

This Day in History... August 5, 1864

Battle of Mobile Bay Begins

On August 5, 1864, Admiral David Farragut led a successful naval attack that led to a Union victory at Mobile Bay, Alabama.

Mobile Bay was the last important harbor held by the Confederacy. It was deep enough for ocean-going vessels to navigate, and three forts protected the opening. The city of Mobile, at the head of the bay, was the center of blockade running in the Gulf of Mexico, which continued in spite of efforts by the Union to stop it. In August 1864, the Union's Rear Admiral David Farragut was determined to take control of the bay and put an end to the blockade-runners.

A long, narrow peninsula marked the opening of the bay. In 1834, the US built Fort Morgan at its tip to protect the port from enemies. During the Civil War, the Confederacy took control of Mobile Bay and reinforced this fort, as well as two smaller ones that also guarded the entrance.

In addition to the forts, the Confederate Torpedo Bureau planted a line of naval mines (known as torpedoes) across the main channel, leaving an opening near Fort Morgan. Blockade-runners safely navigated the opening, but the stronghold's guns hit Union vessels attempting to pass through.

The Confederate fleet stationed in the bay consisted of three small gunboats and the CSS *Tennessee*, an ironclad with a ram. Admiral Franklin Buchanan commanded the ships. He had been the flag officer aboard the *Virginia* in the first battle of ironclads in 1862. Because of his heroic actions at the time, he became the Confederacy's first admiral.

Farragut and the West Gulf Blockading Squadron had previously been successful in taking control of the Mississippi River. The admiral's attention now turned to Mobile Bay. His fleet was much larger than Buchanan's, and the lessons Farragut had learned during the Mississippi battles would serve him well this time.

The battle required the assistance of the Army. The commander of the Military Division of West Mississippi estimated he needed 5,000 troops to land behind the forts and cut off communications with Mobile. General-in-Chief Ulysses Grant needed all available soldiers for his campaign in Virginia; so many from this area were sent to his aid. The remaining men were enough to take the forts but not the city of Mobile. Some of the troops were signal corpsmen who went aboard Farragut's ships in order for the Navy and Army to communicate with each other.

On August 3, some 1,500 Union troops under the command of General Gordon Granger landed on the far side of Dauphin Island, the location of Fort Gaines, the second-largest fort. By the next evening, they had formed skirmish lines less than a half-mile from the fort.

While the Army prepared for battle on land, Farragut was getting his fleet ready for the dangerous venture past Fort Morgan. He had run his fleet past the guns of the forts protecting New Orleans and would use the same strategy here. The admiral's 14 wooden ships were lashed together in pairs. If one became disabled, the other could drag it through the channel. The four ironclads were positioned closer to the fort to protect the wooden ships from artillery fire.

This stamp pictures Farragut standing on a rope ladder of his ship, the Hartford.

At dawn on August 5, the fleet began its mission. The USS *Tecumseh* led the ironclads and the *Brooklyn* and *Octorara* were the first wooden-hulled ships in the line. At 6:47 a.m., *Tecumseh* fired the first shot and the battle began. As the ironclad was passing the fort, it steered too close to the minefield, detonating a torpedo. It sunk within minutes. The commander of the *Brooklyn* stopped his ship to await orders from Farragut. The admiral ordered that his ship, the *Hartford*, be steered around it and into the lead. This took his ship over the minefield. When asked about sailing over the mines, Farragut allegedly shouted, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" His daring command paid off, and the rest of the ships made it safely past Fort Morgan.

Farragut ordered the wooden vessels to be unlashd and to pursue the wooden Confederate boats. One was captured almost immediately. Another was beached, and then burned by its crew. The third sought the protection of Fort Morgan's guns. The final Southern ship, the ironclad *Tennessee*, faced the entire Union fleet. Rather than moving to safety, Admiral Buchanan turned his vessel and sailed full-steam into the midst. He tried to ram the Northern ships, but his vessel was too slow. The smokestack was shot and the boiler could not build up pressure needed to run the engines. The chains connected to the rudder were damaged, so the ship could not be steered. In addition, the shutters on the gun ports were jammed shut so the artillery inside was useless. The *Tennessee* surrendered about three hours after the first shot was fired.

Enemy ships no longer threatened the Union Navy, so Farragut began the attack on the forts. He sent one of the ironclads to bombard Fort Powell, the smallest of the three. The commander of the fort realized resistance was futile, so his men spiked the guns and blew up the magazines. They then waded ashore and made their way to Mobile.

The Northern ground troops went into action at Fort Gaines. Sand dunes shielded their artillery, making it easier to bombard the stronghold from behind. The fort surrendered on August 8. Granger then moved his men behind Fort Morgan, cutting off all communications with Mobile. The Confederates held out until August 23, when the white flag of surrender was raised over the last of the three forts.

Though the important city of Mobile remained part of the Confederacy, Mobile Bay was now in Union hands and closed to blockade-runners. For the part he played in the victory, Farragut was given a \$50,000 bonus and promoted to vice admiral.



This stamp reproduces a painting by Julian Oliver Davidson published in 1886.



This stamp pictures Farragut, his foster brother David Porter, and a warship representative of the ships they commanded, the USS Hartford and Powhatan.

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