

# **FIRST BATTLE OF KINSTON**

By Dr. Lonnie H. Blizzard  
Reprint from Kinston Free Press 2004

## **Civil War Comes To Eastern North Carolina December 1862**

December 10, 2004

[LONNIE BLIZZARD](#) 

*Special to The Free Press*

In the fall of 1861, General George McClellan, Chief of the Federal Army, proposed an amphibious Army invasion on North Carolina's coast and for the Army to push inland. Brigadier General Ambrose Burnside, a friend and business associate of McClellan's, was selected to command the operation. General Burnside set out to secure a fleet capable of carrying 15,000 men. Seventy-five vessels were obtained, which Burnside referred to as a "motley fleet." It included barges outfitted with steam engines and propellers, ferry boats, passenger steamers, and tug boats. The assortment of vessels assembled for departure at Fort Monroe, Virginia. The fleet "set out" in early January, 1862, with Burnside commanding from the little tug boat named "Picket," the smallest vessel in the entire fleet. The violent storms in mid-January cost him several of his ships and men. Burnside didn't have Doppler radar and doubtfully understood a "nor'easter," which hit near Hatteras Island.

By early February, the amphibious Army had successfully taken Hatteras Island and Roanoke Island. After their capture, Burnside sent out units to invade several towns and villages near North Carolina's northeast coast. This invasion became known by historians as "The Burnside Expeditions."

In early March, General Burnside moved further inland to capture New Bern. The Confederates had regrouped and established their eastern-most defensive position at New Bern. Confederate General L. O'B. Branch had approximately 4,000 troops in his command. Expecting an assault by river, Branch had most of his big guns mounted toward the Neuse River. Burnside, expecting this, landed downstream and assaulted New Bern by land. The outnumbered Confederates were soon forced to withdraw and to set up defenses at Kinston. Burnside, in turn, ordered special services of "Thanksgiving" on March 16, 1862, for the victory just gained.

In July, 1862, General Burnside was called back to Virginia, along with 7,000 troops to support General McClellan at Fredericksburg. General



John G. Foster was left in command of the Union forces at New Bern. In the meantime, General James G. Martin had assumed the command of the Confederate brigade at Kinston. He too, along with approximately 2,000 troops, was called to Virginia by General Robert E. Lee, Commander of Confederate troops. General Nathan Evans assumed command at Kinston of the remaining 2,014 troops.

Union General John G Foster

Union General Foster continued "expeditions" into eastern North Carolina villages during the summer and fall of 1862. He began planning his most ambitious inland assault in the late fall. His goals were to capture Kinston, destroy the gunboat being built at Whitehall, and to burn the Wilmington-Weldon railroad bridge at Goldsboro, a vital supply link for General Lee.

## Union troops begin march to Kinston

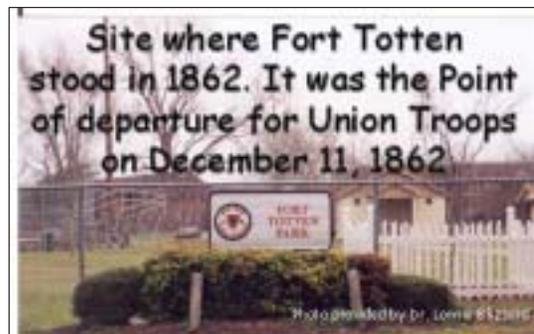
December 11, 2004

[Lonnie Blizzard](#) 

*Special to The Free Press*

By late fall 1862, Gen. John G. Foster, commander of Union Force at New Bern, had built the strength of his forces to about 18,000. He was ready to move further inland and try to cut off supply routes to the Confederate troops in Virginia.

One hundred and forty years ago today, Dec. 11, 1862, a "splendid winter morning," Foster ordered the expedition to proceed. His forces for the march numbered about 12,000 strong, including 10,000 infantry, 300 pioneers (black troops), 40 pieces of artillery, and 640 cavalry, plus more than 200 supply wagons.



