



Confederate Siege Line



The Vertebrae of the Confederacy

Before the Battle of Shiloh, and especially after it, Confederate officers saw the need for a line of defensive works to protect the city. The two longest railroads in the Southern Confederacy crossed here and both were vital for the transportation of men, rations and the other material of war. The strategic military importance of Corinth cannot be overstated; one side had to be defended the rail crossing at all hazards while the other would employ all available means to ensure its capture. Secretary of War Leroy P. Walker stressed the significance of the rail lines crossing at Corinth, “These roads constitute the vertebrae of the Confederacy.”

A Fortified City



Captain Samuel Lockett

Defending the city would not be an easy task. In the wake of Shiloh the Union assembled three armies in Tennessee and intended to take Corinth, their next objective in the overall goal of opening the Mississippi River Valley. The Confederate commander, General P.G.T. Beauregard, had to decide whether to retreat or dig in. He chose to dig.

Captain Samuel Lockett, a West Point graduate and General Braxton Bragg’s chief engineer, was given the job of laying out the city’s defenses. The earthworks Lockett designed were a series of strong

artillery positions connected by trenches and rifle pits. As much as possible he took advantage of the rolling topography and the swampy creek bottoms, placing artillery bastions on key ridges and hills.

Pvt. Thomas Duncan of the “Tishomingo Rangers”, a Corinth native, was intimately familiar with the countryside around the city. He was assigned to assist Capt. Lockett and on more than one occasion Gen. Beauregard himself came out and selected positions for individual fortifications.

The Landscape Transformed

Most of the labor to create the fortifications came from enslaved persons who were “impressed” or borrowed from local farms and plantations. Work crews of slaves were supervised by white officers who ensured the exacting standards of the engineers were met. As the enemy drew closer to Corinth, soldiers were included in the backbreaking work and the fortifications grew taller.

“We have made a splendid little ditch, 10 or 12 miles long and cut down all the undergrowth, and small trees and a great many of the large trees, for a mile before it,” noted Pvt. John Street of the 9th Texas Infantry. “We have cut down trees in front of our breast works about a quarter of a mile wide clear the whole length of the breastworks. They are just so thick as they can lie so that it is impossible for an army to make a charge. No cavalry in the world can get over the logs.”

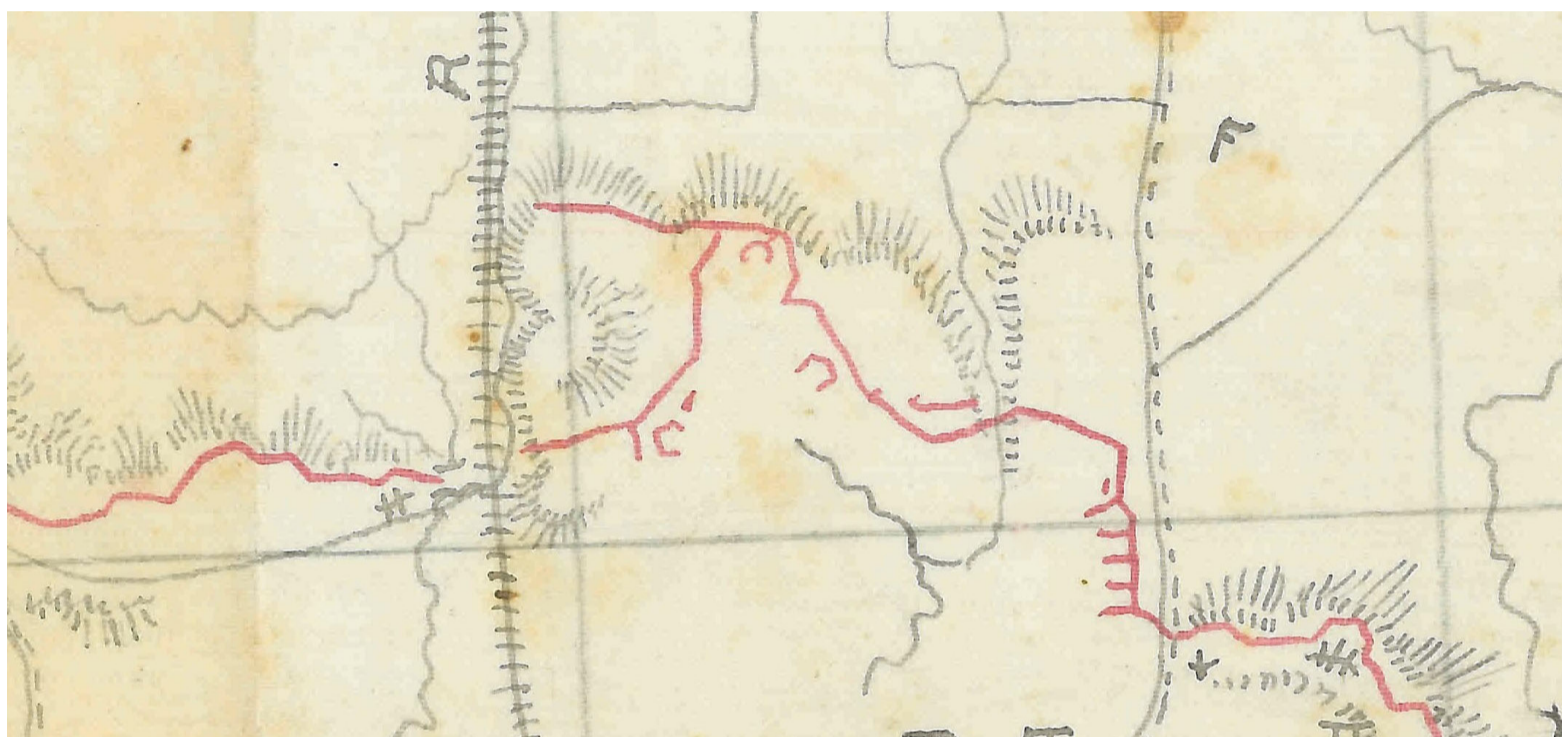
When it was finished the impressive project was dubbed “The Beauregard Line,” in homage to the fiery Creole commander; a title by which it is still known today.



