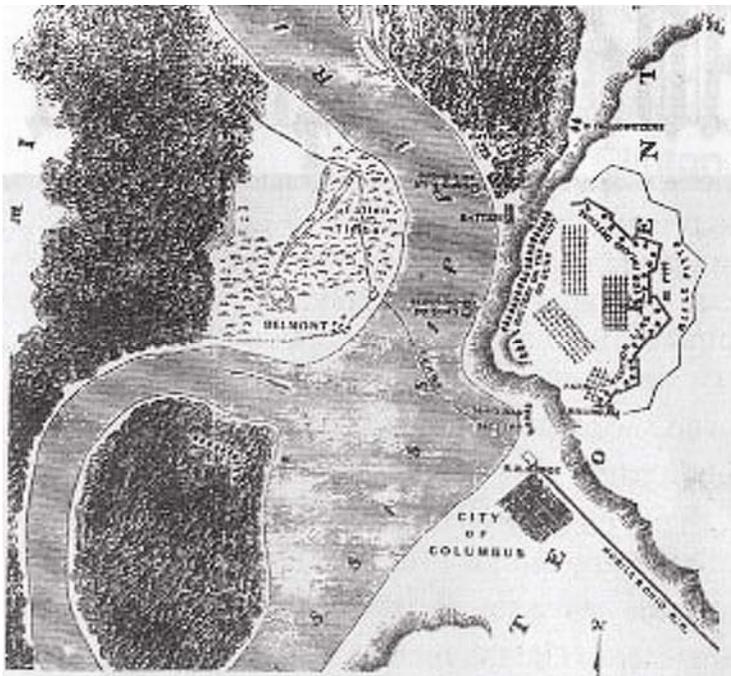


### *"The Gibraltar of the West"*

A thirty-two pound Sea Coast cannon (largest Civil War cannon in Kentucky), a portion of giant chain with 20-pound links and a huge anchor that once blocked the passage of Union gunboats on the Mississippi, and a network of earthen trenches were part of an impregnable Confederate stronghold known as "The Gibraltar of the West." These artifacts, as well as a house believed to have been used as a hospital, are preserved at Columbus-Belmont State Park.

The Battle of Belmont, which took place on November 7, 1861, cost the country more than 1,000 casualties and in reality neither side was the victor.

Control of Columbus was critically important during the Civil War and many strategies were planned by both sides to control the position. In addition, the Battle of Belmont was instrumental in the rise to power of one General Ulysses S. Grant, who led Union forces on that day.



### *The Columbus Fortifications*

In September 1861, Confederate General Leonidas Polk, who was also the Bishop of Louisiana, moved his forces from Tennessee to occupy the heights at Columbus, Kentucky and established a camp at Belmont on the Missouri side of the river.

Throughout the autumn and winter, as many as 19,000 Confederate troops labored incessantly to make the position at Columbus impregnable. A floating battery was positioned on the Mississippi including river streamers which were converted to gunboats; more than 140 guns were positioned on the bluffs; and a huge chain, firmly anchored on the Columbus shore and resting on rafts was stretched across the river. In addition, numerous trenches were dug at Columbus to further fortify what would be called Fort DeRussey.

According to William G. Stevenson, who served in the Rebel army at the Columbus fortifications, the lifestyle at Fort DeRussey was one of "hard work and harder drill." He noted that "... at one time we worked 12 hours out of every 36 so every other work turn came at night. Generals Polk, Pillow, Cheatham, and McGown were present day and night encouraging the men with words of cheer. General Pillow at one time dismounted and worked in the trenches himself to quiet some dissatisfaction which had risen."

"An immense amount of work was performed here," Stevenson continued in his account. "A range of hills running parallel to the river rises directly north of the town. On these hills most of the batteries were erected, and extensive breastworks were also thrown up. On the river side were the heaviest batteries. A sand-bag battery mounting six heavy guns was constructed at the upper end of the town ... This battery was constructed by filling corn-sacks with sand, and piling them up in tiers, leaving embrasures for the guns.

