

The Quartermaster: Montgomery C. Meigs -- Lincoln's General--master Builder Of The Union Army

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Review

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O'Harrow Jr., Robert *The Quartermaster: Montgomery C. Meigs—Lincoln's General--Master Builder of the Union Army*. Simon & Schuster, \$28.00 ISBN 9781451671926

Supplying Victory: Montgomery C. Meigs Revised

By the spring of 1861, the city of Washington was inundated with soldiers, but the Federal army was still trying to provide uniforms, equipment, food, and shelter in much the same way it had before President Lincoln called for volunteers. Providing for over three hundred thousand was not the same as providing for considerably less.

Luckily for the Union, William Seward, newly minted Secretary of State, knew a youngish captain of engineers—Montgomery C. Meigs. Rather than put older officers like Winfield Scott and Joseph Totten in the field, Meigs seemed like a good bet. He had designed and implemented the Washington Aqueduct, and had taken control on a project to expand the capitol building, promising to create a space that would, ". . . resonate with the promise of America. "

Offered the job of holding Fort Pickens, Captain Meigs quickly went about the business of designing a plan to reinforce the fort. The operation was successful, and Meigs gained the confidence of the president. By May of 1861, Lincoln had decided to make Meigs the quartermaster general of the Federal Army.

Robert O'Harrow's book, *The Quartermaster: Montgomery C. Meigs—Lincoln's General—Master Builder of the Union Army*, allows the reader a chance to become acquainted with Meigs and his massive accomplishments in a new biography that follows his subject from his early Army engineering career to becoming, as James McPherson calls him, "the unsung hero of northern victory. " O'Harrow, an award-winning author in the investigative unit of the Washington Post, approaches his subject in such a manner as to highlight Meigs'

many accomplishments without ever waxing maudlin or poking fun at the sometimes-grumpy officer. O'Harrow's Meigs is strong, honest, cultured, forward thinking, and fiercely loyal to his country and the war effort.

Meig's efforts span the entire war and include supplying Meade's forces at Gettysburg, Grant's various supply needs—from Vicksburg to Petersburg—and Sherman's army in Georgia and on the march to the sea. Whether the Union armies were in the field or in camp, Meigs was tireless in his efforts to feed, clothe and arm "his" soldiers. Author O'Harrow carefully follows Meigs and details his efforts in a matter-of-fact style. One of the most interesting parts of the book is Chapter 30, "A Vulnerable Capital. " One rarely thinks of General Meigs commanding in the field, but he did so, albeit briefly, during the July raid by General Jubal Early on Washington. Working under Major General Alexander McCook, Meigs organized over 5,000 men made up of Home Guards, clerks and invalids. These unlikely soldiers were in the process of clearing away timber and brush from the front of Fort Stevens when the Confederates showed up. The troops under Early were exhausted, and the appearance of a stout defense at Ft. Stevens was enough to hold the fort until the Union VI Corps showed up during the night of July 11-12. For Meigs, performing under the eyes of President Lincoln, this garnered a promotion. He was brevetted a major general on July 5, and signed his correspondence from Fort Stevens: "Headquarters Meigs' Division. "

O'Harrow's portrait of Montgomery Meigs is a very human one. He shows the reader many sides of this complex Union warrior—none more clearly than Meigs' disgust with his former colleagues Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee or his abiding sadness at the death of his son in action on October 3, 1864. Meigs' most well-known achievement, Arlington National Cemetery (on land that had been Robert E. Lee's home), honors all Union fallen and their grief-stricken families while clearly stating that no one who was not loyal to the United States deserves to have his rights to property reinstated.

Montgomery C. Meigs was a complicated man. *The Quartermaster* clearly outlines his myriad accomplishments and never lets the reader forget that these efforts were a vital part of the Union victory in 1865. This book is a valuable addition to those being published lately that begin to veer away from mere battle/campaign analysis, or another look at the common soldier. Meigs was an uncommon soldier in every respect, and O'Harrow's lovingly written, authoritative, and impeccably researched biography goes a long way toward

giving him his place among officers like Grant and Sherman. *The Quartermaster* will join David W. Miller's *Second Only to Grant* in a small but important list of books about this compelling Union officer.

Meg Groeling is a current contributor for the blog EmergingCivilWar, author of The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, and is currently working on First Fallen: The Life & Times of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth.