

FORT JOHNSTON



Guardian of the Cape Fear River



CONFEDERATE LIFELINE

On January 9, 1861, as secession fever swept the South, an armed body of civilians overwhelmed Fort Johnston's lone occupant, Ordinance Sgt. James Reilly, and demanded the keys. Reilly quickly surrendered them and received a receipt in return. North Carolina Gov. John W. Ellis, however, on January 11 ordered Fort Johnston and several other strongholds restored to the Federal government. The Confederates reoccupied the fort on April 16, after the fall of Fort Sumter, once again taking possession from Reilly. He soon resigned



Maj. James Reilly,
Confederate artillery
Courtesy Cape Fear Museum

from the U.S. Army, joined the Confederacy as an artillery officer, and, in a strange twist of fate, oversaw the surrender of Fort Fisher to Union forces on January 15, 1865.

Behind you is the Cape Fear River, flowing between Oak Island and Bald Head Island. During the war, vessels attempting to run the

Federal blockade of Southern ports passed through this inlet en route to Canada, Bermuda, the Caribbean islands and Cuba. They steamed back to Wilmington with tons of military supplies, which railroads transported to Petersburg and Richmond in Virginia to support Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Eventually, the Union blockading squadron sealed every Southern port except Wilmington, which was protected by Fort Fisher, Fort Johnston, and several other fortifications on the Cape Fear River.

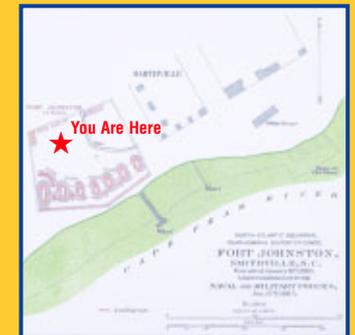


Fort Johnston barracks, 1865. The building in front of you was built about 1810 and used as officers' quarters. The white columns were added during the 20th century.

On February 29, 1864, U.S. Navy Lt. William B. Cushing led a small party ashore at night to kidnap Confederate Gen. Louis Hébert, Fort Johnston's commanding officer. Hébert was away, so Cushing's raiders took another officer to let the garrison know they had breached the fort's security. Cushing took possession of Fort Johnston and Smithville (present-day Southport) for Federal forces on January 18, 1865, after Fort Fisher fell. Union troops assembled nearby for the assault on Fort Anderson in February.



Lt. William B. Cushing



In 1745, the North Carolina General Assembly authorized the construction of a fort here to protect the Cape Fear River from the Spanish. Little more than a century later, Fort Johnston (named for colonial governor Gabriel Johnston; also called Fort Pender) and other Confederate forts helped safeguard the river and Wilmington from attack by U.S. Navy forces. Fort Johnston remained an active military facility until decommissioning began in 2004.