

*A nine part series of frequently overlooked sites in and around Corinth, Mississippi.*

### ***Part Two – Corona College***

Sure, you've heard of it, anybody who reads the *Daily Corinthian* has seen something about the old female academy. But do you know where it was or how to get there today? It's not hard to find near the corner of Tate and Gaines, tucked in behind Abe's Grill on U.S. 72. Once it was one of the most important buildings in Corinth, possibly the most beautiful, though today few know the story.

In 1855, Rev. Leroy Gaston and his wife Susan moved to Corinth with the thought of opening a girls' school. Two years later their dream was realized and construction began on the magnificent three story brick structure. The land chosen for the school was southwest of the railroad junction on a high knoll, later known as College Hill. Martin Siegrist, a Swiss immigrant living in St. Louis, was selected to design and build the school, and the results were unlike anything else found in Corinth.

Towering columns with iconic capitals, castellated battlements, floor to ceiling windows and a flagpole tipped cupola were just a handful of the signature details found at the school. The interior boasted arches, columns, beautiful carpets and oak wainscoting and window sills. Maroon blinds on the massive windows "threw a lovely light over all." The boarding rooms for the young ladies were tastefully equipped with walnut cottage furniture and all the comforts they would expect at home.

The school staff consisted of seven instructors which included the Gastons. A student described Rev. Gaston as "mild, indolent, unambitious, too lenient," unlike his wife who "combined strictness with charm." In 1858, Corona College had an enrollment of ninety girls representing four states-- Mississippi, Alabama, Texas, and Tennessee, though over half of the girls were from Corinth. Unlike most female institutions in the state, the college had an entrance exam and prospective students were tested in American history, elementary arithmetic, geography and grammar.

The school was in its third year when war came to Corinth. Very early in the conflict Corinth was noted for its strategic location at the junction of the two longest railroads in the Confederacy. The city became a marshalling point for gathering troops and the college was soon pressed into service as a hospital. Classes remained in session and the young ladies showed their patriotism by sewing a beautiful silk flag for the "Corinth Rifles," a local militia unit. Festive ceremonies were held on the college grounds, first to present the flag to their boys in gray, and another to bid them goodbye as they were sent south for service in Florida.

In April of 1862, shortly after the Battle of Shiloh, General P.G.T. Beauregard ordered all civilians to leave Corinth in advance of what he believed would be a great battle for the defense of the city. The young ladies were sent home, never to return, though the doors of the college

remained open as a military hospital. When the Confederates were forced to evacuate the city in May, the Federals continued to use the building to treat the sick and wounded. Mrs. Gaston briefly stayed behind to look after wounded Confederates, but was compelled to leave suddenly when accusations of spying arose. During the October Battle of Corinth, the fighting could be observed from the cupola of the school. "College Hill" was actually an integral part of the Union defensive line, nestled in between Battery Phillips and Battery Tanrath.

Corona College survived the battle but not the war. On January 24, 1864, the Union garrison was pulled out of camp in Corinth and sent to more active seats of war. Sometime during the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup> someone set fire to the building, for what purpose one can only imagine. The Union has often been blamed for the arson but an eyewitness, only a child at the time, remembered all of the soldiers had left during the day. W.E. Small recalled visiting the smoking ruins the next morning, "A man came along and asked to borrow my toy wagon I had with me. He said people were going to use the bricks to help rebuild the town."

The silk flag presented to the "Corinth Rifles" on the lawn of Corona College is on permanent display at the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center at 501 West Linden Street. Directions to the site of Corona College can be obtained at the center, open daily 8:30 to 4:30. For more information call 662-287-9273.