Advance on Raleigh April 9–13. Occupation of Raleigh April 14. Bennett's House April 26. Surrender of Johnston and his army. Duty in North Carolina until July.

The regiment was mustered out of service in Raleigh, North Carolina on July 19, 1865. Including Duncan McNeil, the regiment lost 285 men – 157 were killed or mortally wounded, and 128 were lost to disease.

Fort Fisher

During the Civil War in 1861, Confederate forces built Fort Fisher on a narrow peninsula near the mouth of the Cape Fear River to protect Wilmington, North Carolina, a critical port city. By 1865, Fort Fisher was the largest earthen fortification in the world. Its north face crossed the peninsula; its east face followed more than a mile of the Atlantic Coast.



Plan of Fort Fisher. Due to the shifting coastline, much of where the east-facing portion of Fort Fisher once stood is now underwater.

The fort consisted of sod-covered mounds of sand with bomb-proof shelters, platforms with 44 guns, three mortars and three Napoleon smoothbores. In front of the fort was a nine-foot-tall palisade of sharpened logs. Dozens of mines outside the palisade could be detonated from inside the fort.

At the Cape Fear River near the west end of the north face was a sally gate that provided access to the fort from the Wilmington Road, which connected the fort to Wilmington. Just below Shepherd's Battery, this was the fort's only gate, and as the site of fierce fighting during the battle it would become known as the Bloody Gate.

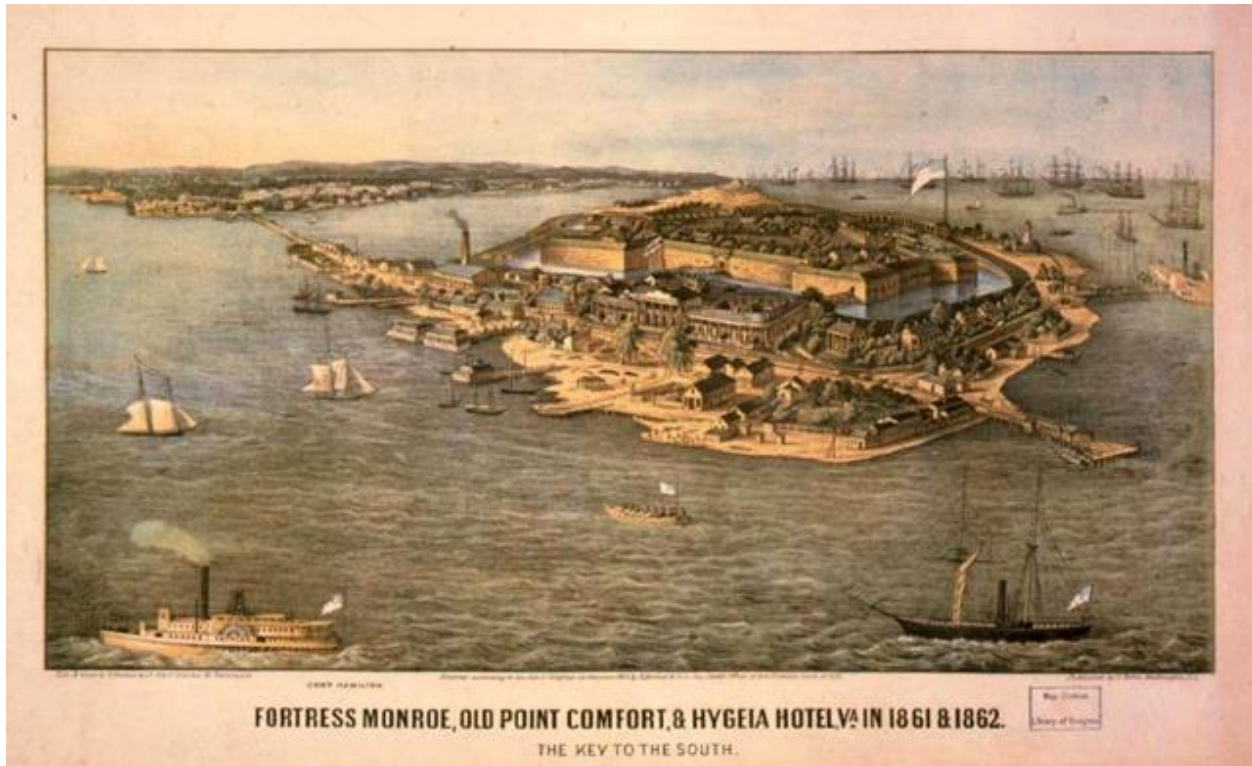
By late 1864, the Confederacy was in retreat. Wilmington, North Carolina was the last major Confederate port. It was crucial for the Confederacy's trade with the rest of the world, and for bringing in supplies to support the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia.

