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Major General Henry W. Halleck, commander of the massive Union Department of the Mississippi, looked at the strategic situation in the spring of 1862 and immediately saw the keys to victory. Writing to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton on May 25, Halleck declared, “Richmond and Corinth are now the great strategical points of war, and our success at these points should be insured at all hazards.” That was quite a statement, given the fact that major economic, industrial, and military centers such as Chattanooga and Atlanta were still in Confederate hands at the time. Nevertheless, Halleck named the Confederate capital and the almost unknown railroad crossroads at Corinth, Mississippi, as the two keys to Union success. The importance of Richmond was evident, but mention of the small town of Corinth seemed surprising, on the surface.¹

Many others echoed Halleck’s sentiments, however. One lower-level Federal described Corinth in Lincolnesque fashion as the “key that unlocks the cotton States, and gives us command of almost the entire system of Southern railroads.” Certainly, Confederate officials agreed with Halleck’s summation of Corinth’s importance. No less an authority than Corinth’s defender, P. G. T. Beauregard, argued to Richmond immediately after Shiloh, “If defeated here, we lose the Mississippi Valley and probably our cause.” John Tyler Jr., son of the former president and now a Confederate officer, described Corinth as “the key to the Tennessee and Mississippi Valleys.” A former Confederate secretary of war, Leroy Pope Walker, highlighted Corinth’s significance when he referred to the two major railroads that crossed there as “the vertebrae of the Confederacy.” Historians have long asserted that the Confederate cabinet in Richmond even deliberated whether to abandon the capital to defend Corinth.²

Corinth’s obvious importance in the Civil War went through several phases. Initially, the town’s strategic or tactical significance was less than its logistical importance. At first, Corinth served as one of Mississippi’s, and then the broader Confederacy’s, major logistical and mobilization hubs in the western Confederacy. The fact that it sat at the junction of two of the South’s most
important rail lines is enough evidence, but the mass of troops that came and went and finally concentrated at Corinth overwhelmingly confirms the town’s initial importance as a military staging area.

Then, for a few months in early 1862, Corinth became a strategic and even tactical necessity. In fact, during the months of March, April, and May 1862, there was no more important place than Corinth in the western Confederacy and, arguably, in the South as a whole. Federal commanders concentrated almost all their power in the vast western theater on Corinth, forcing Confederate officials to do the same. The result was the iconic battle at Shiloh in April, fought over Corinth’s railroads. Then came the month-long siege in May and the capture of the town and its railroads.

Corinth’s significance to the war effort then morphed into another logistical realm, this time for the occupying Union forces. The town became the base from which Federal armies spread along the Memphis and Charleston Railroad eastward toward Chattanooga and westward to Memphis. The plan was to use this line, particularly from Corinth to Memphis, as the staging and support area for the Union advance down the Mississippi Valley, ultimately toward Vicksburg.

The role Corinth played in the Civil War changed yet again in the fall of 1862 as Confederate armies pushed forward in a massive offensive. Southern officers led their columns into Union-occupied areas of Maryland, Kentucky, and west Tennessee. Corinth became the focal point of the west Tennessee invasion, and the offensive resulted in a horrific battle in October. Although not as large as Antietam, and obviously overshadowed by it, Corinth was just as intense. The Federals repelled the offensive and retained Corinth, thus allowing the delayed Vicksburg campaign to move forward. From the Corinth–Memphis line, Ulysses S. Grant led his columns southward and eventually opened the Mississippi River, cutting the Confederacy in two.

The secured Federal bastion at Corinth had a more practical result as well. As the Union effort increasingly became a war to end slavery, the Federal government began to make provisions for contrabands, the official term for runaway slaves. Eventually, the government took over their care and began enlisting them into the Union army. Corinth, sitting on the brink of Confederate territory, was on the front lines of this racial war. Securing Corinth allowed the Federal army to care for and enlist thousands of former slaves in the most famous of all contraband camps in the western theater.

