

Free Bridge, Battle of ^[1]

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by Thomas J. Farnham, 2006

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The Battle of Free Bridge, a [Civil War](#) ^[4] engagement sometimes called the Battle of Comfort or the Battle of Quaker Bridge, occurred on 6 July 1863. Two days earlier, Gen. C. A. Heckman, commander of the 9th New Jersey, had led his regiment along with other Union companies out of New Bern, then in Union hands, and headed toward Pollocksville. The column arrived there at midday and was joined by additional Union troops. Heckman and his force then began the march to Trenton. At the fork of Comfort and Quaker Bridge Roads, he halted the column and dispatched reconnaissance parties to examine the bridges and fords that crossed the Trent River. His men found that Quaker Bridge had been destroyed, but Wilcox Bridge, on the road from Trenton to Kinston, remained unscathed. On Heckman's orders, the 9th New Jersey demolished it.

After spending the night near Chinquapin Chapel, Heckman sent Lt. Col. John G. Chambers with the 23rd Massachusetts and one section of Belger's Battery to the intersection of Comfort and Free Bridge Roads to hold that location. At the fork, Chambers placed one piece of artillery on Comfort Road and one on Free Bridge Road and then, with several other officers, began to reconnoiter the area. They spotted approximately 50 cavalymen from the 8th Battalion, North Carolina Partisan Rangers. The Union officers managed to escape to friendly lines, but once there, they and the rest of their men came under a barrage of artillery fire.

About that time, Heckman arrived at the battle scene. He ordered Belger's Battery to move forward and return fire; for a time, the two batteries blazed away at each other. When the defenders' guns fell silent, Heckman did not advance, hoping part of his cavalry, deployed nearby, might encounter the enemy's rear and trap the [Confederates](#) ^[5] between two Union forces. But the cavalry returned by a different route, and Heckman withdrew. He and his troops spent the night at the same burned mill where they had previously bivouacked and were back in New Bern by 6:00 p.m. on 7 July. Two Union soldiers were wounded at Free Bridge; the extent of Confederate casualties was unreported.

References:

John G. Barrett, *North Carolina as a Civil War Battleground, 1861-1865* (1960).

J. Madison Drake, *The History of the Ninth New Jersey Veteran Volunteers* (1889).

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