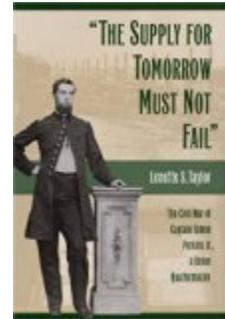


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lenette S. Taylor. *The Supply for Tomorrow Must Not Fail: The Civil War of Captain Simon Perkins Jr., a Union Quartermaster*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2004. xv + 264 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-783-5.

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## Invisible Men: Union Army Quartermasters

Pity the poor Union Army quartermaster. On the rare occasion when the average Civil War buff thinks about him, the images that come to mind are those of shoddily-made uniforms dissolving in a hard rain in mid-1861, William S. Rosecrans's men and animals starving during Braxton Bragg's 1863 siege of Chattanooga, and thousands of overcoats littering Ulysses S. Grant's line of march during the Wilderness Campaign of 1864. If these images were in fact accurate measures of the honesty, ability, and efficiency of the typical Union Army quartermaster, then it would appear that the Union Army won the war in spite of the best efforts of these men, not because of them.

As Lynette S. Taylor's biography of Captain Simon Perkins, Jr. (1839-1911) makes clear, however, the typical Union Army quartermaster was actually as honest, hard-working, and efficient as working conditions and Army red tape would allow. He was also overworked and undervalued, as the chronic shortage of competent, energetic quartermasters throughout the war attests (pp. 12-13).

Simon Perkins, Jr. was part of a prosperous and well-connected Ohio family. His father and uncles were rain-makers in the railroad, iron, and banking industries. In a letter to Quartermaster Montgomery C. Meigs stating his qualifications to receive a commission in the Quartermaster Bureau, Perkins listed as references Ohio Governor David Tod (his maternal uncle), Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P.

Chase, and Comptroller Elisha Whittlesey. Although he was only twenty-three years old at the time of his application, Perkins already had ten years of experience working in family businesses.

Perkins probably decided to seek appointment as an officer in the Quartermaster Bureau because service as a private in the original ninety-day 19th Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment convinced him that his business experience would allow him to make a more valuable contribution to the war effort as a quartermaster (pp. 10-11). His new boss, Quartermaster General Meigs, was in full agreement with Perkins that the Quartermaster Bureau was the most important of the War Department's seven staff departments, for shortcomings in that bureau could "make the best planned campaign impracticable" (pp. 11).

Perkins soon became aware that the quartermaster's job was neither easy nor effortless. He learned his duties on the job, and realized rather quickly that men in his position worked long hours, had numerous duties due to the chronic shortage of competent quartermasters, and rarely received recognition or promotion for a job well done. Problems in the Western Theater (Perkins served in the Army of the Ohio, Army of the Cumberland, and Department of the North) included bad roads and rivers that could be too shallow to navigate at certain times of year, disruption by rebel cavalry and guerrillas of lines of supply and communications, competition for goods and cargo space with commercial vendors, and a parsimonious Congress that made no effort to make available

on a timely basis funds for payment of civilian suppliers and employees (pp. 22-23, 39). In addition, the Union war effort's voracious appetite for manpower made it difficult to procure the services of experienced civilian clerks and white laborers, so free blacks were routinely employed as laborers and teamsters, and slaves were sometimes pressed into service in those same capacities (pp. 26-27, 70-71). Finally, civilian and military personnel on the payroll were often laid low by debilitating diseases like malaria that were endemic to many of the Southern states (pp. 58-59).

The amounts of men, animals, materiel, supplies, and cash handled by a quartermaster were at times awe-inspiring. While at the Pittsburg Landing supply depot in Tennessee in 1862, Perkins received almost eighteen million pounds of forage in a twenty-nine-day period (p. 46). Perkins's replacement at the supply depot at Eastport, Mississippi signed receipts for stores on hand that included 2.8 million pounds of corn, 1.9 million pounds of oats, 1.3 million pounds of hay, and 59,000 pounds of straw (p. 63). During a three-month period at the Nashville supply depot in 1863, Perkins dispensed nearly 3.5 million dollars to the holders of 9,000 overdue vouchers (pp. 169-170). Yet during his entire time in the Quartermaster Bureau (two and one-half years), Perkins, like most of his brother quartermasters, held the relatively lowly rank of captain.

Perkins's Union Army superiors seemed at times determined to make a difficult, demanding job even more so. Duties and duty stations were changed so frequently for the typical quartermaster that he rarely had time to learn new duties and settle existing accounts before it was time to pack up and head to his next assignment (p. 39). Quartermasters were required to fill out a bewildering variety of forms and reports, including nine monthly reports, each of which had to include nine different lengthy forms, plus three quarterly reports, each of which had to include three mandatory and two optional returns (quartermasters at major depots filled out an additional mandatory return). All returns were documented with abstracts and vouchers, and vouchers accounting for lost, stolen, or destroyed property had to be sworn before a justice of the peace or designated military officer (pp. 204-205). Additionally, the 1862 effort to root out corruption in the Quartermaster Bureau resulted in a requirement that quartermasters make three copies of their reports—one to be sent directly to the Treasury Department, one for Quartermaster General Meig's office, and one for the quartermaster to keep for his own protection in case of subsequent inquiries by the Army or

the Treasury Department (p. 203).

Quartermasters had to account for lost, stolen, and destroyed property both during and after the war. Perkins had been a quartermaster for less than two weeks when he was required to account for a large load of coal that had been lost on the Cumberland River (pp. 36-37). Such problems cropped up throughout his wartime service, yet his biggest shock in this regard occurred after the war. In 1869, as the result of a Treasury Department audit of his wartime accounts, Perkins received a bill for items unaccounted for. The amount that Treasury claimed he owed was \$297,926.18, a truly jaw-dropping amount in those days. Luckily, he was able to resolve part of the amount owed with a notarized statement of his recollection of the final disposition of certain materials, but erasing the rest of the amount due required the calling in of a few political favors (pp. 194-197).

Biographer Lenette Taylor went to great pains to acquire source materials for her account of Perkins's wartime service. Existing autobiographies of quartermasters, as she points out, are "somewhat enlightening but tend to be rather self-serving" (p. xi). An initial survey of more than forty public and private libraries and archives revealed a dearth of collections of personal papers of Union Army quartermasters. Perkins's family, however, unlike the families of many another quartermaster, had faithfully maintained eight crates packed with records and papers from his wartime service—some twenty thousand of them in all, many still tied in the literal red tape used during the war to seal official documents. These eight crates were donated in 1990 to the Summit County (Ohio) Historical Society, and the records and papers therein were processed and arranged by the author (pp. xi-xii). Numerous primary and secondary materials from the National Archives and other sources "filled many gaps and helped flesh out" Perkins's papers (pp. xii-xiii).

Taylor uses her wealth of raw materials to construct a detailed history of the career of an Army quartermaster that also ably illustrates his place in the grand scheme of Western Theater operations. The book is not without flaws; for example, the index is mainly a "proper name" index, and therefore much less detailed than the index of a work on this subject should be. Only one map is provided, a serious shortcoming for a biography of an Army officer posted to numerous duty stations. The subject matter will likely have limited appeal for a general audience. But the book definitely achieves its stated purpose of shedding light on the essential contributions of

the Union Army's "invisible men" to the war effort. Certainly it will be an essential reference for those researching logistics and transportation in the Western Theater—no better-written or more detailed account of the career of a quartermaster in that theater currently exists.

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