"Torpedoes and other obstructions were placed in the river; but all this kind of work was done secretly by the engineer corps, and the soldiers knew but little of their number and location. Some of these torpedoes were made of cast iron at Memphis and Nashville, and would hold from 100 to 200 pounds of powder as a charge. Others were made of boiler plate, of different shapes and sizes. They were to be suspended near the surface of the water by chains and buoys, and discharged by wires stretched near the surface, which a boat would strike in passing over them."

In a letter written early in January 1862, General Polk said of the works at Columbus: "We are still quiet here. I am employed in making more and more difficult the task to take this place ... I have now, mounted and in position, all round my works, 140 cannon of various calibers, and they look not a little formidable. Besides this, I am paving the bottom of the river with submarine batteries to say nothing of a tremendous heavy chain across the river. I am planting mines out in the roads also."

Union General Halleck in a letter to General McClellan stated: "Columbus cannot be taken without an immense siege-train and a terrible loss of life. I have thoroughly studied its defenses - they are very strong; but can be turned, paralyzed, and forced to surrender."

### *"Pillow's Folly" - the giant chain*

The town of Columbus was an early objective for both Union and Confederate Armies. To ensure that no enemy vessels sneaked past the fortifications at Columbus, the Confederates strung the big chain – said to have been more than a mile long – across the river, securing it on the Columbus end with a huge anchor.

A poster that has hung in the park museum for many years provides some of the only details known about the anchor. According to the poster, the anchor was taken from the Washington Naval Yard and brought up the Mississippi from Mobile Harbor in Alabama by Southern sympathizers when the war broke out. The poster also said that the chain was floated across the river on log pontoons, then tied to two large sycamores on the Missouri shore. A capstan allowed it to be raised or lowered. The anchor's weight and the swift Mississippi current eventually caused the chain to break.

Estimates of the anchor's weight range from 4 to 6 tons. Its hooks measure 9 feet from point to point. Each link of the chain is 11 inches long and 6 inches across. About 65 feet of the chain and anchor are displayed at the park.

In one historical account, the chain was referred to as "Pillow's Folly," an apparent reference to General Gideon Pillow of Tennessee, commander of Confederate troops along the Mississippi and logically the author of the chain idea. Very little about the chain was ever recorded in military reports from Columbus, which probably resulted in much local folklore.

### *"Lady Polk"*

During the Battle of Belmont, Fort DeRussey, situated high on the Columbus bluffs, raked Grant's lines with merciless fire from its 140 cannons. One of the guns, known as the "Lady Polk" in honor of the wife of General Polk, was the largest breech-loading cannon in use at the time. It was an 8-ton, rifled gun, capable of firing 117-pound, cone-shaped projectiles for three miles.

The projectiles prepared for this gun had copper saucers attached to the bottom with flanges fashioned to fit the rifles. The flanges were too large and had to be filed to fit the gun.

During the Battle of Belmont, the heat from firing the gun expanded the barrel and after the battle it was left loaded with unfired projectiles. Four days later when the Lady Polk was fired again, it exploded, broke into three pieces, and 11 men were killed and 20 wounded.

### *The Strategies of Grant and Polk in the Battle of Belmont*

The Battle of Belmont was highly significant in the Civil War because it marked the opening of the campaign in the West, as well as the opening of the Mississippi River to Union supplies.

On September 1, 1861, Brigadier General U.S. Grant, in command of the Union District of Southeast Missouri, seized Cairo, Illinois on the Mississippi and Paducah, Kentucky on the Ohio. Grant was preparing to occupy the heights of Columbus, Kentucky when General Lenoidas Polk moved up from Tennessee with a considerable force and seized the strategic position for the Confederates, establishing his impregnable fortress at Columbus and a camp at Belmont on the Missouri shore across the Mississippi River.

