

Part series of frequently overlooked sites in and around Corinth, Mississippi.

Battery Powell was the Site of Intense Fighting During the Civil War

In an earlier article of this series (the one about Battery F) we talked about what a “battery” meant in Civil War lingo, so we won’t bother to go down that road again. For those of you who didn’t read the paper that day, for our purposes a battery is a fort built to be used by artillery. Once upon a time there were thirteen such forts around Corinth. Today we’re down to just one.

In the summer of 1862, the Union had control of Corinth and the post commander, Brig. Gen. William Rosecrans, had the job of defending it. He could have used the “Beauregard Line” of earthworks built by the Confederates but he didn’t have near enough men to defend such a long line. Rosecrans, or “Old Rosy” as he was known, asked his boss, Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, if he could make a new defensive line closer to the railroad junction, one which could be held with fewer men. Grant said yes and the result was the “Rosecrans Line”, a series of seven forts all within a mile of the railroad depot.

Each of the forts of the Rosecrans Line defended a key road leading into town, and was named for an officer stationed in Corinth at that time. The last fort to go up was on the north side of town guarding the road to Purdy, Tennessee. Battery Powell was named for Major Albert M. Powell, a Maryland native and graduate of the West Point class of 1860. He was the chief of artillery in “Old Rosy’s” Third Division and somebody tried to get on Powell’s good side by naming a fort after him.

During the second day of the Battle of Corinth, Oct.4, ’62, Battery Powell was in the cross hairs of the opening Confederate attack. Eleven pieces of field artillery were placed in and on either side of the fort, with thousands of Federal infantry in support. As strong as the position was it should have been a safe place to be. It was not. At 10 a.m. a full division of Confederates charged across the field and captured Battery Powell as well as all of the artillery and quite a few astonished boys in blue. The fighting was intense. Just to the right of the fort the 6th Missouri Infantry attacked the Union lines and the flag bearer, a fellow named William Huff, was shot nine times but never let go of his flag.

The Confederate victory was fleeting. No more than fifteen minutes after losing the fort, the Federals counter-attacked and retook Battery Powell. There had been no time for the Confederates to use the captured artillery, nor was there any chance to haul the trophies away. All eleven cannon were recaptured and several of the pieces were then used to fire on the retreating Southerners.

Just before the fighting commenced, a Union soldier had noticed a local woman and her child on the porch of a nearby house. There was no time to send them away and it was obvious there would be heavy fighting around the home. The compassionate soldier lowered the mother and child down a nearby well and covered the opening with a mattress. When the fighting was over the captives were returned to the surface. I've often wondered what would have become of them if the soldier had been killed. Did anyone else know they were down the well?

So whatever happened to Major Albert Powell? He survived the war, finishing out the conflict as a Lt. Colonel in command of the artillery of the Union 17th Army Corps. After the war he was stationed in the Dakota Territory and saw plenty of action fighting the Indians on the western frontier. His end came in 1868, not to arrows or bullets, but as the result of a fall from his horse.

Battery Powell no longer exists. All that remains is a single photograph, taken from inside the fort a day or two after the battle. There's little in the photo to indicate the ferocity of the fighting other than a few shattered and twisted trees. Today the site of the fort is under a local home, though a visitor to the location can easily make out the lay of the land and figure out where the fort stood.

Before you go looking for Battery Powell, come by the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center for a map which will lead you to the fort's location. Inside the visitor center take a few moments in the artifact room and have a look at the battle flag of the 6th Missouri Infantry. This is the same flag carried during the battle and is still stained with the blood of the color bearer, William Huff. The Center, located at 501 West Linden Street is open daily from 8:00 to 5:00 and can be reached at 662-287-9273.