Despite its multifaceted significance, Corinth has received little attention from Civil War historians. Overshadowed by Shiloh, the highly significant May operations are often relegated to mere paragraphs, partly because the siege produced relatively little bloodshed. Yet much like the Tullahoma cam-
Campaign in 1863, Corinth’s capture by the Federals was extremely important. Taking place at the same time as the Antietam and Perryville campaigns, the October battle at Corinth has likewise been overshadowed. And because historians have only recently begun to look at the social aspects of war, topics such as civilians, race, and politics at Corinth have rarely been discussed.

But Corinth’s history has all the ingredients of a fascinating and important operation. Larger-than-life figures such as the still-learning Ulysses S. Grant, the carousing Earl Van Dorn, the dapper P. G. T. Beauregard, the portly and intriguing Sterling Price, the bookish Henry Halleck, and the rising William S. Rosecrans all took part in the campaigns. Natural phenomenon such as earthquakes and acoustic shadows baffled the soldiers, who were already confused by the fog of war. Brutal fighting that saw several brigades lose as much as 50 percent of their strength, and one lose 70 percent, attests to the vicious nature of the campaigns.

Before the late 1990s, however, only amateur and local historians gave Corinth and its surrounding operations any attention. Newspaper editor G. W. Dudley produced two short but important accounts of the local battles in the 1890s, The Battle of Iuka (1896) and The Battle of Corinth and the Court Martial of Gen. Van Dorn (1899). Monroe Cockrell located a lost copy of Dudley’s latter account and reprinted it with a version of his own story in 1955. Major historians have only recently begun paying attention to Corinth. Peter Cozzens wrote The Darkest Days of the War: The Battles of Iuka and Corinth in 1997, and Earl Hess included the campaign in his study entitled Banners to the Breeze: The Kentucky Campaign, Corinth, and Stones River (2000). More recently, Steven Dossman added a short history entitled Campaign for Corinth: Blood in Mississippi to the much-lauded McWhiney series.

As good as these works are, however, none gives Corinth its full due. Cozzens’s well-received book covers only the fall campaign, primarily the battles themselves. The story is included with Perryville and Stones River in Hess’s book. Inexplicably, little light has been cast on the siege; similarly, the occupation phases have produced few studies other than local investigations and journal articles. Fortunately, new approaches in Civil War historiography have opened the possibility for a more comprehensive examination of Corinth’s history, including the civilians that both affected and were affected by the battles, the racial issues involved in the occupation, and the political overtones of military and social events. A comprehensive account of Corinth’s important and significant role in the Civil War is impossible without this new approach, and the time has come, some 150 years after the fact, to produce such an analysis of the siege, the battle, and the occupation of Corinth. I hope this volume fills that need.
Those numerous people who aided me in the research and writing of this book over the past twenty years are almost uncountable, but a few made extraordinary efforts. The staff members at the many archives and special collections I consulted were all helpful and supportive. Many academic friends and colleagues aided me in the process as well, including my colleagues at the University of Tennessee at Martin: David Coffey, Deidra Beene, Sandy King, and Sarah Conrad. Early on, several professors at Ole Miss encouraged the dreams of a young college student, and some read parts of my manuscript. Douglas Sullivan-Gonzalez, James J. Cooke, Harry P. Owens, and David G. Sansing were all great mentors. Harry Laver and Bill Robinson at Southeastern Louisiana University helped me locate a thesis on the siege. Patrick Hotard, the author of that thesis, was also helpful. John F. Marszalek and Michael B. Ballard at Mississippi State University, where I continued my graduate education, encouraged me greatly. Professor Marszalek went far beyond the call of duty, twice reading the initial version over a decade ago and then plowing through the revised version of some 900 pages. He is the epitome of a mentor and a friend.

Numerous staff members and volunteers at Shiloh National Military Park and the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center also facilitated the process of finishing this book. My entire career in the National Park Service was encased within my work on this project, and I was fortunate to be around during the development of the Corinth center and even worked there occasionally. Jim Minor, Ashley Berry, Stacy Allen, Woody Harrell, and Tom Parson all aided me in one way or another. In addition to facilitating my research there, Tom Parson, the Park Service’s chief authority on all things Corinth related, read the manuscript twice and made many helpful suggestions and corrections.