First Battle of Fort Fisher

Sailing out of Fort Monroe in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, Union forces that included 64 ships launched a failed attack against the fort at Christmas, December 1864. As the 169th N.Y. Infantry served in this battle, Duncan McNeil likely participated in this attack.



Plan of Fort Monroe, Encyclopedia Virginia



Fort Monroe, Fort Monroe National Monument



View of Fort Monroe in 2022 at Point Comfort. Today, the fort is at the heart of Fort Monroe National Monument.



Built in 1802, the Old Point Comfort lighthouse is the oldest surviving structure at Fort Monroe. The ship carrying the first Africans that were kidnapped and brought to English North America to be sold as slaves landed at Point Comfort in 1619.

On December 24th, Union ships fired about 10,000 rounds of solid shot and explosive shells at Fort Fisher, although the fort's sand hill construction protected it from much damage. Union forces landed during the afternoon of December 25th. However, in spite of the Union's superior numbers, the attack was unsuccessful, and Union forces withdrew on December 27th and returned to Fort Monroe.

Second Battle of Fort Fisher

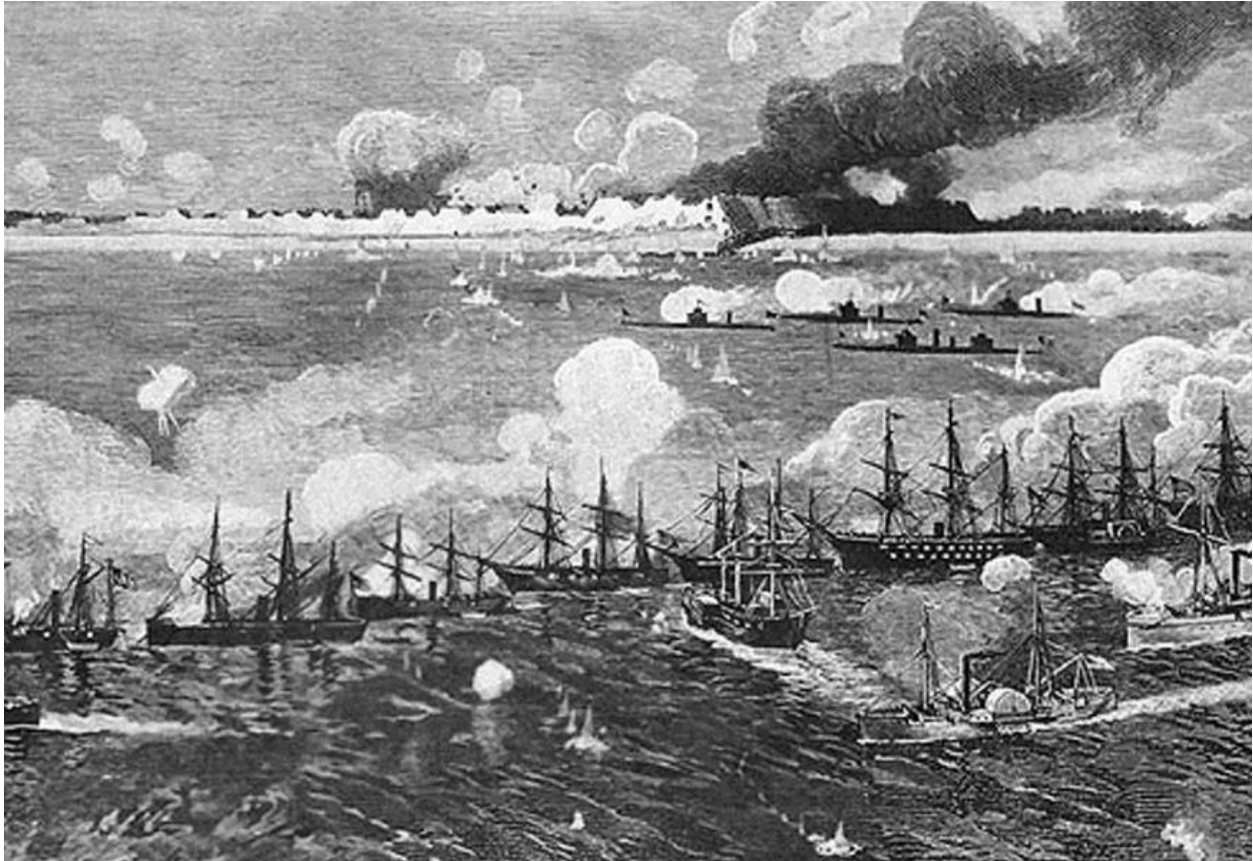
After the First Battle of Fort Fisher, Union forces had regrouped at Fort Monroe in Hampton Roads. After planning a new attack strategy, more than 10,000 troops departed Hampton Roads for Fort Fisher on the morning of January 6.

