

North Carolina as a Civil War Battlefield: May 1861-April 1862 ^[1]

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In the war's first few months, North Carolina garnered little attention from the Union military. North Carolina was largely forgotten by the Confederates as well, and most of the troops raised in the Old North State were organized into [regiments](#) ^[2] and sent elsewhere in the Confederacy. Aside from small garrisons at a handful of coastal [fortifications](#) ^[3] there was not much of a military presence in the state. President Lincoln ordered a [blockade](#) ^[4] of all southern ports in April. The Confederate response of blockade running into and out of the state's ports began to attract the attention of the powers in the North, with the Union setting out to eliminate the lucrative trade. To that end, forces under General Benjamin Butler and Commodore Silas Stringham converged at Hatteras Inlet in late August 1861 to attempt the closure of that passageway to the sea. Acting in conjunction, the Union army and navy successfully captured Forts Clark and Hatteras, and effectively closed the inlet to blockade running on August 28-29. The operation at Hatteras was viewed as an important victory at a time when the Union was desperately in need of a military success.

In order to completely control the waters of northeastern North Carolina, the Union organized the Burnside Expedition. Again, a joint army-navy operation, the Burnside Expedition lasted from late January through late April 1862 and resulted in the occupation of much of eastern North Carolina. Led by General Ambrose Burnside and Flag Officer Louis Goldsborough, the expedition's first target was Roanoke Island. Capturing the island would ensure Union control of both the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds. This would give the Union military an effective foothold in the eastern part of the state from which to base future operations. Roanoke Island fell to Union forces on February 8. The US Navy then turned its attention toward destroying North Carolina's small, fledgling navy, nicknamed the Mosquito Fleet. The Mosquito Fleet was destroyed at the Battle of Elizabeth City on February 10, and the town of Winton was burned on February 19.

Burnside's next target was the state's former capital of New Bern. By March 12 the Union forces were in position to strike the Confederates defending the town. Union gunboats began shelling the riverbank on March 13, in preparation for landing troops. After a brief defense, the Confederates retreated upriver to Kinston, and by the end of the day on March 14, Burnside controlled New Bern. Some of North Carolina's best known Civil War personalities participated in the Battle of New Bern including Confederate officers Lawrence O'B. Branch, Robert F. Hoke, and Zebulon B. Vance. From New Bern, Union troops followed the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad southeast, capturing Havelock, Carolina City, and Morehead City. By March 24, Union forces had occupied the port town of Beaufort and began planning their assault on Fort Macon, a masonry fortification on Bogue Banks that guarded the Beaufort Inlet.

Union troops were ferried to Bogue Banks from March 29 to April 10. Once on the island, they erected gun emplacements and prepared to lay [siege](#) ^[5] to Fort Macon. Colonel Moses White commanded the fort. He was hampered by old, smoothbore [artillery](#) ^[6] pieces that lacked the range and accuracy of the Union guns and a garrison of only 300 men in the fort that were fit for duty. On April 25 the Union guns opened fire on the fort from land and sea. The older masonry fortification was no match for the Union's rifled artillery, and soon it became apparent that the fort's walls and powder magazines could be breached under heavy fire. Colonel White was forced to surrender Fort Macon.

By late April 1862, the Union thoroughly controlled the coast of North Carolina from the Virginia border to the White Oak River. Occupation forces remained in coastal North Carolina, at such locations as Roanoke Island, Plymouth, New Bern, and Beaufort. Beaufort became a coaling station for the North Atlantic Blockading [Squadron](#) ^[7], thereby making it less difficult for the Union to conduct interior raids and refuel the blockading force and supply troops. New Bern became the military and political center for the Union in North Carolina. Roanoke Island and New Bern also became home to two large freedman's colonies, as thousands of slaves flocked to these locations in order to escape bondage and enjoy the protection of the Union forces. However, the capture of Fort Macon and the end of the Burnside Expedition marked the last major military action in the state for over two years, as the Union turned its attention to other theaters of the war, such as Virginia, South Carolina, and the Mississippi River.

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