“We Wait Daily for a Battle.”

Despite months of preparation the grand attack against the earthworks never came. Beauregard faced overwhelming numbers and nearly a third of his soldiers were sick. He knew he could not survive a siege, let alone win a pitched battle, so on the evening of May 29-30, his army slipped out of their earthworks and headed south to Tupelo. In a bid to fool the Union army poised on the outskirts of town the Confederates installed “Quaker guns,” along the earthworks to give the impression they were still fully manned. The guns were merely harmless logs painted black to give the impression of being the real thing.

The earthworks, however, did not go unused. On October 3, 1862, during the Battle of Corinth, Union soldiers of Hamilton’s Division manned these works north of town to defend against the Confederate attack. Heavy fighting took place on the western end of the line as the Southerners charged the very earthworks they themselves had constructed six months earlier. Unfortunately for the Federals there was a gap in their lines and an 800 yard long section of the works was undefended. Confederates in the brigade of Brig. Gen. John C. Moore discovered the gap and the works were overrun in the assault. The men in this section were forced to fall back or risk being cutoff and surrounded.



1862 map of the Confederate earthworks

Visiting the Earthworks

The Confederate siege line can be seen today though a short walk is necessary. Water, insect repellent and possibly rain gear are recommended before beginning your walk. Park your vehicle near the National Park Service sign on Polk Street, pass around or under the road gate, and proceed down the dirt road for just under one mile (do not make any turns off the main road). You will come to the trailhead on your left and a large exhibit panel. Proceed down the trail until you reach a “T”. A turn to the right will terminate at the apex of the “Salient” the northernmost of three 5-gun battery positions which made up this prominent feature of the Beauregard Line. A turn to the left will lead to three separate viewing positions which discuss the details of the earthworks. All viewing stations have wooden platforms and exhibit panels with images and text. Time has taken a toll on these earthworks and the gentle mounds and trenches bear little resemblance to their war-time appearance. The hardwood trees growing on and near the works have helped protect them from damaging erosion.

You can do your part by viewing the works from a discreet distance and refraining from climbing onto them. Digging for artifacts, with or without the use of a metal detector, is strictly prohibited and any trash brought to the site should be taken out with you.

With just a little effort we can all do our part to ensure these American treasures are here for generations to come.



For more information see Corinth Stop 3 on the Shiloh Battle App.