Union forces initiated a second attack on January 12, 1865 with 56 ships and a land attack that consisted of several thousand troops.



Depiction of Union attack on Fort Fisher, January 15, 1865

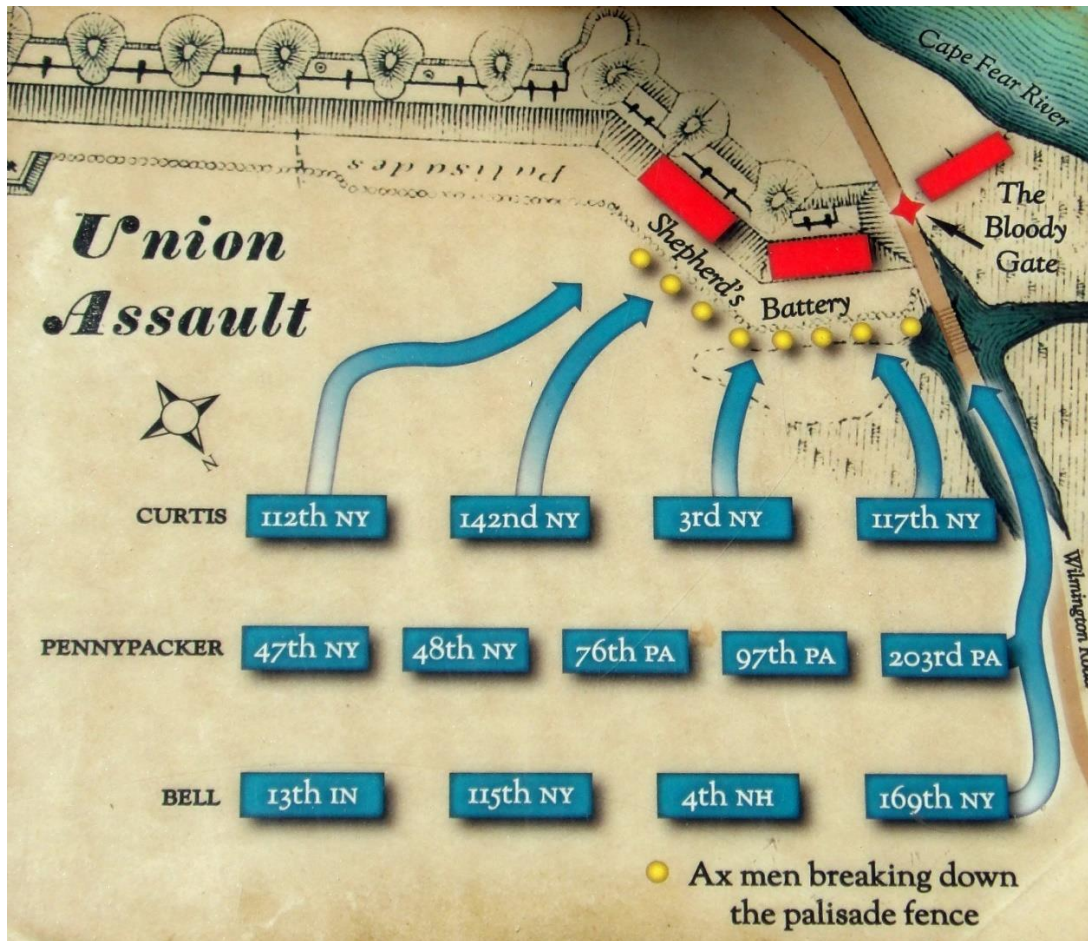
On January 13, 2,261 sailors and marines made up a landing force that attacked the fort's sea face. This was the largest amphibious attack during the Civil War, and it was the largest U.S. amphibious attack until D-Day in World War II.



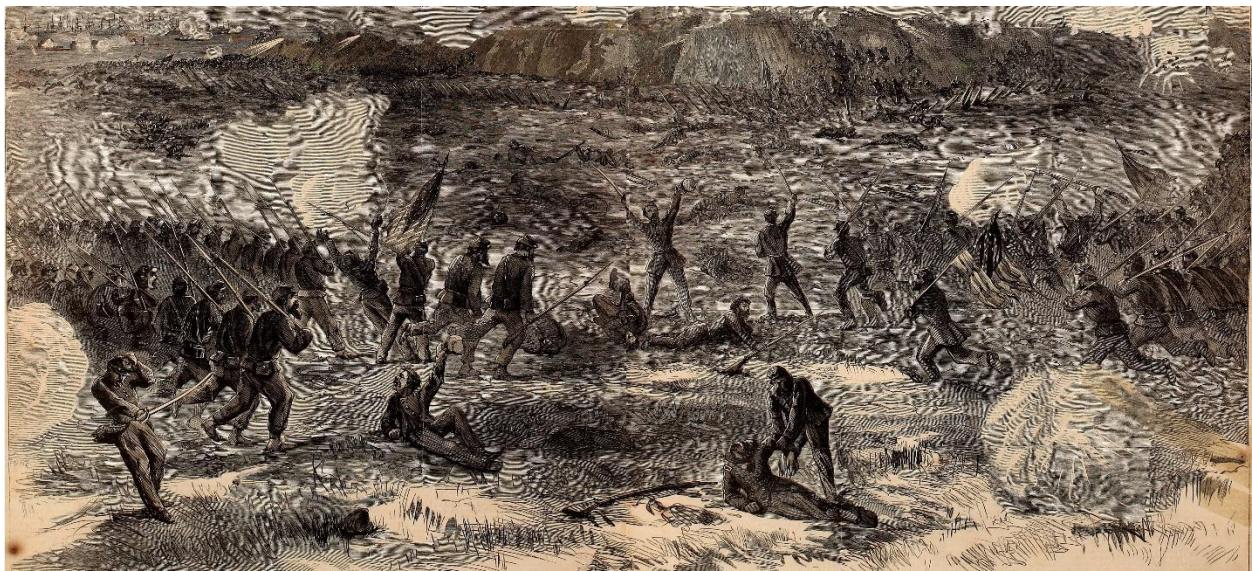
Bombardment of Fort Fisher, US Naval History & Heritage Command

The army troops landed on the peninsula north of the fort, and south of a division led by Confederate Major General Robert Hoke. Hoke's troops did not engage with the Union's troops, instead remaining in place to protect the route to Wilmington.

Union troops moved south towards the fort on January 14. On the morning of the 15th, Union gunboats opened fire on the fort, and by noon had taken out all but four guns. This action also pulled some of the Confederate defenders' attention away from the sally gate. The gate became the primary focus of Union land forces, who launched their attack at 2PM.



The focus of the Union's land assault was on Shepherd's Battery and the Bloody Gate along the Cape Fear River. Colonel Bell's brigade, which include Duncan McNeil, was part of this assault.



Depiction of the attack on Fort Fisher, Harpers Weekly, January 19, 1865

Confederate snipers killed and wounded a number of frontline Union soldiers, but Union forces were able to fight their way through the gate and establish a fortified position inside the fort.