The third New York cavalry was dispatched as scouts on the advance and on the side of the march. They were to act as provost guards to protect homes and probe the Confederate defenses.

Foster took Trent Road west from New Bern. The Confederates obstructed his way by "falling trees, burning bridges, and setting up pickets." Foster was not pleased because he only advanced 14 miles on the first day. The column of troops was 4 ½ miles long.

Trent Road out of New Bern today is Trent Boulevard. It intersects U.S. 17 and roughly follows it to Ten-Mile Fork. There, Trent Road follows Ten-Mile Fork Road across N.C. 41 where it changes its name to Wyse Forks Road.

About four miles west of Ten-Mile Fork, Foster ordered his troops to make camp. During the night, some of the infantry advanced through the swamps to within three miles of Trenton. They engaged a company of Confederate troops and battled for a short time. A number of Confederates were killed or wounded, including the company captain. Four Union soldiers were taken prisoner by the Confederates, and two were wounded.



The night was cold, especially for the troops trying to get their rest in bed rolls and sleeping out in the open. In fact, the water in their containers froze during the night. They were awakened the next morning to the sound of drum beats. Roaring fires were built from rail fencing. It warmed the men and thawed their water. After

a hearty breakfast of hardtack and coffee, Foster ordered the march to continue.

Meanwhile, the pioneers, working with the engineers, had pushed forward during the night, clearing trees the Confederates had cut across the road and rebuilding wooden bridges that had been burned.

Trent Road in 1862 forked near Sasser's Mill. The road "leading directly to Kinston" was called lower Trent Road. It intersected with Dover Road at Wyse Forks. The upper Trent Road today is Middle Road and intersects N.C. 58 at Leslie White's store. Both roads cross Southwest Creek, which was the Confederates' outer line of defense for Kinston.

Two other roads also led into Kinston: the Neuse Road and the Wilmington Road (today U.S. 258).

## **Union troops remain Kinston-bound**

December 12, 2004

[Lonnie Blizzard](#) 

*Special to the Free Press*

After a cold night's rest, Union Gen. John G. Foster ordered his men to continue the advance inland. They marched about 10 more miles along Trent Road to an intersection near Sasser's Mill.

The right fork led directly to Kinston, according to Foster's report. Actually, it intersected with Dover Road at Wyse Forks, which to the left, led directly to Kinston (U.S. 70).

Foster sent three cavalry companies up this road "to make a demonstration." His objective was to fool the Confederates dug in along Southwest Creek into thinking it was a direct attack. Foster and the main column of troops took the left fork, the upper Trent Road, for about four more miles before making camp. This today is along Middle Road in Jones County. Foster and his men camped near Shady Grove Church.



Meanwhile, the three companies that proceeded toward Kinston on lower Trent Road (Wyse Forks Road) encountered two Confederate scouts. After being captured, they revealed that Confederate infantrymen were at the Becton Farm near Wyse Forks. Union troops dismantled and "sneaked up" on the Becton farmhouse and killed 13 Confederates, captured 11, and burned the house.

By this time, it was dark. The three Union companies had difficulty in rejoining the main column. Foster had ordered no campfires that night. He was so near the Confederate line that he was afraid the fires would reveal his position. It was about 10 p.m. before the three companies could rejoin the main force.

Foster used a similar maneuver the next day by sending a small contingent of Union troops "to feint an attack along the upper Trent Road" (N.C. 58). Once again, they determined that Confederates were dug in well along Southwest Creek (near Patterson's Chapel).

After probing the enemy's position to determine its strength, Union forces withdrew "at a crossroads" (near Southwood School) before returning to the main column.

Foster's march on Dec. 13 continued west parallel to Vine Swamp. This route today is Lightwood Knot Road. Again, his idea was to fool the Confederates into thinking he was coming to Kinston on one of the lower roads crossing Southwest Creek.

However, he decided that the old Wilmington Road (today U.S. 258) would be the best route to make his attack. He surmised that the Confederates would be less prepared for an attack here than they would be at one of the three lower crossings, which would have lead more directly to Kinston from New Bern.

