



Union Siege Lines May 21-28, 1862



A Landscape Transformed

Time has changed the appearance of war-torn Corinth. The damage and destruction has long been repaired and the homes and businesses which survived the violence have in turn been replaced by newer structures. Evidence of the struggle can still be found; a few historic homes and sites in the city, but mostly in the woods to the west, north, and east. It was here that vast amounts of earth were moved to create fortifications that spanned the horizon.

The Siege Grinds On

The Federal advance on Corinth (which had begun on April 29, 1862) continued into the third week of May, drawing ever closer to the substantial Confederate fortifications. On May 21 the Union right flank took the heights to the west of Bridge Creek and consolidated this gain with a new line of earthworks. An ill-conceived Confederate plan to attack the Union left flank the next day was cancelled before it began and Gen. Beauregard reluctantly resolved to abandon Corinth. As he conceived his plans for withdrawal the Union juggernaut pushed forward, slowly but relentlessly.

On May 28 Brig. Gen. Thomas Davies' Second Division of the Army of the Tennessee advanced 1,500 yards across Phillips Creek and occupied the high ground beyond. The 50th Illinois Infantry, supported by a 12-pounder bronze cannon, was sent ahead to develop the Confederate skirmishers on the edge of a cotton field. Adjutant Charles Hubert recalled how the Confederates were driven across the field but soon rallied where upon they "raised a mighty yell and charged for the gun."

Hubert wrote, "It is impossible to describe the stress and strain which a waiting line of men endures under such circumstances. Oh how we waited, the grip on our muskets tightened until the strained sinews showed on our hands and wrists. See them come; hear them yell. Oh if we could only go out and meet them how much better we would feel."

Two additional pieces of artillery joined the Union line and began to send deadly rounds of canister into the attacking Southerners. "They waver, they halt, but their officers rally them and once again they advance yelling like demons. On they come only to be treated as before and, broken and shattered, they fall back to their works."

As the smoke of battle cleared the Union soldiers could be seen digging yet another line of fortifications. This time, however, the Confederate line was a mere 1,000 yards away, well within range of light field artillery.



Brig. Gen. George Washington Cullum

Thousands of Shovels

The shallow trenches and the gently-rounded contours of the lines seen today are a far cry from their look in 1862. Dug with military precision under the watchful eyes of engineers, the work was performed by scores of companies toiling late into the night. By morning a new line of works stretched as far as the eye could see.

Col. Henry Cummings of the 39th Iowa Infantry wrote, "There are fortifications all the way from the Tennessee River to Corinth. Sometimes these pits are only dug long enough for a regiment and sometimes, as here, they are five miles long."

Men with picks and shovels worked to create the fortifications, while others were given axes and placed upon fatigue duty, "which consisted of clearing the ground in front of underbrush and obstructions which if left would assist to cover the enemy in case of attack." It was back-breaking work and could be dangerous as well; Confederate sharpshooters frequently targeted men engaged in this duty.

End of the Siege



General Thomas Alfred Davies

During the night of May 29-30, Gen. Beauregard pulled his men out of their positions and set them marching south on the road to Tupelo; saved to fight another day. Susan Gaston, the headmistress of the Corona Female College recalled, "A noise of passing crowds, but not a word, in silence in darkness. On for hours, not a word of command heard, but on the thousands went, now, for the first time called on to fall back and give place to the invading foe."

From their fortifications the Union soldiers knew something was afoot. Adjutant Hubert watched spellbound as "all eyes were directed to the sending up of rockets by the enemy." The men speculated whether the fireworks heralded a Confederate attack or a possible retreat. It was actually a deliberate ruse by Beauregard's cavalry as was the piercing call of train whistles and buglers left behind to blow revile in the deserted camps.

At daylight Gen. Davies personally rode out with a squadron of cavalry for a reconnaissance of the strangely quiet enemy position. "I passed into their entrenchments without opposition, and finding nothing but heaps of camp equipage, tents, and the like in every direction I pushed forward to Corinth. Everything was in flames around the depot except the two hotels and the private buildings."

Davies ordered the telegraph wires to be cut and the fires around the depot to be extinguished. He then rode on to the high ground southwest of town, the site of the Corona Female College where a Confederate flag still flew from the lofty dome. "I ascended to the roof, my staff following, and ordered it to be hauled down and the Stars and Stripes raised in its place. I have the rebel flag in my possession."

The Siege of Corinth was over and the 18 month-long Union occupation of the city had begun.



1862 map of the Union earthworks

Visiting the site

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.