The January 15, 1865 assault on Fort Fisher by infantry troops of the Federal army, Le Monde Illustré, February 25, 1865

Union forces became somewhat muddled after division Brigadier General Adelbert Ames lost all three of his brigade commanders: Brevet Brigadier Newton Martin Curtis, Colonel Galusha Pennypacker and Colonel Louis Bell, whose Third Brigade included the 169th New York Infantry regiment. Bell's brigade joined the attack at 3:50PM, but Bell himself was killed by a sniper before ever reaching the fort. Within minutes, the flag of the 169th New York Infantry was among those planted on Fort Fisher's ramparts.

By 4PM, more than 4,000 Union troops were inside Fort Fisher. Hours of hand-to-hand combat followed. Although Confederate leaders at the fort reached out for reinforcements, Confederate generals including Braxton Bragg and Alfred Colquitt were skeptical of reports of the Union's success, so Confederate reinforcements never arrived.



Fighting inside Fort Fisher, sketch by Frank Vizetelly, North Carolina State Archives

The combination of the naval assault and the Union's superior numbers proved to be too much for the Confederate defenders. They surrendered shortly before 10PM.

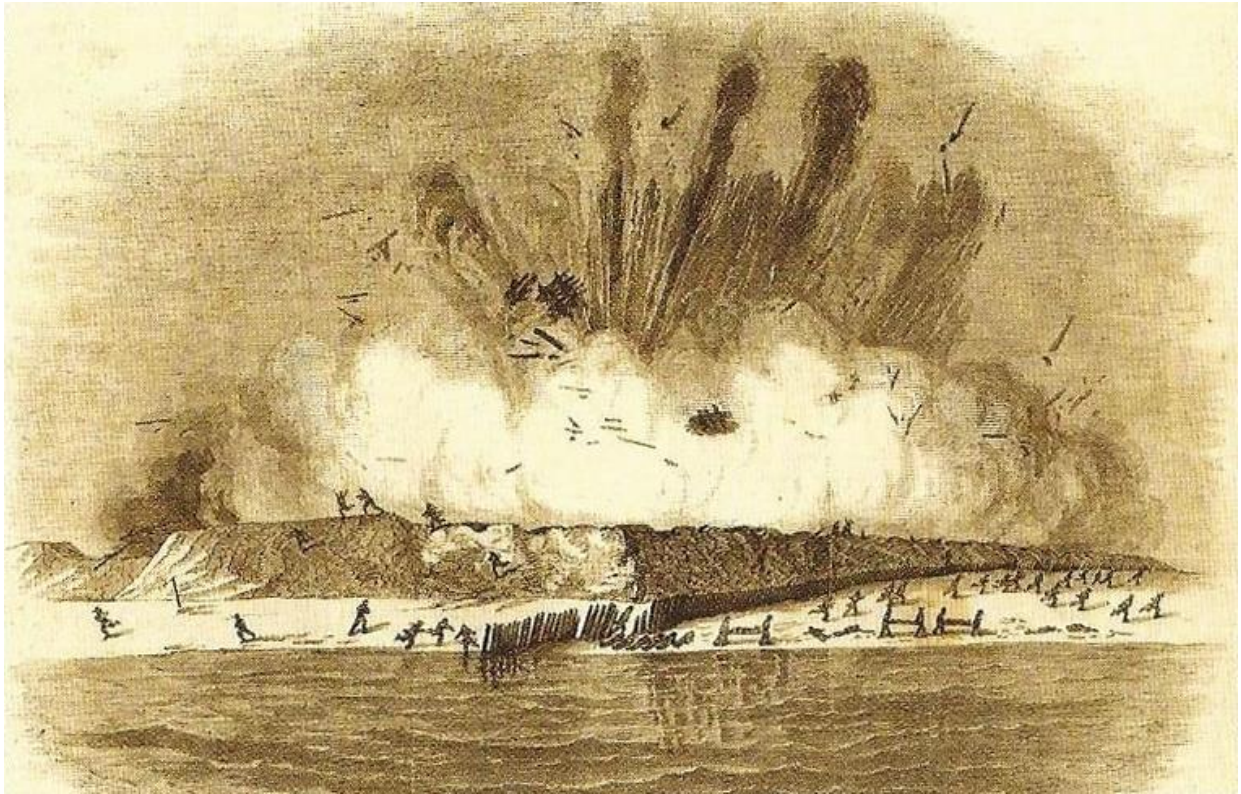
Soon after, the air was filled with rockets and fireworks as Union forces celebrated their capture of Fort Fisher. At 1AM January 16th, General Bragg wired General Robert E. Lee and Confederate president Jefferson Davis that the fort had been lost.

