

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

Oliver's Hill was the Scene of Some Heavy Fighting

Who was Colonel John Oliver and why is there a hill named for him on the north side of town? He wasn't a Corinthian; in fact he wasn't even Southern. John Morrison Oliver was a native New Yorker who came to Corinth in 1862 as the commanding officer of the 15th Michigan Infantry. He had put in a strong performance at the Battle of Shiloh as well as the Siege of Corinth, and as a result he'd been elevated to the command of a small brigade. In the days prior to the Battle of Corinth his brigade was sent to Chewalla, TN., to keep an eye out for the advancing Confederates under General Van Dorn. He found them.

On the morning of October 3rd, Oliver met the entire Confederate army on its way to Corinth. He had about 500 men; the enemy, 21,000. He was so heavily outnumbered he didn't have a prayer of stopping them; the best he could hope for was to delay them for a bit. Oliver withdrew his men back into Mississippi, down the road leading to Corinth and across Cane Creek. He finally came to a halt on the steep slopes of a hill close to the crossing of the Memphis & Charleston R.R. with the Chewalla Road. The hill marked the western end of the "Beauregard Line" of earthworks, fortifications built by the Confederates back in the spring. It was here the Union chose to make their first stand against the advancing enemy.

Once across, Oliver had burned the rickety bridge over Cane Creek and it took time for the Confederates to rebuild the span and then cross their own ranks over. The Union soldiers took a shaky defensive position on top of the hill and warily watched rank upon rank of Confederates prepare for the coming charge. A sigh of relief came from the Federals when they were joined by another small brigade of troops. They were still outgunned but their odds had

improved slightly. Their job would be to once again delay Van Dorn while the bulk of Gen. Rosecrans' army arrived from camps south of town. Luckily for Oliver the reinforcing troops were led by Brigadier General John McArthur, truly the right man in the right place at the right time.

John McArthur (no relation to that other famous General McArthur) was a native Scotsman and a born fighter. He was 35 years old and, as Gen. Rosecrans said, "General MacArthur's Scotch blood rose" and he took command with a will. As the senior man on the hill he positioned the men of both his and Oliver's brigades, "borrowed" a third brigade from another division and appropriated as much artillery as he could lay his hands on. Unfortunately for McArthur the earthworks ended before they reached the top of the hill and most of his men were without protection.

When the Confederates attacked it was with a fury. Maj. Gen. Mansfield Lovell's Division slammed into the Oliver's Hill defenses and the fighting was bitter. It was give and take for over an hour and both sides took heavy casualties. McArthur masterfully directed his troops and held back the superior force but the final outcome was inevitable. The tide finally turned in favor of the Confederates when a large gap in the Union lines was discovered and Southern troops began to pour through. A soldier from the 7th Illinois Infantry told how they were nearly encircled, "Rebels on our right and rear; rebels on our left and rear; soon their right and left columns will meet; soon we will be surrounded if we remain here." The Federals fell back several hundred yards and rallied for another stand.

Among the Union losses on Oliver's Hill was a 20 pounder Parrot Rifle (named for the cannon's designer, not the bird) from Richardson's Battery, 1st Missouri Light Artillery. As the

Confederate lines swept forward the cannon fell into Southern hands. The cannon itself was distinctive as the black cast iron barrel had been graced with painted white letters spelling out “Lady Richardson” in honor of the battery commander’s wife. A last minute attempt to haul the cannon off failed and it became a trophy of war. But who’s trophy? It was a big thing to capture a cannon or a flag during the war and both the 22nd and 33rd Mississippi Infantry took credit for capturing it. Their claims and counter claims went on for years, both sides utterly convinced their own regiment had taken the prize. The “Lady Richardson” would eventually be recaptured by the Union at the siege of Vicksburg.

Oliver’s Hill was the scene of the first of several bloody engagements in Corinth over the next 24 hours. The Confederates took the high ground, but the Federals held it long enough to allow reinforcements to arrive from Kossuth. Colonel Oliver did well on the heights but the man of the hour was really General John McArthur. Perhaps it should have been called McArthur’s Hill. The Scots blood in me would agree.

For more information on what took place on Oliver’s Hill, come by the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center. The research library has copies of the reports written by McArthur and Oliver as well as all of the principal commanders at the Battle of Corinth The Center is located at 501 West Linden Street and is open 8:00 to 5:00 daily. Park staff can be reached at 662-287-9273.