Battle Description:

On April 19, 1862, Confederate troops repelled Union troops for five hours at Sawyer's Lane, retreating to fortifications 2 miles north at Joy's Creek only after being outflanked from the east. Both sides claimed victory: the North because they captured the field and the South because they prevented the destruction of the Dismal Swamp Canal Locks, 3 miles northwest in South Mills, North Carolina.

The Confederate troops retreated north to the locks at Wallaceton in Virginia during the night to prevent being outflanked from the east again. Union forces retreated back to their transports at Chantilly on the Pasquotank River around 10:00 p.m., fearing the Confederates were receiving reinforcements from Norfolk. A Confederate force of about four thousand men was sent from Suffolk through Gates County in an attempt to cut the Yankees off from their ships, but they arrived too late.

General Jesse Reno's Union forces consisted of three regiments from Roanoke Island and two from New Bern. They were accompanied by a detachment from the Ist New York Marine Artillery and underwater explosives expert, Professor Benjamin Maillefert, of New York City. Their objective was to blow up the locks at South Mills, cutting off the major route for supplies to Norfolk and denying Confederate ironclads a route to the Albemarle Sound. The fear of ironclads was unfounded; the canal was far too shallow and narrow for the CSS Virginia's passage.

The Union battle plan called for Colonel Rush Hawkins and his Fourth Brigade from Roanoke Island to land at Chantilly under the cover of darkness, followed by a twelve mile forced march to South Mills. They were to capture and hold the bridge over the Pasquotank River below South Mills, preventing the seven Third Georgia companies posted on the Pasquotank County side of the river from crossing over into Camden County. Reno was to follow with his two regiments from New Bern and the explosives to blow up the locks.

In the darkness, Hawkins and his Fourth Brigade took a wrong turn onto Gumberry Road, arriving at Belcross around dawn. They stopped at the house of Lieutenant Alonzo Bell on Lamb's Road to eat breakfast. Hawkins recognized Bell as one of the paroled captives from the Battle of Hatteras Inlet. After eating, the Union column continued down Lamb's Road towards South Mills, an unintended detour of about 5 miles. Hawkins blamed the blunder on treachery by his local guide.

In the meantime, Reno's column left Chantilly at dawn and followed the most direct route past Camden Court House, stopping to rest at Lamb's Corner around 10:00 a.m. While stopped, clouds of dust and flying colors were espied approaching from the east down Lamb's Road. Reno called his men into line of battle and prepared to fire on the approaching force, thinking Hawkins was already at South Mills holding River Bridge. The supposed enemy turned out to be Hawkins and his worn-out men, several hours late. They fell in behind the fresher troops of the Second Brigade and continued northward towards Sawyer's Lane.

Around noon, Confederate artillery fire halted the Union column. The Union battery was hurried to the front of the column and a three hour artillery battle ensued, followed by an hour of combat between the infantry units. The Union advance was held up by five companies of Colonel Ambrose Wright's Third Georgia Infantry and three guns of the Giles Light Artillery, a total of about four hundred men holding off over three thousand until outflanked from the east around 5:00 p.m. The Confederates withdrew to entrenchments north of Joy's Creek; the exhausted Yankees declined to pursue them. The Battle of South Mills was over.

On the return to their ships at Chantilly, Union troops destroyed the bridge over Sawyer's Creek, set prisoners free from the jail, stripped the store of an outspoken Southern sympathizer of its merchandise, reportedly stole the gems of the local Shrine Hall, and used the Camden Court House as a rest stop. The route back to Chantilly was strewn with materials looted during the return trip.

CAMDEN COUNTY

NORTH CAROLINA CIVIL WAR TRAILS

Battle of South Mills Driving Tour

Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center
2356 US Highway 17 N.
South Mills, NC 27976
252.771.8333 ~ 877.771.8333
dscwelcome@camdencountync.gov

Driving Directions:

Begin at (1.) Dismal Swamp Welcome Center. Turn right onto US 17. Turn right onto NC 343 South and follow it to South Mills. Bear right onto SR 1247. Turn left onto SR 1245 immediately after crossing the draw bridge and follow the canal bank down to the Civil War Trails marker near the current (2.) South Mills Locks.

Retrace your route to the bridge. Turn right. Follow Hwy. 343 southward 3 miles to (3.) the Battlefield. Hawkins' troops charged across the fields to the left of the historical marker. The 6th New Hampshire's famous volley was fired from the field on the right.

Continue driving south on NC 343 ten miles to the (4.) Camden Court House, where Union troops released jailed prisoners and ransacked several buildings on the way back to their ships at Chantilly. Continue south to the stoplight and turn right (west) onto Hwy. 158, following .9 miles to the stop light at Country Club Road.

Turn left at the stop light onto Country Club Road. Proceed .7 miles - Turn right onto Chantilly Road. (5) Chantilly. Continue .6 miles to the waterfront, where Union forces landed on April 19,1862.

