

The Dismal Swamp Canal and the Civil War

by Claude Milot

The Dismal Swamp Canal is the oldest operating artificial waterway in the United States, going back to its completion in 1805. Throughout its early history, it was used to ship produce and merchandise between Norfolk and Elizabeth City. But commerce decreased gradually in the 19th century with the advent of railroads and highways. The canal's strategic importance grew, however, with the outbreak of the Civil War.

With Union ships effectively blockading the East Coast, the canal provided an effective way for Confederate forces to move arms and munitions from Norfolk to the Albemarle Sound and points south. That ended in April, 1862, when Union forces under General Ambrose Burnside captured Elizabeth City. Then, when Burnside suspected

the canal might be used as an escape route for Confederate ironclads, he sent General Jesse Reno with 3,000 troops to destroy the lock at South Mills. A four-hour battle took place there, and the Union troops eventually withdrew after failing to accomplish their mission. But damage to the canal made further use of the waterway difficult.

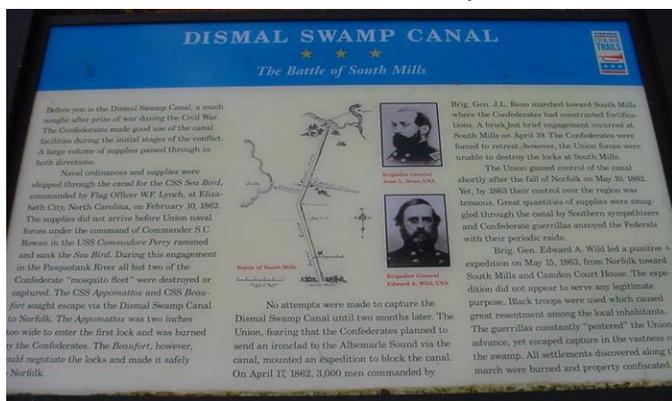


Figure 1 - The Battle of South Mills

By then it was getting serious competition from the deeper and wider Albemarle & Chesapeake Canal, which had opened in 1859. It was also getting competition from railroads and highways.

The Dismal Swamp Canal was rehabilitated in 1892 and once again saw an increase in boats carrying merchandise and farm products. Continued improvements in other modes of transportation depressed commercial traffic on the canal in the 20th century, but the canal experienced an increase in passenger traffic. Today, the Dismal Swamp Canal is part of the Intracoastal Waterway and sees 2,000 recreational boaters a year transit the waterway to avoid severe weather along the Atlantic Coast.