

Grant's Chief Engineer Left Mark on Corinth

I was driving around town the other day and noticed the new building being put up by Worsham Brothers over on Highway 72. It got me to thinking about construction and contractors and how the appearance of Corinth has changed over the years. I've only been around these parts for fourteen years and I've seen a number of changes, but just talk to some of the older residents in town and they'll tell you about a whole different Corinth.

Of course that got me to thinking about how Corinth looked during the war and all of the changes to the young city. One of the men most responsible for those changes was Captain Frederick E. Prime of the United States Army.

Frederick Prime was born in Florence, Italy to American parents. He attended school in Paris and Geneva and returned to the States to become a cadet at West Point. He graduated 1st in the class of 1850 and was assigned to the prestigious Engineer Corps. He spent the years before the war travelling the country and superintending the work on a number of construction projects for the army. Most of his work can still be seen; Fort Massachusetts on Ship Island, Mississippi, Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, Fort Gaines at the mouth of Mobile Bay and Forts Wood and Schuyler in New York Harbor.

When the war broke out Frederick worked on the defenses of Washington, D.C. and Baltimore and was later wounded and captured during a reconnaissance near Mill Creek, Kentucky. Once he was exchanged he was sent to Mississippi and served as an assistant engineer in the closing days of the Siege of Corinth. In July of 1862 he was appointed as General Grant's Chief Engineer.

When Corinth fell to the Union one of the first engineering projects to be started was the completion of the "Beauregard Line" of earthworks around the city. Grant was never enthused about the venture and he was willing to drag his heels when General Halleck ordered the job to begin. Grant felt the project was too big and was convinced if

the earthworks were ever completed it would take every Union soldier in the United States to fully man them.

One evening in July Grant was having supper with General Rosecrans, the commander of the Corinth garrison. The talk turned to the fortifications and Rosecrans suggested a smaller line of defense focusing on forts built close to the railroad crossing. Grant liked the idea and after the meal they set out on their horses to seek out possible locations. Captain Prime rode with them.

Within days Frederick was ordered to commence the new line of defenses dubbed the "Rosecrans Line." The line would eventually consist of seven earthen redoubts, each strategically placed to defend a key road or railroad leading into town. High ground was chosen to ensure an unobstructed field of fire.

Captain Prime was a gifted architect and each of the forts was laid out with military precision. Detailed drawings were created to guide the work crews in building the earthworks to his exact specifications. The walls of the forts were 4 ½ feet high and on average were 20 feet thick. In front of the wall was a ditch, 3 to 5 feet deep. Embrasures were built into the works as well; these were the openings in the wall which the cannon fire through, each embrasure placed to create interlocking fields of fire between the forts.

Construction of the forts continued through the summer and one by one the redoubts were completed and named for individual officers within the garrison. The last to be completed was Battery Powell on the north side of town and construction was still in full swing when the Confederates returned in early October. While the combat was raging less than a mile away, Prime was fighting the battle with a pick and shovel.

Work crews labored throughout the sweltering day moving tons of earth. Powell was the smallest of the forts but its walls were still over 100 feet long and the amount of labor it took to complete was gargantuan. Prime worked the men mercilessly, racing the clock to finish the earthwork in time. Dirt was still being thrown onto the walls that

night as six pieces of field artillery were wheeled into the enclosure and their gaping muzzles pointed towards the Confederate lines.

Work on the “Rosecrans Line” did not end with the defeat of Van Dorn’s army. Idle soldiers are prone to get into mischief and to keep the men busy they were put back to work on the earthworks, strengthening and improving the forts and making the city impregnable. Captain Prime supervised the extension of the walls of all the forts and the addition of wooden palisades which gave the works the appearance of the classic western fort from the Hollywood movies.

Prime rejoined General Grant in time for the Vicksburg operations but the extended campaigning took a toll on his health and he was sent back east to recover. He remained in the army for 6 years after the war and supervised work up and down the Gulf Coast. For his service he was promoted to Colonel and given a brevet promotion to brigadier general, which he declined. By 1871 his failing health forced his retirement from active duty and he settled in Litchfield, Connecticut where he remained until his death in 1900.

Fred Prime is a shining example of all of those patriotic Americans who over the years have served our country in time of war, though never called upon to fire a weapon or lead men in battle. Combat is not the only measure of heroism and devotion to duty. All of the work performed by Captain Prime has been erased from our town, but there was a time when his actions changed the face of Corinth.