Control of Kentucky was vital to the fortunes of the Union, just as it was to the success of the rising Confederacy. When General Polk seized Columbus, the neutrality that Kentucky had endeavored to maintain in the sectional struggle was violated, and public opinion swept the state into active support of the Union cause. While the

political consequences of the occupation of Columbus were ultimately disastrous to the Confederacy, the immediate advantages were important as the first naturally strong defensive position south of Cairo.

Even President Lincoln, a Kentucky native, was cognizant of the importance of the state to the Union cause when he said, "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game."

Following the occupation of Columbus, which became the most heavily fortified area the North American Continent had ever witnessed, the Confederates extended their line of defense in the West to Fort Henry on the Tennessee River, Fort Donnelson on the Cumberland River, and on to Bowling Green.

Upon establishing his forces at Cairo, Grant suggested the desirability of taking Columbus from the Confederates, but his superiors paid him no heed.

Early in November, Grant was advised that General Polk was sending reinforcements from Columbus to General Sterling Price in Missouri and it was of vital importance that this movement be stopped. On the morning of November 7, 1861, Polk sent 2,500 men, under the command of General Gideon Pillow, across the Mississippi and took up positions just beyond the camp at Belmont in Missouri. Grant landed a force of 3,100 men on the Missouri shore. Grant's forces were escorted by the two gunboats "Tyler" and "Lexington."

When Polk learned of the Federal approach, he thought it was a feint to disguise an attack on Columbus itself, which was the obvious goal of the advance. When he sent General Pillow across the river he was playing along, but kept his main line of forces in Columbus. Little did he know, Grant had no intention of attacking the well-fortified camp on the Columbus side.

Grant, meanwhile, made an aggressive decision: he would attack Belmont at dawn. By 8:30 a.m., his men were ashore three miles above Belmont. Grant posted a regiment to guard his transports and ordered the rest of his force forward.

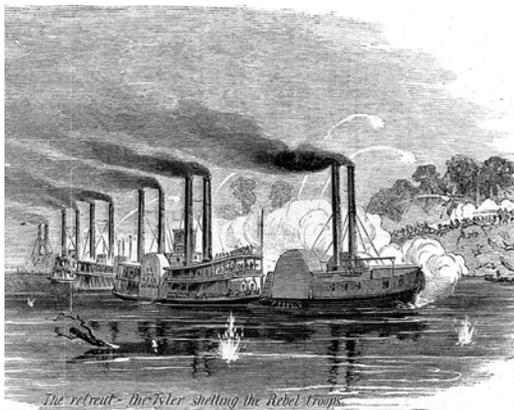
In the lead was a company of the 22nd Illinois under Captain John Seaton, who specialized in skirmish-line tactics. Seaton made this speech to his men, "Many of us have seen the sun rise for the last time. I do not know what the crucial test may cause, but – if I should show the white feather, shoot me dead in my tracks and my family will feel that I died for my country."

A few moments later, muskets rattled and the battle was on. The fierce fighting began at about 10:30 a.m.; it was not to end until sunset.

"They opposed us step by step," Seaton wrote, but his men forced Confederates "from tree to tree." Grant was at the front rallying his troops. His mount was shot; he took an aide's horse and galloped forward.

Polk, meanwhile, sent General McGown with a force of infantry and artillery up the east bank of the river to reinforce his troops. Grant bore down upon the Confederate position, and the Rebels stubbornly resisted. Gradually, the Union forces drove the Confederates to the riverbank and captured the camp, setting fire to it while celebrating their supposed victory.

Across the river in Columbus, General Polk was surprised to find no attack developing on his main position. He ordered heavy cannon fire on the Federals in Belmont and sent several regiments to land between them and their boats.



General Benjamin Cheatham, landing Confederate reinforcements, attacked Grant's column on the flank as it withdrew from Belmont. The Federals' celebration turned suddenly to panic. Some of the officers thought surrender was the only answer. Grant's reply was: "We must cut our way out as we cut our way in."