Other people in and around the Corinth community contributed to the process as well. Van Hedges graciously opened his massive collection of Corinth Civil War materials to me, as did Dr. William G. Jackson. Kristy White, Anne Thompson, and Gale Judkins helped me track down some elusive information on Corinth’s citizens. Margaret Greene Rogers, now deceased, aided me in my initial research. Greg Williams allowed me to utilize his huge collection of Civil War regimental histories.

Working with the University Press of Kansas has been a wonderful experience. Mike Briggs supported the project from the first and ushered it through the publication process. Susan Schott and Larisa Martin made the marketing and editing aspects easy and enjoyable, and copyeditor Linda Lotz did a wonderful job on the text. The historians recruited by the press, Bill Shea and an
anonymous reader, added many useful suggestions and comments. George Skoch created the wonderful maps.

Obviously, the group closest to me, and those who have probably had the most impact on me besides my God, is my family. My parents George and Miriam Smith apparently saw something worthwhile in my dream of research and writing. Early on, they funded several research trips to archives and special collections. Now that I look back on it and realize the cost of funding my own research trips, I see their sacrifice and love. I could not ask for better parents, and I love and cherish them dearly. My brother Danny Smith, a former newspaper editor, took the time to read the earliest draft nearly twenty years ago. Although the manuscript has changed drastically over time, his efforts are still visible in the finished product.

I began this project long before I knew there was a beautiful young lady named Kelly Castleman. As the focus of this book has changed over the years, so has my life, and only for the better. I am proud that Kelly is no longer a Castleman but a Smith, and together we have produced the two sweetest girls in the world, Mary Kate and Leah Grace. To them I give my unending love and thanks for their unending love and support.
Prologue

CROSSROADS

The spring of 1862 was a difficult one for Abraham Lincoln and his commanders. The year-old war had entered a vicious period, with large-scale battles producing tens of thousands of casualties. And those casualties were seemingly not garnering much fruit. A Federal attempt to capture Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate capital, was grinding to a halt amid massive bloodshed, while out West, several Union victories looked small compared with the bloody near-catastrophe at Shiloh. Not to be disrupted, however, Union commanders knew where the immediate, as well as the long-term, focal points were. John M. Schofield wrote in April that all Union troops were necessarily going to the Corinth front: “Something can be risked elsewhere, but nothing there,” he wrote. As distinguished a Confederate figure as Robert E. Lee added his ideas on Corinth’s importance. In forwarding orders for reinforcements to the critical crossroads, Lee wrote, “If [the] Mississippi Valley is lost [the] Atlantic States will be ruined.” Because it was obviously so important, by the end of that year, Union generals would expend thousands of lives and tons of ammunition in first taking and then holding the small north Mississippi town. Indeed, the Federals would spend almost the entire bloody year wrestling for possession of Corinth.¹

Despite its prominence in the spring of 1862, the town that became the South’s vital staging area possessed a humble background. The hamlet itself dated back only to 1854, when word came that two major railroads would soon cross each other in central Tishomingo County. The Memphis and Charleston Railroad was to run from Memphis across northern Mississippi and Alabama and ultimately to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where other lines would connect it to the East. The Mobile and Ohio would run from Mobile, Alabama, northward to Columbus, Kentucky, on the Mississippi River. Surveyors staked out the routes of both railroads, and they crossed on a small parcel of land owned by William Lasley.²
Realizing the economic boom that would result, smart businessmen began to capitalize on the future crossing. Lasley sold his land at a profit. The two men who bought it, Houston Mitchell and Hamilton Mask, set to work building a town, and a hamlet quickly sprang up. These two entrepreneurs staked off their newly acquired land into streets and lots, sold their tracts, and began to gain their wealth. Fittingly, they named their little village Cross City in 1855. A petition for incorporation surfaced as the town grew, and the charter became official on March 12, 1856. The name was changed on the recommendation of the town’s newspaper editor, W. E. Gibson, and Cross City became Corinth. Elections soon took place, with prominent local men becoming the selectmen, constables, judges, and justices of the peace.3