Upon reaching a crossroads (Sandy Foundation), Foster turned his column northeast along the Wilmington Road. It wasn't long before advancing cavalry scouts reported back to Foster that they had been fired upon by Confederates who were dug in on the north side of Southwest Creek.

## **Union, Confederates clash at Kinston**

[December 13, 2004](#)

[Lonnie Blizzard](#) 

*Special to The Free Press*

On the morning of Dec. 13, 1862, Union Gen. John G. Foster's troops encountered Confederates along the Wilmington Road near Woodington.



Foster ordered his units into battlefield formations about three quarters of a mile from the creek. The following is taken from General Foster's official report:

"On Saturday, the 13th - We reached Southwest Creek, the bridge over which was destroyed, and the enemy posted on the opposite bank, some 400 strong, with three pieces of artillery. The creek was not fordable, and ran at the foot of a deep ravine, making a very bad position

for us. I ordered a battery in as good a position as could be obtained, and under their fire the Ninth New Jersey, which had the advance, pushed gallantly across the creek by swimming, by fragments of the bridge and by a mill-dam, and formed on the opposite bank. At the same time the

Eighty-fifth Pennsylvania, of General Wessells' brigade, forced a passage by the felling of trees and fording about half a mile below bridge, and engaged the enemy's left, who thereupon retired and deserted his breastworks."

The destroyed bridge referred to in Foster's report was just upstream from the present bridge. About 4,000 feet of the earthworks on the north side of the creek are still well defined. About 600 feet were destroyed by a bulldozer in 2002. The mill dam is still in place, with the millhouse pilings clearly visible. It is about one-fourth mile upstream from the bridge.

The following is taken from Confederate Gen. Nathan Evan's official report:

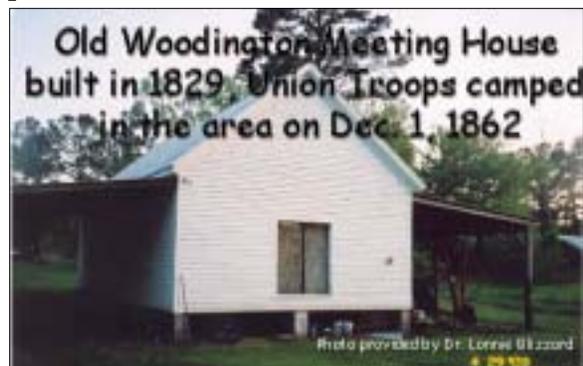
"On Saturday, the 13th instant, the enemy approached Kinston in considerable force and attacked the line of our forces under the immediate command of Col. James D. Radcliffe, North Carolina Troops, who had taken position on the west side of Southwest Creek. At 10 o'clock, I arrived on the ground and assumed command, and ordered Colonel Radcliffe to take command of the left wing at the crossing of the upper Trent Road. The enemy then was attacked at Hines' Mill while he attempted to cross the creek. After a sharp engagement of an hour, I fell back toward the Neuse River, keeping line of battle and arresting his approach about 2 miles from Kinston Bridge. He then attacked in considerable force, but retired after an engagement of ten hours. I rested on my arms that night in this position, the enemy ceasing fire after nightfall."

Hines' Mill referred to in Evan's report was sold to Waller Brothers about 1900 and became known as the Waller Mill.

It is estimated that 2,000 Union troops crossed Southwest Creek on Dec. 13. The remaining 10,000 made camp for the night on the south side of the creek. One

Massachusetts soldier wrote that they spent the night in a pleasant grove around a little church called Woodington; actually it was the Woodington Meeting House built in 1829. It was used for community meetings and by

several denominations for periodic church services. It has been moved from its original site and is now being used as a storage building on the Rigsbee Farm in the Woodington community.



