

BATTLE OF JENKINS' FERRY

One of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War occurred over a two day period, April 29-30, 1864 in Grant County-- The Battle of Jenkins' Ferry. The Union Army was led by Major General Fredrick Steele. The Confederate Army was under the command of General E. Kirby Smith.

General Steele and 5000 Union troops were attempting to get back to Little Rock while retreating from Camden, Arkansas after having been mauled at Mark's Mill and Poison Springs. On the afternoon of April 29 Union forces reached Jenkins' Ferry on the Saline River. This location is about 15 miles from the present day location of the Grant County Museum. When General Steele and his men reached the Saline River they saw it was flooded. The Union forces at this time employed a large inflatable pontoon bridge that was placed over the swift river allowing them to cross over. In addition to approximately 5000 men, General Steele had hundreds of wagons, mules, horses and supplies to have to get across the bridge before being attacked by the Confederate forces. Fighting broke out as they attempted the crossing and became very fierce the following day, April 30. Although the battle waged back and forth, late on the 30th General Steel and the last of his men crossed over the bridge and then cut it into pieces sending it down the river and preventing the Confederate forces from following them.

Upon crossing the river, the Union Army found the lowland on the north side of the river to be flooded and their wagons promptly bogged down. By abandoning those wagons stuck in the mud, the Union forces managed to reach the security of the higher ground north of the river. Moving hurriedly from that high ground toward Little Rock, Steele ordered all unnecessary baggage destroyed. Wagons, ammunition, clothing and other supplies were dumped along the road.

A veteran of the Jenkins' Ferry Battle remembers this phase of the expedition: "All along the road for miles were burning wagons, their contents thrown over a wide area. If all the cartridges that were sown that day should bear fruit, even sixty-fold, there would never be peace anymore."

Despite Confederate resistance and the poor conditions of the road, the Union Army arrived in Little Rock on May 3rd. General Steele was now out of danger, but he paid a high price for the consolation. He had lost 635 wagons, 2500 horses and mules and over 2750 casualties in the campaign. He had employed about 4000 men in the Battle of Jenkins' Ferry; of those about 700 were killed or wounded. General Kirby Smith's Confederate forces were estimated to have lost over 800 men killed in the battle.

A confederate private remembered the battlefield after the fighting ceased: After the battle a detail of men were employed in burying the dead. Armed with shovel, pick ax and spade they proceeded along the road to complete this mournful task which the enemy was unable to accomplish.

The ground was thickly strewn with ghostly , mangled forms. It was almost too horrible for human endurance. No conception of the imagination, no power of human language could do justice to such a horrible scene.

Some who fought at Jenkins' Ferry are noted on markers located at the battle site which is now at state park.

Please visit Grant County Museum and see in person many of the relics taken from the battle scene. It is one of the finest Civil War collections in Arkansas.

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