

# Corinth 1862: Siege, Battle, Occupation

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## Review

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**Smith, Timothy B.** *Corinth 1862: Siege, Battle, Occupation*. University of Kansas Press, \$39.99 ISBN 978-0-7006-1852-1

### Exploring an Under-investigated Campaign

The town of Corinth, Mississippi owed its creation to the railroad. Founded in 1854, it arose at a junction between two major railroads in Tishomingo County, Mississippi: the Memphis and Charleston and the Mobile and Ohio. Completed in 1857 and 1861 respectively, the railroads literally brought life to the fledgling settlement. However, with secession and the onset of the Civil War, the railroads also captivated Union and Confederate military planners. Less than a year after workers completed the Mobile and Ohio, Union armies captured and occupied Corinth on May 30, 1862, denying Confederate forces this vital area after conducting a month long campaign. Five months later, Confederate forces attempted to retake this junction, but were repulsed after two days of heavy fighting on October 3-4, 1862.

Despite its importance and the attention garnered as a railroad hub, the fighting for and occupation of Corinth in 1862 has yet to receive adequate treatment from historians. Peter Cozzens's 1997 book *The Darkest Days of the War* examines the battles for Iuka and Corinth, while other books in recent years have briefly examined the October battle as well. Timothy B. Smith, currently teaching at the University of Tennessee at Martin and the author of multiple books including *Mississippi in the Civil War: The Home Front* (2010) fills this hole in the literature through his newest contribution, *Corinth 1862: Siege, Battle, Occupation*. Part of the Modern War Series from the University of Kansas Press, Smith examined both the military actions around Corinth in 1862 and how its inhabitants experienced these events and Union occupation.

Smith accomplished this by giving Corinth's citizens equal attention within his narrative from the opening pages. For example, Smith mentioned how the

concentration of Confederate troops in Shiloh prior to the battle of Shiloh caused many of the women and children remaining in Corinth to leave (9). After the bloodshed of Shiloh, Smith remarked how surgeons turned nearly every structure in Corinth into makeshift hospitals for wounded soldiers. Placing Corinth front and center in his narrative allowed Smith to show how the townsfolk dealt with the arrival of both the railroads and the war to their doorsteps. While many of Smith's chapters consider the siege of May 1862 and the October battle, he establishes a tone that guarantees a voice for the residents that remained in Corinth throughout the book.

Smith spent significant time assessing the siege conducted by Union Major General Henry Halleck in late April and May 1862 against Confederate forces commanded by Pierre G. T. Beauregard. Smith remarked how topography, lack of good water, and the weather all played key factors in shaping how both sides acted during the siege. The staggered start of Halleck's march on Corinth from April 27-29 reflected this, as the Union Army of the Mississippi had to traverse multiple creeks swollen from rain and would move slower than the Halleck's other forces, the Army of the Tennessee under George Thomas and the Army of the Ohio under Don Carlos Buell. Smith highlighted how a fight between Pope and Confederate forces at Farmington on May 9 altered the strategic conduct of the siege. From a Confederate perspective, he believed Beauregard did not allow enough time for Earl Van Dorn to bring his men into position for a flank attack that would have rolled up two brigades under Pope's command, but Smith gave Van Dorn sufficient criticism as well. Smith further illustrated how the battle altered Halleck's strategic outlook, as Farmington forced Halleck to adopt a much more conservative approach for the rest of the campaign. Moreover, Smith insinuated that Halleck did not fully comprehend the impact of Farmington, arguing that he did not keep as close an eye on Pope as he should have after this engagement. On the whole, Smith provided a balanced account on how the siege unfolded. Ultimately, deteriorating conditions and supplies forced Beauregard to execute a complex but successful withdrawal from Corinth that preserved his forces from capture. Despite Beauregard's actions, the loss of Corinth as a railroad hub crippled the logistical capabilities for Confederates in the Mississippi Valley (102).

Smith gave more consideration towards Confederate Major General Earl Van Dorn's attack on Corinth on October 3 and 4, 1862 against Union forces under the command of Major General William S. Rosecrans. In depicting this two-day battle, Smith delved deep into the heavy fighting, showing how

Confederate forces were able to push into Corinth itself by October 4 but were unable to hold the city. Smith criticized both commanders for their mishandling of reserves on October 3, but reserved special scorn for Confederate division commander Major General Mansfield Lovell. Lovell disregarded an order to attack on October 4 and did not move until after Confederate forces began their withdrawal. Lovell, in Smith's opinion, cost the Confederates any possibility of victory through his inaction on October 4 (254). Smith argued that Lovell's inaction does not absolve Van Dorn completely of blame for the defeat, but that both individuals significantly contributed to this setback.

Despite all the attention Smith bestowed to these actions, the reader is constantly aware of how Corinth's remaining inhabitants experienced the war. After Corinth's capture in May, Smith admits that little is known about the local government due to a lack of surviving town records, but utilizes what remaining accounts and surviving collections that he can in painting a vivid picture of how Corinth experienced the war and occupation. As the battle for Corinth engulfed the town on October 4, 1862, Smith showed how some families took refuge in a dry well to avoid artillery fire from both sides (263). These are but two examples of how Smith kept a proper perspective throughout, balancing social history with his extensive battle narrative.

In the final chapters Smith briefly touched upon Corinth in the final years of the war. Included here are discussions concerning the recruitment of African-Americans, relations between the remaining civilians and soldiers stationed in Corinth, and the Union evacuation in January 1864. In the epilogue, Smith traced the history of Corinth's battlefields since 1865, bringing Corinth toward the present day. Despite decades of neglect, recent legislation such as the Corinth Battlefield Preservation Act of 2000 and the creation of the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center in 2004 have continued a turnaround begun in the 1990s to preserve these areas (306-7). The epilogue brings forth Smith's interest in the history of Civil War battlefields and the ongoing efforts towards restoring Corinth's image in the Civil War landscape, much like Smith's book itself.

Overall, Timothy Smith's *Corinth 1862* is a needed addition to the historiography of both Civil War Mississippi and the campaigns of the Western Theater. His balanced approach ensured that the siege, battle, and occupation received proper attention throughout the work. Smith's well-researched narrative should serve as the standard text on Corinth for the foreseeable future.

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