After the Fall

Exhausted from the battle, soldiers found places to sleep on the ground in and around the fort.

By dawn's early light, evidence of the result of the battle was overwhelming. The ground was littered with bodies of the dead and wounded from both sides. Abandoned weapons and mangled machinery were everywhere.

Early in the morning of January 16, 1865, Fort Fisher's main magazine exploded, killing at least 200 men from both sides, many of them in their sleep. Duncan McNeil was among those killed.



Explosion of Fort Fisher's main magazine, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, February 11, 1865

Union leaders attempted to blame the Confederates for the explosion. But the night before, Union troops held a big celebration with more than a few drunken revelers. A Court of Inquiry determined that guards were posted at some magazines and at the various entrances to the fort, but not at the main magazine. Between drunken revelers firing guns and people entering the magazine with lanterns – some observed just 10-15 minutes before the explosion – and the Court concluded that the explosion was the result of carelessness on the part of unknown persons.

The battle of Fort Fisher is regarded as the most decisive battle of the Civil War fought in North Carolina. With the fall of Fort Anderson soon after, Union forces were able to occupy Wilmington. This severely limited the supplies reaching General Robert E. Lee and his forces in Virginia. Lee surrendered within three months after the fall of Fort Fisher.

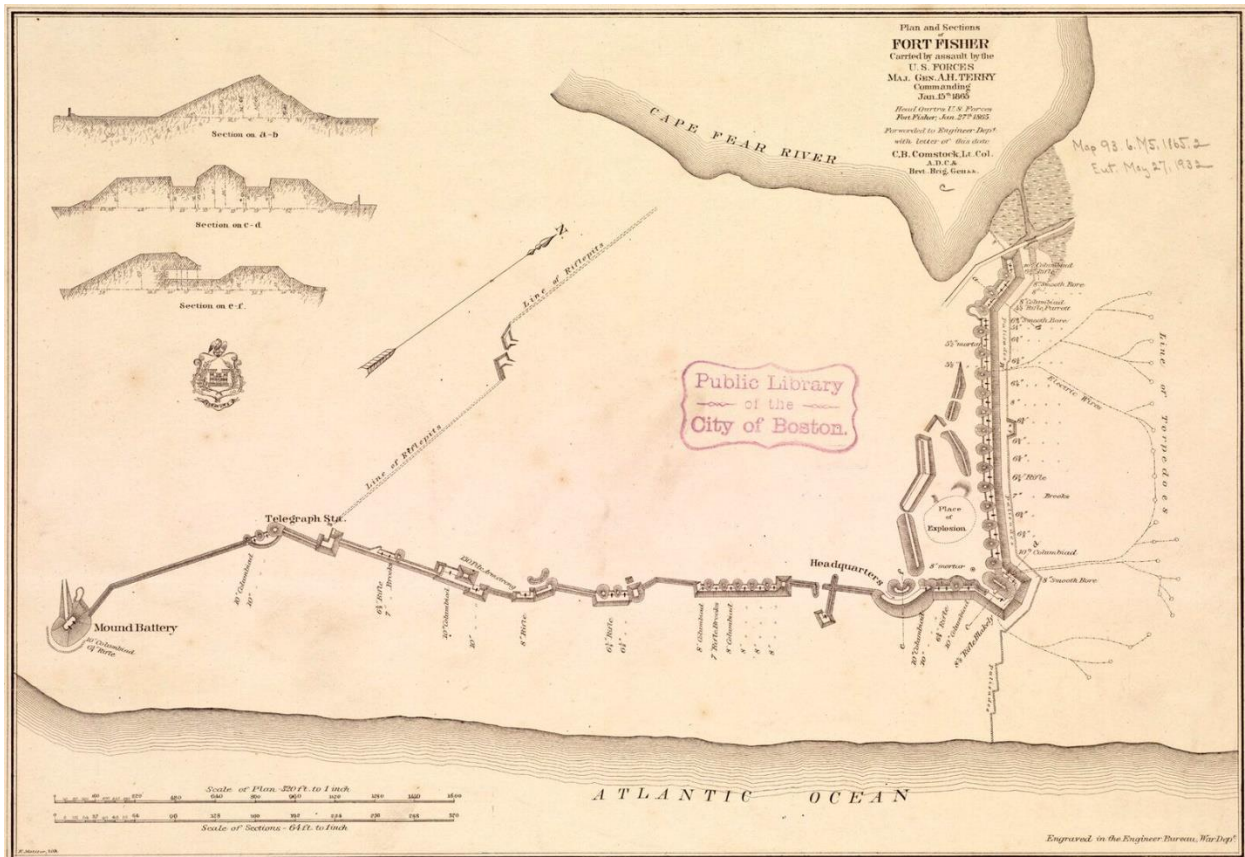
The site was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1961, and it is now part of North Carolina's Fort Fisher State Historic Site. The historic site includes what remains of the main fort complex, a museum and a visitor center.

