



Fighting with Picks and Shovels



Battery Robinett, 1862

Silent Sentinels

Many surviving Civil War battlefields are living testimonials to the extensive use of field fortifications during that conflict. Fortifications made from mounded soil, baskets, timber, and even bales of cotton, were proven to be very effective during the war. The area surrounding Corinth, Mississippi was fortified heavily by the Union and Confederate forces who struggled for control of the strategically important town. Today, those earthworks stand as silent sentinels, bearing witness to the bloody affairs of war. They are some of the best preserved earthworks in the country, and are designated National Historic Landmarks. Viewing these fragile remnants is a highlight of touring Civil War Corinth.

The Use of Field Fortifications

Field fortifications had several purposes. The first, and most obvious, was to provide protection against incoming fire. Projectiles would bury themselves in earthworks, inflicting little damage to the soldiers inside. Second, fortifications were meant to place obstacles in front of an attacking force in order to impede and slow the assault. Abatis, trees felled in the direction of the enemy with sharpened ends, offered such obstacles. The last purpose was to provide an open field of fire in which the defenders could shoot down attacking soldiers. This fire was most effective when it could be poured into the enemy from more than one direction. The shape of fortifications was intended to provide for such enfilading (cross) fire.

Army officers of both Northern and Southern forces understood early in the war the importance of using field fortifications for both defensive and offensive operations. Advances in weapons technology necessitated a shift in warfare. The officers educated at West Point had completed courses on the science of field fortifications under the direction of Dennis Hart Mahan. Mahan's classes had their desired effect, and his influence was seen in strategy developed by his pupils throughout the war.

For example, after serving as commander of Confederate forces in and around Corinth during the spring of 1862, General P.G. T. Beauregard had this to say of his army and fortifications, "They had come to fight, and not to handle the pick and shovel.... Before I had left that gallant army, however, I had learned how readily the humbler could aid the nobler duty."

The men on the front lines found they could improve their chances for success, and more importantly, for survival, by digging in. Simple rifle pits could be dug by infantry soldiers in earnest, even under fire. These crude pits could be improved to form trenches with headlogs and ditches in front.

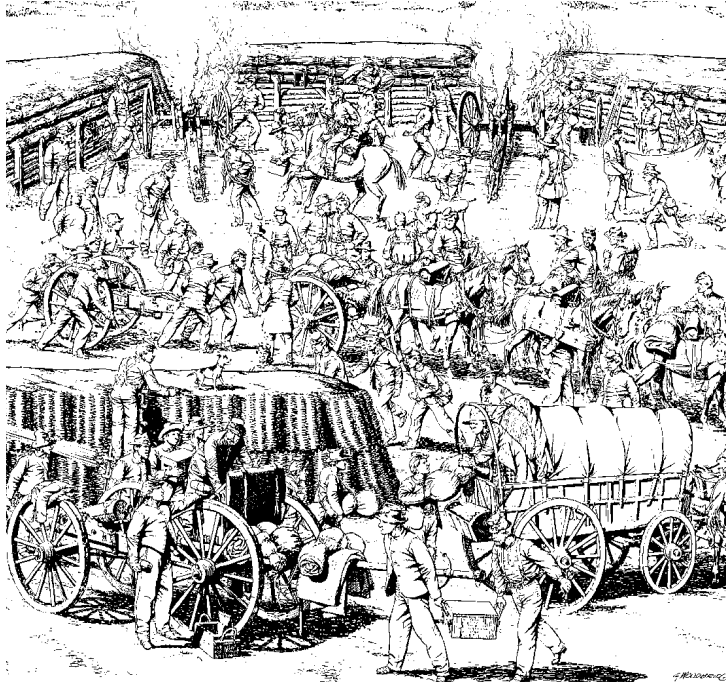
Soldiers constructing earthworks during the war



Fortified Corinth

Following the retreat from Shiloh, the Confederate Army spent the majority of April, 1862 constructing and occupying a defensive line of earthworks on the northern and eastern sides of Corinth. As Federal forces under the command of Henry Halleck advanced on Corinth, they put on

The fight for Battery F



one of the more elaborate displays of offensive entrenchments in the entire war. As the army advanced, it sent out skirmishers to clear the way, then constructed a new line of earthworks to occupy. This cautious strategy transformed the landscape between Shiloh and Corinth, and turned a 22 mile journey into a 30 day exercise in field fortification science. The strength of these fortifications, as well as the size of force, convinced Beauregard his Southern army could not defend Corinth. The use of offensive fortifications aided National forces in capturing Corinth on May 29, 1862 without the calamity of a large battle.

Fortifications for the artillery were much more difficult to build. The size of artillery pieces as well as the number of men needed to operate them required larger, more complex structures. Six such structures were constructed through the summer of 1862 around the southern and western approaches to the town and named Batteries A through F. Following their completion, Union General William S. Rosecrans ordered a new series of seven fortifications built. These positions were meant to be an inner line of defense for the rail junction and depot in Corinth that could be garrisoned by a smaller force. These earthworks were located in a semicircle within roughly a half mile radius around the rail crossover, guarding the northern, southern, and western approaches into town.

Battery Robinett

Battery Robinett, one of the structures ordered built by Rosecrans, was built on the site just east of the courtyard behind the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center. This wedge shaped work, called a lunette, was roughly thirty- five yards wide by forty yards deep, and was open to the rear. It had seven foot tall parapets, a ten foot wide ditch in front, embrasures for heavy guns, and was armed with three twenty-pounder Parrott rifled cannon.

The walls were reinforced by gabions (earth filled baskets) and fascines (woven bundles of brush). A covered way, or communication trench, linked the fort with the Memphis and Charleston Railroad cut to the south. The approach to Robinett was obstructed by abatis. Rosecrans further ordered the construction of breastworks between the seven redoubts that would offer positions in which infantry troops could fire from a protected position.

During the Battle of Corinth, the fight for Robinett was bloody and desperate. A Confederate attack against the bastion resulted in a hand to hand struggle for the position. The strength of Federal defensive fortifications proved effective against the Confederate assaults.

Battery Robinett shortly after the battle



Viewing Civil War Earthworks

The exhibits within the interpretive center demonstrate the manner in which earthworks were constructed. The earthwork outside the northern end of the building offers an impression of what a finished fortified battery position would have looked like.

When examining surviving Civil War earthworks, it is sometimes difficult to envision the scene during the 1860's. These seemingly haphazardly placed mounds of earth were actually carefully engineered and constructed field fortifications. Each structure and angle was erected to enable the soldiers inside to cover as much ground as possible with fire. The earthen mounds were reinforced with wooden planks, logs, or gabions.

To view the remnants of the fortifications in the area, obtain a map of the driving tour of Civil War Corinth. Often, the eroded, fading trace of these works bare little resemblance of the complex, massive fortifications of the siege,

battles, and occupation of Corinth. Yet, with just a little imagination, one can envision how things would have appeared to those soldiers building, manning, and fighting in these works during the Civil War.

Use of gabions and fascines