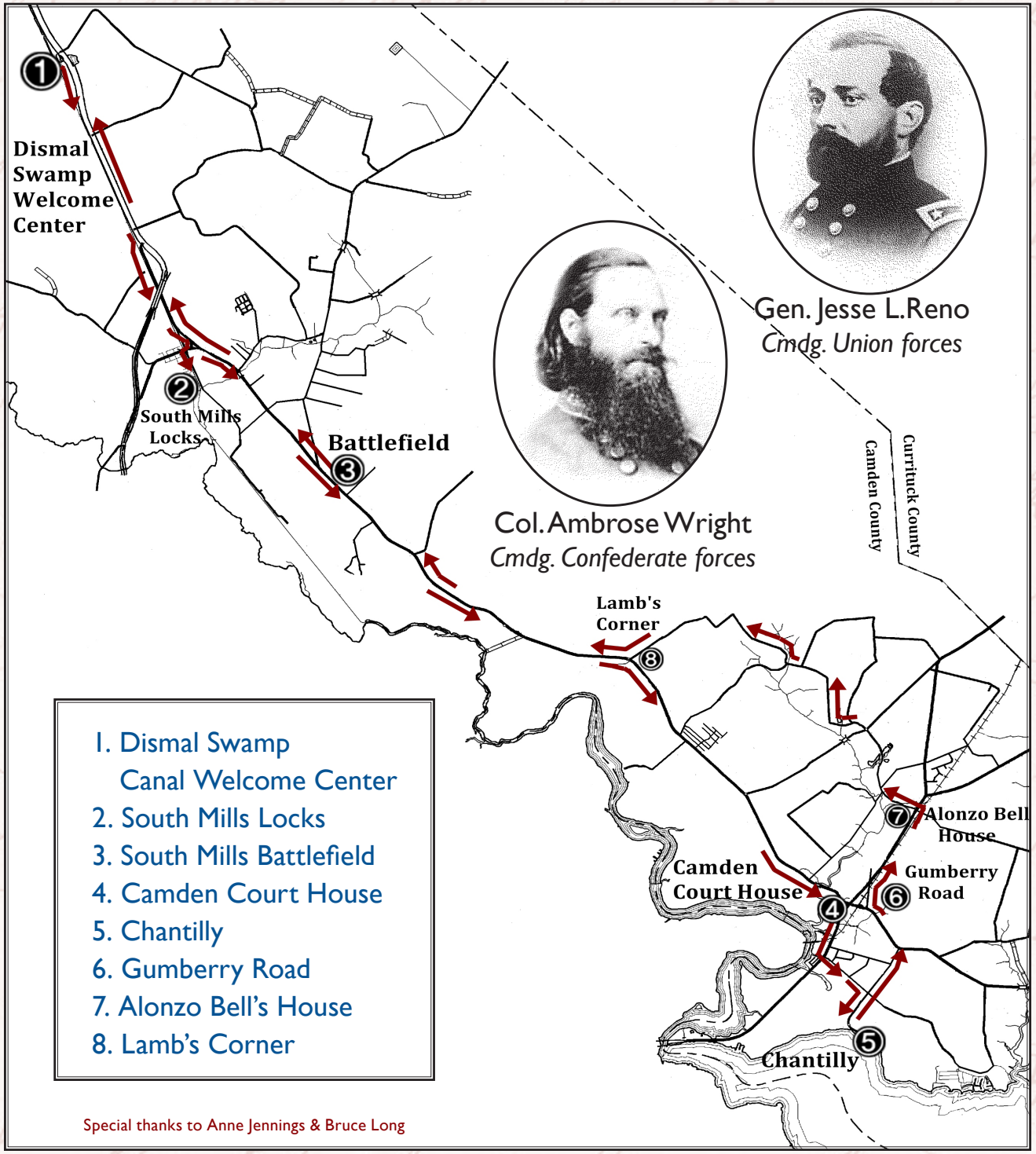
Return back to the intersection (.6 miles) to Country Club Road. Cross over the intersection and follow Seymour's Lane (.9 miles) to Hwy. 343. Turn left at the stop sign, travel .7 miles - Turn right onto (6) Gumberry Road. Hawkins' 4th Brigade made their wrong turn in the dark here.

At the end of Gumberry Road turn right on 158 to Belcross. (1.2 miles) Turn left onto Lamb's Rd. at the flashing light. (7) Alonzo Bell's House, where the 4th Brigade ate breakfast, stood near Harris Underground Utilities.

Follow Lamb's Road to (8) Lamb's Corner, (6 miles) where Reno's 2nd Brigade drew up in battle formation, facing Hawkins' 4th Brigade approaching from the east.

Turn right on NC 343. Follow NC 343 past the battlefield to US 17. Continue north on US 17 and return to the (1) Dismal Swamp Welcome Center.

Battle of South Mills Civil War Trail



Special thanks to Anne Jennings & Bruce Long