The small town continued to grow, especially with completion of the railroads. Corinth’s first postmaster, Henry C. Hyneman, opened shop in 1856—interestingly, in a pink post office. The town’s first brick building went up in 1857, and several churches of the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist faiths soon opened their doors. Several saloons received licenses to operate, and numerous hotels began their functions.4

An educational institution also emerged in Corinth, the Corona Female College. It was housed in an impressive three-story domed structure that sat on five acres south of town donated by Houston Mitchell. St. Louis carpenter Martin Siegrist, a Swiss immigrant, moved to Corinth to build the structure, and it was completed by the summer of 1857. One student later remembered that the main hall had arches and pillars; the twenty-three rooms as well as the surrounding gardens were tastefully furnished and well kept. Officially opening in July 1857, the college soon boasted students from several surrounding states. The Reverend Leroy B. Gaston, a Presbyterian minister, served as president of the school, and his wife Susan was the principal. Despite the Unionism of the area, the Gastons were firmly Southern, declaring that no Northerners would teach in their school. By 1858, the college had ninety students and seven teachers, with a preparatory department consisting of a three-year program and a collegiate degree adding another year. “Oh, how hard we had to study,” one student remembered, noting that “Mr. Gaston certainly had very little ‘humbugery’ about his examinations.”5

By 1860, Corinth had grown to a population of around 1,200, prompting county officials to move the seat of government there for half of vast Tishomingo County; workers soon erected a brick courthouse in the center of town. Five churches, the college, three large hotels, and many smaller businesses had also emerged by the beginning of the new decade. The largest and most famous of these buildings was the brick Tishomingo Hotel, also built by Siegrist and operated by George Cox. It boasted two stories and stood adja-
cent to the railroad depot, facing the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. Another major hotel was Wiley Blount Pannell’s Corinth House. An observer described in detail the small town as it looked in the early 1860s: “The houses are built after the Southern fashion,” he noted, “with a front-door for every room looking toward the street. This is an odd feature to one used to Yankee architecture, but it is the universal style of the Southern states. The apartments of most of the houses are large and airy, and surrounded with immense porticos, where the high toned chivalry enjoy their siesta.” He also noted that the people “consume almost unheard of quantities of Bourbon and rifle whiskey.” “The yards of the rich are decorated with shrubbery,” he continued, “and what is far more in accordance with good taste, forest-trees are left standing and neatly trimmed—a custom which has been too sadly neglected in the North.” He also mentioned “several substantial brick and frame business-houses” and enumerated some of the shingles that advertised the shops.

With all the churches springing up, a universal tug-of-war between good and evil emerged. There was lawlessness, of course. One judge described this scene in 1860: “They took a man up there to-day for running away with another man’s wife, & gave him a pretty good whipping.” He also described a wrestling match held in Corinth and noted, “I am fearful that the morals of Corinth are on the decrease.” Yet the churches were active; they even held meetings for the black population, and some allowed blacks to join their membership. There were political events in Corinth as well, including speeches by luminaries such as Stephen A. Douglas and William Lowndes Yancey. Concerts and graduation exercises at the college added to the social activities.

Although Corinth grew in educational, religious, social, and economic activity, everyone knew that the main lifeblood of the town was the locomotive. For years, the backwoods area of Tishomingo County had seen only river traffic from the nearby Tennessee River. Corinth itself obtained many of its supplies and did its trading at Pittsburg Landing, just across the border in Tennessee. Other landings in the eastern part of the county, such as Eastport, also provided an outlet for trade along the river. When the railroads extended passenger and mail service to Corinth, however, the town became tied to the larger regional and even national economy. The spike that completed the Memphis and Charleston Railroad was hammered in on April 1, 1857, just west of nearby Iuka; the ceremony brought a flurry of excitement as well as many new businesses and products.

