



Dover Hotel: The Surrender House

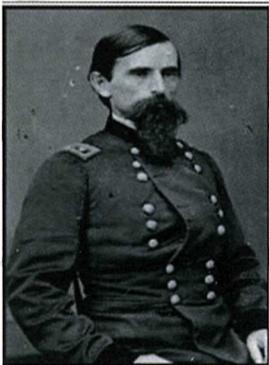


Located on the banks of the historic Cumberland River in Dover, Tennessee, the Dover Hotel is representative of the region's deep roots in Civil War history. It was here that the momentous surrender of Fort Donelson took place, changing the course of the Western Theater of the Civil War. Today, the Dover Hotel stands alone as the only original existing structure where a major Civil War surrender took place.

On the Cumberland River

Built between 1851 and 1853, the Dover Hotel has an interesting history. With its prime location on the banks of the Cumberland River and on Petty Street, the main road into town, the hotel was the first to be seen by riverboat travelers as they stepped onto the main landing. As one of three hotels in Dover, the Dover Hotel offered the best accommodations in town.

The Cumberland River, then as now, served as an important waterway from the Allegheny Mountains in Kentucky through Tennessee, allowing travel and shipping into the vital river ports of Nashville and Paducah. A small town with few inhabitants, Dover served as a stopover for riverboat traffic overland stages between Clarksville and Paris.



The best description of the hotel comes from Union Brigadier General Lew Wallace. Upon learning of the surrender, Wallace visited the hotel and ate breakfast with General Buckner and his staff, all of whom he was acquainted with before the war. He wrote:

"[The] tavern [was] double storied, unpainted, and with windows of eight-by-ten glass...The entertainment furnished man and beast was good of kind; though at the time mentioned a sleepy traveler [some] might have been somewhat vexed by the explosions which spiced the good things of a debating society that nightly took possession of the bar-room, to discuss the relative fighting qualities of the opposing sections."

Making History

With the fall of forts Henry and Heiman on the Tennessee River about twelve miles northwest of Dover in early February 1862, Confederate hopes were turned to Fort Donelson. Confederate forces infiltrated the city and its surroundings, including the Dover Hotel. Described as a "tavern" in most accounts, the hotel became the headquarters for Confederate General Simon Bolivar Buckner and, perhaps as some have concluded, Commanding General John Bell Floyd as well. Its claim to fame would not come until the morning of February 16 with the historic meeting between Buckner and Union General Ulysses S. Grant.

On the evening of February 15, after three days of fighting, Confederate Generals Floyd, Buckner, and Gideon Pillow held a war council at the nearby Rice House. It was there that the decision to surrender the fort was made, with Buckner taking command as Floyd and Pillow fled to Nashville. Early on February 16, Buckner communicated the decision to Grant who responded with the immortal words: "No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted." Buckner accepted the "ungenerous and unchivalrous terms" and the official surrender took place at the Dover Hotel later that morning.

Beyond the Civil War

With Fort Donelson under Union control, the Dover Hotel became a hospital for the small garrison left behind to defend the fort. As the war ended and army left the area, the building became a hotel once again.

In the years that followed the Civil War, the Dover Hotel underwent many changes, and had many owners before falling into a state of delapidation. In 1927, with the last owner, Elizabeth Hobing, planning to have the hotel razed, the Fort Donelson House Historical Association was formed to save the structure.

After a restoration project was completed, the hotel opened to the public as a historic structure and museum in September 1930 as the Fort Donelson House. In 1959, the Association donated the hotel to the National Park Service where it was included as part of Fort Donelson National Battlefield.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is this the original structure?

The appearance of the hotel today is the result of an architectural restoration project in the 1970s. Approximately 20 percent of the structure is original, including the floor sleepers, most of the frame, the foundation, and one of the chimneys.

What did the inside of the Dover Hotel look like in 1862?

No reliable information as to the interior layout of the hotel exists.

How many rooms did the Dover Hotel have?

In 1862, at the time of the surrender, the hotel is believed to have had eight bedrooms of approximately eight square feet located on the second floor.

Where in the hotel did Grant and Buckner meet?

According to most sources, Buckner was eating breakfast at the time of Grant's arrival. Many believe that the dining room was located in the hotel basement; if so, perhaps Grant and Buckner had their meeting there.

Did the conversation portrayed in the film take place in the Dover Hotel?

No, the war council took place at Pillow's headquarters at the home of Confederate Major J.E. Rice, located approximately one block from the hotel. The Rice House was lost in a fire in 1863 that consumed all but four buildings in the city of Dover. The Dover Hotel was one of the four buildings saved.

The Dover Hotel is touted as the only original existing structure where a Civil War surrender took place. Isn't Appomattox Court House an original structure?

No, the original Appomattox Court House was dismantled in the 1890s with the intent of moving it to Washington D.C. as a tourist attraction. The project lost funding and the dismantled building was abandoned for almost fifty years. In April, 1940, the Appomattox Court House Historical Monument was created and the building was subsequently rebuilt.

Visit the National Park Service website at www.nps.gov/fodo for more information.