Three Perspectives of the Federal Occupation of Huntsville

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THREE PERSPECTIVES OF THE FEDERAL OCCUPATION OF HUNTSVILLE

An Introduction

Everyday life in Huntsville had moved on at its usual pace for almost a year after the Confederates opened fire on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, thus prompting the beginning of the Civil War. However, many of Huntsville’s citizens began to express concern about the safety of the Tennessee Valley when General Ulysses S. Grant began to execute his plan to drive into the very heart of the Confederacy along the river route formed by the Mississippi, Tennessee, and Cumberland rivers. After capturing Fort Henry on the Tennessee on February 6, 1862, and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland on February 16, 1862, Grant moved rapidly to Nashville and then headed southwest toward Corinth, Mississippi, a junction of two important railroads—the Mobile & Ohio and the Memphis & Charleston.

The Confederate commander, General Albert Sidney Johnston, had anticipated that the Union forces would attempt to capture all important rail centers and river ports to interrupt the flow of goods and manpower to the Confederate forces fighting on the Eastern Front in Virginia. For this reason he had gathered all available forces at his disposal to defend Corinth, thus leaving the rest of the Tennessee Valley vulnerable to attack.

Some citizens believed that Huntsville would be attacked since it was the site of the Eastern Division Headquarters of the Memphis & Charleston Railroad as well as its repair shops. Others thought that Huntsville would be bypassed since Corinth, Mississippi, and Chattanooga, Tennessee, were more important targets. After the Confederates were unsuccessful in their attempt...
to defeat the Union forces at Shiloh Meeting House near Pittsburg Landing on April 6, 1862, and had to retreat to Corinth, most of Huntsville’s citizens became very much concerned about their safety. The three accounts of the invasion of Huntsville on April 11, 1862, which are presented here will help to provide some insight on how invasion and continued occupation of the city affected the lives and fortunes of its citizens.

Although the first occupation lasted only until August 31, 1862, a year later on July 4, 1863, Union troops returned and continued their stay in Huntsville until the end of the war in 1865. Future issues of the Huntsville Historical Review will feature articles concerning the turbulent times through which Huntsvillians passed from 1861 to 1876.

The Editor.