The Untold Story of Shiloh: The Battle and the Battlefield/Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide

Dwight T. Pitcaithley
New Mexico State University

ISSN 0003-4827
Copyright © 2006 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1073

Hosted by Iowa Research Online
local studies to flesh out and enhance the larger picture? It is on this edge that the book is at its weakest. Raus has served as a historian at Manassas, Gettysburg, and Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania, and his battlefield expertise dominates the work. The campaign descriptions are as good as any but are superfluous for readers with a basic knowledge of the war. As a result, the Cortland volunteers become lost in the larger stories of the Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Antietam campaigns.

The book ends, as it begins, in Cortland, New York, taking the story of the county and its soldiers through the end of the war. The beginning and the end are the briefest but best parts of the book, with the long campaign histories sandwiched between. There is little to offer scholars of Iowa history here except in the book’s approach. Every soldier represented a community and had a family, loved ones, and a job back home, and that was true in every part of the nation.


Reviewer Dwight T. Pitcaithley is college professor of history at New Mexico State University. Former Chief Historian of the National Park Service (1995–2005), he is the author of several articles about the NPS and the preservation of public memory, especially in regard to the Civil War.

Former National Park Service historian Timothy Smith has followed his insightful _This Great Battlefield of Shiloh: History, Memory, and the Establishment of a Civil War National Military Park_ (2004) with a pleasing companion volume. The _Untold Story of Shiloh_ probes into little-known and little-analyzed aspects of the battle, Shiloh’s national cemetery, the story of the battle as presented by generations of historians, and the founders of the park. With a most accessible writing style, Smith covers a range of subjects, adding depth to the reader’s understanding of the place called Shiloh.

Several of his chapters deal with battle-related subjects—“The Ten Greatest Myths of Shiloh,” the campaign against Corinth, Mississippi, and the role of the U.S. Navy—but it is the non–military-related sections that make _The Untold Story of Shiloh_ captivating reading. In “Historians and the Battle of Shiloh: One Hundred Years of Controversy,” Smith observes four distinct schools of thought that have shaped the
Historiography of the battle. Historians first offered straightforward accounts of the battle. Then they emphasized the action at the Hornet’s Nest and the Sunken Road as the keys to understanding the battle. A third school discounted the contest at those two places and argued instead that the death of Albert Sydney Johnson determined Shiloh’s outcome. Finally, Smith discerns a fourth school developing, one that emphasizes that Confederate misunderstanding of “enemy positions, deployment, and geography” (2) led to the Confederate defeat. Smith’s skillful handling of the construction and evolution of these historical perspectives adds an important dimension to the study of battles.

All Civil War battlefields possess monuments and markers, yet few if any historians of the battles spend much effort to analyze the dedication of the monuments and their role in national reconciliation. Smith not only presents a refreshing analysis of the relationship between the monuments and the gauze of reunion they attempted to create, but he also offers readers the dedication speeches themselves. Stepping away from the role of intermediary, he presents unfiltered transcripts of the speeches dedicating monuments honoring troops from Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. The state commission from Iowa dedicated 11 regimental monuments and one state monument in 1906, with the keynote speech presented by Iowa governor Albert B. Cummins. The speeches from those dedications, as well as that given at the unveiling of the United Daughters of the Confederacy’s Confederate monument, offer insights into the memory of the war by those actively engaged in shaping that memory. Smith astutely observes that the contested memory of the war today was shaped by battles during the 1950s and 1960s over civil rights for African American citizens and that the rhetoric of peace and unity evident in the dedication speeches was aimed solely at white audiences.

Students of Iowa history will appreciate the attention the author gives to David Wilson Reed, “The Father of Shiloh National Military Park.” A citizen of Allamakee County, Iowa, veteran of the battle, and author of *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged* (1902), Reed also became the driving force behind the preservation and development of the battlefield. Appointed secretary and historian of the Shiloh battlefield commission, he played a pivotal role in marking the battlefield and shaping a history of the event that accentuated the action at the Hornet’s Nest, action in which Reed and the Twelfth Iowa Infantry featured prominently. Given Reed’s indefatigable efforts to preserve the battlefield and chronicle the battle, Smith concludes, “If it had not been for D. W. Reed, Shiloh National Military Park would not be the national treasure it is today” (155).
Mark Grimsley and Steven Woodworth’s *Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide* is the third entry (following Chickamauga and Gettysburg) in their battlefield guide series titled This Hallowed Ground: Guides to Civil War Battlefields. The series is designed to provide more than a cursory description of the battle and the terrain upon which it was fought and less than a heavily detailed and documented guide demanding considerable time to absorb. *Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide* succeeds admirably. Each “stop” is divided into clearly defined sections labeled Directions, Orientation, What Happened, Analysis, and Vignettes. Following an introduction to the Shiloh campaign and an overview of the first day of the battle, the authors begin their tour with very detailed directions to the first stop at Pittsburg Landing. From there, the battlefield visitor is led in a largely chronological fashion around Shiloh National Military Park.

The guide’s clear and concise directions, combined with clearly drawn maps and descriptions of each battle action, followed by a short analysis, makes the volume a very efficient tool for quickly and effectively exploring the battlefield. Many of the entries are followed by “Vignettes,” useful anecdotes or eyewitness accounts of the battle or its aftermath. The section on Bloody Pond, for example, concludes with a report posted two days after the battle: “Of the effective nature of our fire upon this point I was enabled to judge from the appearance of trees shattered by case shot at very low range; of carriage wheels strewn over the ground; of one caisson completely disabled and abandoned; of dead horses, four of which were left here; and of the enemy’s dead, nine of whom still remain, besides those already buried.” The guide provides a list of sources for all quotations and a short list of books on Shiloh for those who wish to probe more deeply into those bloody events of April 1862.

*Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide* and *The Untold Story of Shiloh* offer two different, yet highly compatible, methods for viewing and understanding the battle and battlefield of Shiloh. Whether the reader craves detailed on-the-ground directions for the battle—“Walk about 100 yards to the 7th Iowa Infantry monument”—or a studied understanding of how historians construct their narratives of past events, these two very readable volumes contribute much to our knowledge of the events of almost 150 years ago on the banks of the Tennessee River.