Fort Fisher in Photos

Timothy H. O'Sullivan was one of the best-known Civil War photographers, and was responsible for some of the most famous photographs of the war. He was at Hampton Roads in December 1864, where he took photos of the U.S. Navy fleet as it prepared to sail to Fort Fisher for the First Battle of Fort Fisher.

O'Sullivan arrived at Fort Fisher itself in early February 1865, just a few weeks after the Union captured the fort. While there, he took about forty photos of the fort, capturing images of the fort much as Duncan McNeil saw it. O'Sullivan's photos can be found in a number of locations. [Fort Fisher 1865 – The Photographs of T.H. O'Sullivan](#), by Chris E. Fonvielle, Jr., provides a detailed account of O'Sullivan and his work at Fort Fisher.

I visited Fort Fisher State Historic Site in June 2022, where I toured the museum and walked around what survives from the fort.



Fort Fisher, between the Atlantic Ocean (bottom) and the Cape Fear River. Union land forces attacked from the north-northeast (right). They eventually breached Confederate defenses at the Bloody Gate, near the Cape Fear River.



Duncan McNeil and the Union forces approached Fort Fisher from the north. Trees had been cleared from this land, giving the Confederate defenders a clear shot at Union soldiers. The Bloody Gate is at the right edge of the photo. T.H. O'Sullivan, February 1865



View of Shepherd's Battery from the north in 2022



The Bloody Gate and Shepherd's Battery from inside Fort Fisher, T.H. O'Sullivan, February 1865



View of the Bloody Gate and Shepherd's Battery, 2022



The Bloody Gate (left) and Shepherd's Battery from inside Fort Fisher, T.H. O'Sullivan, February 1865



Looking towards Shepherd's Battery inside Fort Fisher, 2022



Looking towards the Atlantic from the Shepherd's Battery second gun chamber, T.H. O'Sullivan, February 1865



Looking east from atop Shepherd's Battery, 2022



The Northeast Bastion from inside Fort Fisher. Center right, a soldier stands at the site of the main magazine that exploded the morning of January 16, killing about 200 people including Duncan McNeil. T.H. O'Sullivan, February 1865



Site of Fort Fisher's main magazine, 2022

Duncan McNeil's Burial and Legacy

After he died, Duncan McNeil's body was returned to Fort Edward, New York, where he was buried in Union Cemetery.



Marker for Duncan McNeil, Union Cemetery, Fort Edward, New York. His marker notes his military service and his death at Fort Fisher.

Years later, his mother Jane was buried in an adjacent grave. His sister Jane, her husband Martin H. Tompkins, and their son James Martin Tompkins were also buried in Union Cemetery.

Duncan McNeil never married and had no children. However, other members of his family named children after him.

