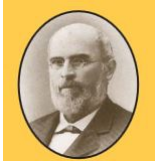


Bridgers, Robert Rufus ^[1]

Bridgers, Robert Rufus

by H. C. Bridgers, Jr., 1979

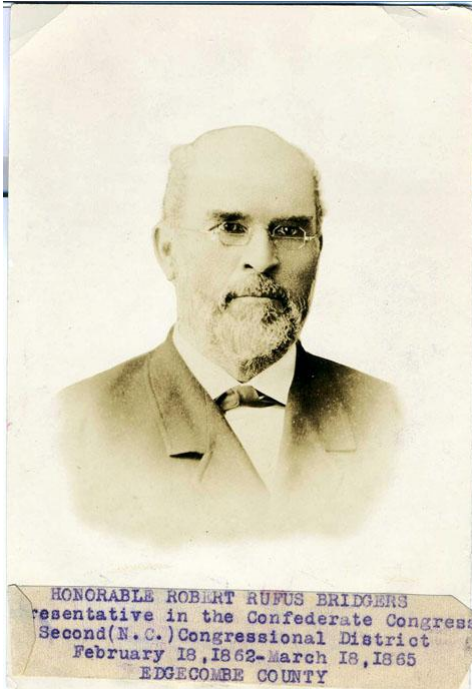
28 Nov. 1819–10 Dec. 1888



Potter's raid" Civil War
Trail marker courtesy of
the North Carolina
Digital Collections.

^[2]Robert Rufus Bridgers, *Confederate* ^[3] congressman and railroad official, elder son of Elizabeth Kettlewells Routh and John Bridgers, was born on a farm in southwestern *Edgecombe County* ^[4]. Failing to apply himself during early education under Elder Mark Bennett at Town Creek Academy, he was put to work on the farm at age thirteen. Two years later, having acquired an appreciation for education, he attended Stony Hill Academy in *Nash County* ^[5]. He was graduated from *The University of North Carolina* ^[6] in 1841 with distinction, delivering his commencement speech on the science of law. Throughout his life he remained a staunch friend and supporter of the university. When the alumni association was organized in 1843, he was a charter member. He was a frequent donor to the university and a university trustee from Edgecombe County from 1858 to 1868 and from *New Hanover County* ^[7] from 1879 to 1888.

Bridgers began law practice in Tarboro and soon entered the mercantile business and politics. He served as representative from



R.R. Bridgers. Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History. ^[8]Edgecombe County in 1844 and again from 1856 to 1860. He was extremely interested in agriculture and acquired extensive landholdings in Edgecombe and Halifax counties and in Florida.

On 11 Dec. 1849, Bridgers married Margaret Elizabeth Johnston (26 Aug. 1832–29 Aug. 1907), daughter of Emily Norfleet and Henry Johnston of Tarboro. Their children were Emily, Robert R., Preston L., Mark, Luther, George J., Mary, and Frank W. Margaret and Robert Bridgers were Episcopalians, and both were substantial contributors to Calvary Church in Tarboro and St. James Church in *Wilmington* ^[9].

Bridgers was one of the organizers of the Tarboro branch of the *Bank of North Carolina* ^[10] and in 1859 became its president, a position he held until the bank was forced to close in 1865. He was also instrumental in the construction of the Tarboro branch of the *Wilmington and Weldon Railroad* ^[11], becoming its president in 1865.

He was often called colonel, but no record of his military service during the *Civil War* ^[12] has been found. Indications are that poor health precluded such service. However, his contribution to the Confederacy was substantial. He was a member of the *Confederate Congress* ^[13] from 1862 to 1865, serving on the Military Affairs and Special Finances committees. He also operated the High Shoals iron furnaces, considered the second most important in the South for production of nails and rolled material.

In about 1871, Bridgers moved to Wilmington, because he had become president of the Wilmington and Weldon and the Wilmington, Columbia and Augusta railroads. Meticulous attention to detail and a thorough knowledge of civil engineering served him well during his distinguished railroad career. It was under his leadership that an association of railroads called the Atlantic Coast Line was formed, although it was several years after his death that these railroads became a company by that name. He was also an ardent proponent of the standardization of time, serving as president of the *Southern Railways* ^[14] Time Convention.

Bridgers suffered a fatal stroke while testifying on railroad matters before the South Carolina legislature. Both he and his wife were buried in Wilmington's Oakdale Cemetery. A portrait of Bridgers hangs in the *Philanthropic Society in Chapel Hill* ^[15] and another, by R. N. Brooke, is held by the *White House of the Confederacy* ^[16] in Richmond.

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