For a time, the Mobile and Ohio lagged behind its east-west counterpart, but it was soon completed as well. Service reached Corinth on January 10,
1861—ironically, one day after Mississippi seceded from the Union. There was great celebration, with the mayor and aldermen of Memphis coming out on the Memphis and Charleston to take part in the festivities. A local militia company, the Corinth Rifles, fired salutes, and one newspaper reported, “Corinth may now boast of being situated at the junction of the two longest railroads in the South, and we predict that in a few years she will occupy a position of prominence and independence, not even anticipated by her most sanguine projectors.” Amid even greater celebration, railroad officials drove in the last spike for the Mobile and Ohio on April 21, 1861, at the Mississippi-Tennessee state line. Excursion trains brought dignitaries and tourists to the site, and a huge barbecue was held just north of Corinth.9

The presence of two major railroads in the southern portion of the United States brought new ideas to the formerly backwoods area. One visitor gave a good overview of the town’s rise in prominence: “The place itself, although socially and politically insignificant, and not calculated ever to become of commercial consequence, yet, with the speculative greed strongly characterizing the age, had, upon the completion of the Rail-Roads, been laid off into streets, and lots sold at fabulous prices, on a plan as extensive as the City of Paris, with a plaza, or public square in the center.”10

Despite the railroads and the potential to ship goods, agricultural endeavors around Corinth were actually smaller than in other parts of the state. There were some plantations, but the extreme northeastern portion of Mississippi was hilly and not well suited to large-scale farming. As a result, the society and culture around Corinth was very different from that on the big plantations along the Mississippi River. According to the 1860 census, only 4,981 of the roughly 437,000 slaves in Mississippi resided in Tishomingo County, which was one of the largest counties in the state. Along the Mississippi River, some counties had as many as 15,000 slaves each. Around the state capital of Jackson, in Hinds and Madison Counties, there were 22,363 and 18,118 slaves, respectively.11

This lack of a major slave presence translated into a lack of zeal for secession. One Corinthian, Walter A. Overton, noted in his diary during the secession crisis of November 1860, “I hope the excitement will soon pop off and peace and quiet be restored.” Governor John J. Pettus began talking of secession in earnest after the election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860, and the state legislature called for a secession convention. Tishomingo County was less than enthusiastic, much like its neighboring counties in northwestern Alabama and southwestern Tennessee. Overton later noted that he had voted for the “Union ticket” during the canvass for the secession convention delegates, and most of his neighbors had done likewise. The county voted
nearly three to one for the cooperationist delegates, and it elected four anti-
secession men to the convention, which assembled in Jackson in January
1861. Arthur E. Reynolds, Wright W. Bonds, Thomas P. Young, and John A.
Blair all made their antisecession feelings known, including in the famous bal-
lot cast on January 9, 1861, on the very ordinance of secession. The four men
voted against the ordinance; all told, only fifteen delegates voted in the nega-
tive. Still, all four delegates from Tishomingo County signed the ordinance
six days later in a show of support. Although the four men and the county as
a whole did not support secession, they very much supported the war when it
became inevitable. Unionist delegate Arthur Reynolds, in fact, was one of
the first men to raise a unit for the Confederacy, ultimately becoming colonel of
the 26th Mississippi. The large number of soldiers the county later sent to the
Confederate war effort further attests to this support.12

The people of Corinth quickly began adjusting to war, just as they had ear-
lier adapted to modernization. The earlier change had been welcomed, and the
town’s livelihood was staked to the boom the railroads brought. By the time
the Mobile and Ohio Railroad was completed in April 1861, however, a mere
nine days after the firing on Fort Sumter, the people of Corinth realized that
the railroads would soon complicate if not destroy their lives. The railroads
that had been the focus of so much economic and social celebration in the
1850s now made Corinth a valuable strategic point in the war, and both sides
were determined to control it. An observer noted Corinth’s placement: “Its
importance is derived solely from its military association and strategic posi-
tion, cutting as it does, the three great arteries of the South.” A Corinthian
noted the result in his diary on March 5, 1861: “Lincoln’s inaugural address
seems to purport war,” he prophesied, “we shall have Squally times for
awhile.”13