

South Mills, Battle of ^[1]

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by Paul Branch and Thomas L. Norris Jr., 2006

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Brig. Gen. Jesse L. Reno. Image courtesy of Albemarle-NC. Col. Ambrose R. Wright. Image courtesy of Albemarle-NC.

The Battle of South Mills, a [Civil War](#) ^[3] engagement also known as the Battle of Sawyer's Lane and the Battle of Camden, occurred in [Camden County](#) ^[4] on 19 Apr. 1862 at the south end of the [Dismal Swamp Canal](#) ^[5]. After the [Confederacy](#) ^[6] lost [Roanoke Island](#) ^[7], [New Bern](#) ^[8], and [Fort Macon](#) ^[9], the Union's Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside sought to blow up the locks of the canal at South Mills. He hoped to prevent the Confederates from passing their small [ironclad](#) ^[10] gunboats through the canal to Albemarle Sound and threatening Union forces in the region. Burnside mounted an expedition in cooperation with Federal gunboats to move up the Pasquotank River. Brig. Gen. Jesse L. Reno commanded the expedition of 3,000 men.

Soon after midnight on the morning of 19 April, Reno's force landed about four miles below Elizabeth City. Local Confederates, led by Col. Ambrose R. Wright, had prepared for the enemy. They dug a ditch across the road with marsh woodland at each end, then filled it with wood from fences and buildings and set it on fire to block the Union's movement. This ditch, known as "the roasted ditch," is still extant.

Wright, commanding 900 men, stationed five companies and three guns in a ditch crossing the road on which Reno was advancing. Reno's troops arrived late in the morning and deployed for attack. Wright's outnumbered men held off the Union force for four hours, until they had exhausted their ammunition. Wright fell back and assumed another defensive position, but Reno's men were too shaken and exhausted to follow.

Reno himself was troubled by inaccurate rumors of massive Confederate reinforcements assembling at Norfolk and abandoned the expedition, returning that night to the Federal ships below Elizabeth City. In the engagement, Reno lost 13 killed, 101 wounded, and 13 missing. Wright lost 6 killed, 19 wounded, and 3 captured.

References:

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Origin - location:

[Camden County](#) ^[16]

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