

# WAR ON THE CHOWAN RIVER



## *Buffalo Country*



After Union Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside captured Roanoke Island in February 1862, U.S. Navy vessels patrolled the Chowan River from its mouth in North Carolina to Franklin, Virginia, located on the Blackwater River, a tributary. The Chowan River here became the boundary between Federal-occupied counties to the east and Confederate-held counties to the west.



Buffalo Fort at Wingfield

In 1862, Unionists seized Wingfield, the riverside plantation home of secessionist Dr. Richard Dillard, Sr., aide to North Carolina Governor Henry T. Clark. They built a fort there (one mile south) as headquarters for Company E, 1st North Carolina Volunteers (USA). Lt. John “Jack” Fairless, a Confederate deserter from Gates County, loosely commanded this company of local Unionists, fellow deserters, and runaway slaves known as the Wingfield Buffaloes. Despised by the local population, the Buffaloes conducted raids into Chowan, Gates, Hertford, and Bertie Counties, and “pillaged, plundered, and destroyed properties in the area while decoying runaway slaves.”

The Buffaloes exhibited little military discipline and were held in contempt by many Federals, who referred to them as “our home guard thieves.” Nonetheless, the Buffaloes were highly effective in subduing Confederate guerilla activity here.



Dr. Richard Dillard

The Union gunboats *Shawsheen*, *Lockwood*, and *Underwriter* successfully defended the river side of the fort at different times. After several unsuccessful Confederate assaults from the land side late in 1862 and early in 1863, the Buffaloes departed Wingfield on April 17, 1863.

*“I found [at the fort], out of sixty three recruits, only twenty present; the others had gone to their homes or elsewhere as they chose. The captain was in a state of intoxication, threatening to shoot some of the remaining men, and conducting himself in a most disgraceful manner by taking one man’s horse and making other people pay him the money to pay for them, and this, too, from people who are well disposed toward our Government. ... Some of the men that have gone have taken their arms or guns with them; the ammunition has all been smuggled out and sold to citizens for liquor; what remaining arms there were I took on board for safe-keeping.”* – U.S. Navy Lt. Thomas Woodward, September 18, 1862



USS *Shawsheen*, commanded by U.S. Navy Lt. Thomas Woodward