Losses were heavy for the Union forces as they retreated to their transports waiting at the bend of the river. During the course of the second battle, the "Lexington" and "Tyler" made three unsuccessful attempts to silence the batteries at Columbus which were raking the retreating Union lines. But finding the shore guns too powerful to be silenced, the gunboats also retreated up the river. The Union forces

did succeed in reaching their transports, and, covered by protective fire from their gunboats, re-embarked.

Grant himself was nearly left behind. He wrote, "The captain of a boat that had just pushed out recognized me and ordered the engineer not to start the engine; he then had a plank run out for me."

The Federals had been driven away and the confederates counted Belmont their victory, as did the Union. In fact, neither side had won or lost, and the Battle of Belmont resulted in the loss of 1,000 lives. According to Polk's report on the battle, his casualties numbered 641 and he estimated the Union loss at 400 to 500. He also noted that General Grant was "reported killed."

### *The Aftermath*

This first major battle of the Western Campaign did enhance Federal morale, even though it ended all serious efforts to take Columbus by direct assault. It was also a milestone in the career of Ulysses S. Grant. In a period when generals on both sides felt ill-prepared to meet the enemy and Lincoln was growing desperate for action, Grant showed himself willing to fight. The battle and its aftermath proved Grant's strategical genius as well.

In his post-battle report, Grant wrote: "From all the information I have been able to obtain since the engagement, the enemy's loss in killed and wounded was much greater than ours. We captured 175 prisoners, all his artillery and transportation, and destroyed his entire camp and garrison equipage. Independent of the injuries inflicted upon him, and the presentation of his re-enforcing Price or sending a force to cut off the expeditions against Jeff. Thompson, the confidence inspired in our troops in the engagement will be of incalculable benefit to us in the future."

The Union troops proceeded to capture the weaker positions nearby at Fort Henry on the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland. The capture of these positions in February of 1862 not only opened the way to Central Tennessee, but also outflanked Columbus. General Polk favored standing a siege in the elaborate earthworks so laboriously constructed at Fort DeRussey, but was overruled and Columbus was evacuated. Columbus was occupied by the Union forces on March 3, 1862, resulting in the reopening of the Mississippi and the severing of the Confederacy.

### *Columbus and the Flood of '27*

In the years following the Civil War, Columbus enjoyed a steady growth in population and income. Commercial enterprises were attracted by favorable shipping and railroad rates. The Mobile and Ohio Railroad, originating from Mobile in 1852, was built to Columbus and the town continued to grow. It had a population of 2,600 in 1870 and 3,100 in 1880. In 1871, the St. Louis and Iron Mountain Railroad was built to Belmont and a ferry made it possible for connection and transport to the South.

Meanwhile, Columbus had changed from a thriving riverboat town to a factory town. With an ample supply of timber and splendid shipping capabilities by river and rail, many mills were operated in the city, employing much of the male population.

The commercially advantageous site on the river, however, was subject to flooding and many times the town's buildings were affected by flood waters. In 1927, the greatest flood in Mississippi River history swept away the protection levee and the town was virtually destroyed. Only 13 of the town's buildings were left untouched; while 43 were swept down the river and the rest were seriously damaged.

The flood was a catastrophe for Columbus and its citizens. The Red Cross sent money and a man of vision to help them. Mr. F. Marion Rust, in charge of flood relief after the disaster, conceived the idea of moving the shattered town from its site along the river to the top of the high bluffs away from the raging waters of the Mississippi. Both through Rust's efforts and the active support of Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, this idea was implemented with an appropriation of over \$90,000 from the Red Cross. It was thought to be the first time in history that an entire town was moved to a new location. Mr. Rust also became deeply interested in the well-preserved remains of the old Confederate fortifications at Columbus and led the effort for development of Columbus-Belmont State Park. Originally known as Columbus-Belmont Battlefield Memorial Park, this area became a part of the state park system on February 10, 1934.