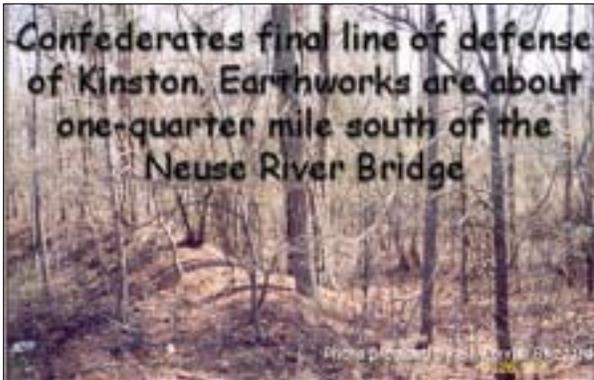
## Union takes Kinston; many captured, wounded

December 14, 2004

[Lonnie Blizzard](#) 

*Special to The Free Press*

The battle for Kinston continued on Dec. 14., 1862. Some junior officers' reports separate the two days as Dec. 13th, the Battle of Southwest Creek, which is often confused with later actions along Southwest Creek, and the Dec. 14th Battle of Kinston. Preferably, it was a two-day Battle of Kinston.



From Gen. John G. Foster's report: Sunday, the 14th instant, I advanced the column, and when about 1 mile from Kinston encountered the enemy in strong force. They were posted in strong position in the wood, taking advantage of the ground, which formed a natural breastwork. Their position was secured on

their right by a deep swamp and their left was partially protected by the river.

Much detail follows in Foster's official report about how he maneuvered his forces to advance upon the Confederate's final line of defense. He continues: Which, with the advanced already made (slowly, but surely) of the entire line, forced the enemy to retreat precipitately for the bridge over the Neuse, which they crossed, firing the bridge, which had been prepared for that purpose. Several regiments were so close, however, that about 400 prisoners were taken from the enemy. A line was formed to the river and the fire



extinguished before great damage was done.



Confederate General  
Nathan Evans

Gen. Nathan Evans' final line of defense, referred to in Foster's report, ran from the Neuse River near APAC-Barrus Construction Company and formed an arc behind King's Restaurant, across U.S. 258 near Measley Road, and tied in to a deep swamp near the Comfort Inn. Only about 800 feet of the earthworks are still standing just east of U.S. 258.

Evans' 2,000 troops lay in wait for the attack to begin. From his official report: On the morning of the 14th (Sunday), being informed by Colonel Radcliffe that the enemy was approaching his position, I directed him to open fire while I would attack his left. I ordered an immediate advance, and soon became engaged with my whole line with the enemy in heavy force - supposed to be about 20,000. The action lasted three hours, when ascertaining his greatly superior force, I retired with my command across the Neuse Bridge, when the enemy pursued with heavy fire, stormed the bridge, and drove me back to the town of Kinston, capturing about 400, including no (number of) sick prisoners.



Evans' right flank was commanded by Col. Peter Mallet. The bridge across the Neuse was known as the Jones' Bridge and was just downstream from the present bridge. There was also action along the Neuse River. Three navy gunboats and five steamboats were sent upstream to assist Foster's land forces. Confederate Col. S.D. Pool had a battalion of heavy artillery well entrenched below Kinston on the north side of the river. A combination of obstructions, low water and Pool's guns kept the fleet from reaching Kinston, however, Evans withdrew his troops from Kinston and proceeded toward Whitehall and Goldsboro on the north side of the river. General Foster and his troops spent the night of Dec. 14 in Kinston before re-crossing the bridge and burning it. They proceeded toward Whitehall and Goldsboro on December 15th on the south side of the river.

Foster's inland expedition resulted in 90 Union soldiers killed, 478 wounded, and nine missing. On the Confederate side, 71 were killed, 268 wounded, and over 400 captured. Typically, many of the wounded died within a few days after the battles. No lasting results were accomplished; Kinston was vacated without major damage, the gunboat at Whitehall survived, and the railroad bridge at Goldsboro was quickly repaired. Foster and all the Union troops returned to New Bern by Dec. 21, 1862.