- Brother James Clark McNeil and his wife Amelia named their first son Emerson Duncan McNeil.
- Nephew Emerson Duncan McNeil and his wife Catherine also named their son Emerson Duncan McNeil.
- Sister Ellen Clark McNeil and her husband Samuel Sawyer named their second son James Duncan Sawyer after both of Ellen's brothers, although he was born about five months before Duncan McNeil was killed. As a boy and young man, he went by Duncan, although he used James as an adult.
- Ellen and Samuel Sawyer's daughter Carrie and her husband Joseph Wasson named their son Duncan James Wasson after Carrie's uncle Duncan McNeil and Joseph's brother James Wasson, who died the year before Duncan James was born.
- Sister Anna Frances Sanders and her husband James William Stone named their first son Duncan McNeil Stone.

Jane McNeil Sanders was twice widowed. In 1865, she applied to receive Duncan's military survivors pension as she was dependent at least in part on him, and he left behind no widow or children. Her application notes details of his service and death at Fort Fisher. Her application was approved.

State of New York } ss.
County of Washington

On this 31st day of October 1865, personally appeared before me,
a clerk of a Court of Record, in the County and State aforesaid, Jane
Mc Neil a resident of Fort Edward County of Washington
and State of New York aged 58 years, who, being duly sworn, makes
the following declaration, in order to obtain the benefit of the act of Congress approved July
14, 1862. That she is the widow of Duncan Mc Neil deceased, and
mother of Duncan Mc Neil who was a private in
Company E commanded by Henry Marshall in the
169th Regiment of New York State Volunteers, in the war of 1861,
and who died or was killed in the service aforesaid, at Fort Fisher
in the State of North Carolina on or about the 16th day of
January 1865, of injuries occasioned by an explosion in said Fort

That her said son, upon whom she was wholly or in part dependent for support, left no widow,
or minor child under sixteen years of age; and that she was married to said Duncan
Mc Neil at Edinburgh, Scotland in the State of
Great Britain on or about the 4th day of October 1824,
by Renaith Mc Ruzie; that she knows of no record
evidence of said marriage existing in the United States of America
that her said husband died on or about the _____ day of _____ 18____,
and that she still remains a widow; that she has not in any way been engaged in, or aided or
abetted the rebellion in the United States; and that she is not in the receipt of a pension
under the second section of the aforesaid act, or under any other act.

She hereby appoints James Tenness, General Claim Agent of the United States
Sanitary Commission, or his successor in office, of Washington, D. C. her lawful attorney, and
authorizes him to present and prosecute this claim, and to receive and receipt for any orders
or certificates that may be issued in satisfaction thereof. My Post Office Address is as
follows: Fort Edward, Washington, Case of J. R. Potter

Jane Mc Neil
(Signature of Claimant)

Also personally appeared before me, Shepard R. Potter and
Robert W. Pratt residents of Fort Edward County of
Washington and State of New York to me well known
as credible persons, who, being duly sworn, declare that they were present and saw said
applicant sign her name to the foregoing declaration, and they believe, from the appearance of
the applicant and their acquaintance with her, that she is the identical person she represents
herself to be, and know that she was recognised by said
as his lawful wife, and that she was so recognised by the community in which they resided;
and that they have no interest, direct or indirect, in the prosecution of this claim.

S. R. Potter
R. W. Pratt
(Signatures of Witnesses)

Sworn to and subscribed before me, this 31st day of October 1865,
and I hereby certify that I have no interest, direct or indirect, in the prosecution of this claim.

C. W. Taylor Deputy Clerk

Jane McNeil's declaration for her son Duncan's pension, October 31, 1865, reports that Duncan died from injuries in an explosion at Fort Fisher on January 16, 1865.

NAME OF SOLDIER:					<i>Mc Neil, Duncan</i>				
NAME OF DEPENDENT:					<i>Widow,</i>				
					<i>Minor,</i>				
					<i>Mother McNeil, Jane</i>				
SERVICE:					<i>Co 169. N.Y. Inf.</i>				
DATE OF FILING		CLASS		APPLICATION NO.		CERTIFICATE NO.		STATE FROM WHICH FILED	
		<i>Invalid,</i>							
		<i>Widow,</i>							
		<i>Minor,</i>							
<i>1866, Feb 21</i>		<i>Invalid</i>		<i>122786</i>		<i>55180</i>			
ATTORNEY:									
SIGNATURE:					<i>Jane McNeil</i>				

Jane McNeil's pension claim was formally filed a few months later

Prepared by Mark David Wasson
 Last updated November 1, 2023