

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Union Prisons

By **Roger Pickenpaugh**

When the Civil War began in April 1861, prisoners and prison policy were not high priorities for Union officials. This was particularly true of the North's political leaders, most of whom, chanting "On to Richmond!" believed the war would be a quick and relatively bloodless affair.

Among the top military brass there were a few realists. One of them was General Montgomery Meigs, the Union's newly appointed Quartermaster General. On July 12, 1861, in a message to Secretary of War Simon Cameron, he predicted that in "the conflict now commenced it is likely to be expected that the United States will have to take care of large numbers of prisoners of war." He added that "arrangements should be at once made for their accommodation."¹ Toward that end, Meigs made two recommendations. The first was the appointment of a commissary general of prisoners, an officer who would carry out Union prison policies and supervise Northern prisons. The second was the selection of a site, preferably on an island in Lake Erie, for what Meigs believed would be the primary Northern prison.

Nine days after Meigs sent his message to Cameron the Battle of First Manassas exploded the idea of a short, painless war. Cameron approved the quartermaster general's recommendations, and Meigs began putting them into effect. For the post of commissary general of prisoners he selected Lieutenant Colonel William Hoffman, a career soldier, West Point class of 1829. Hoffman brought a wealth of practical experience to his position that would aid him in overseeing the construction and operation of prison facilities. His duties in the frontier army had included the erection of Fort Bridger and the rebuilding of Fort Laramie. He even had brief experience as a military captive. During the secession crisis Hoffman's Texas command had been surrendered by his superior, General David Twiggs, although Hoffman and his comrades were soon paroled and sent north.

¹ United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series II, volume 3, p. 8.

In October Meigs dispatched his new commissary general of prisoners to Lake Erie. Hoffman visited a number of islands before recommending Johnson's Island in Sandusky Bay as the best site for a military prison. Because of its location just two and three-quarter miles from the mainland, it would be easy to transport both captives and supplies. The three hundred-acre island offered forty acres of cleared land, and the felled timber could be utilized as fuel. It also came with a low lease price, which appealed to Hoffman, who had developed a reputation as a very frugal officer. Meigs approved the site, and the commissary general of prisoners set to work.

Hoffman had plenty of time to devote to the construction of the new prison. The Union achieved few military successes in 1861, which meant the commissary general had few prisoners with whom to deal. Many of those who were taken were what the government termed "citizen prisoners," or even more honestly "political prisoners." These were individuals suspected of disloyalty to the Union in one form or another. Northern officials cast a rather wide net in rounding up these prisoners, and their offenses ran from being a "rebel horse thief," to "uttering treasonable language," to simply "being a rebel."²

Most of these citizen prisoners, along with the few military prisoners taken by Union armies, ended up in already existing facilities along or close to the Atlantic coast. They included Fort Warren in Boston Harbor; Fort Lafayette and Governor's Island, near Manhattan; Fort Delaware, on Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River; and Baltimore's historic Fort McHenry. Others were housed in the Old Capitol, located just east of the United States Capitol building, a structure built to serve as a temporary seat of the government after the British burned the Capitol during the War of 1812. Most Confederates captured in the Western Theater were taken to Camp Chase, a Union training facility located some four miles west of Columbus, Ohio.

Meanwhile, Hoffman continued his work on Johnson's Island through the winter of 1861-1862. Bad weather and ice on Lake Erie delayed the construction effort, but on February 26, 1862, Hoffman informed Meigs that the depot would soon be ready to receive "a limited number of prisoners, say 500 or 600."³

The military situation had changed, however, rendering the Union's primary prison woefully obsolete before it was even completed. Ten days before Hoffman sent his report, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant had taken Fort Donelson in Tennessee with a jaunty demand for "unconditional surrender." The North's newly minted hero had an important military prize and an open path to Nashville along the Cumberland River. He also had an administrative and logistical headache in the form of 15,000 Confederate captives. Noting that "it is a much less job to take them than to keep them,"⁴ Grant proposed paroling the entire lot.

² O.R., II, 4, pp. 348, 690.

³ O.R., II, 3, pp. 326-327.

⁴ O.R., II, 3, pp. 271-272.

Union policy precluded such an action. As a result, Grant's superior, Major General Henry W. Halleck, commanding the Department of the West, was soon dispatching a flurry of telegrams to Northwestern governors seeking facilities to hold the prisoners. A few went to St. Louis, where they were placed in a former slave market and a former medical college, both previously owned by Confederate sympathizers. Some ended up in the abandoned state penitentiary in Alton, Illinois. Others were sent further east to Fort Delaware. Most, however, found themselves in Union training camps, sections of which were quickly set aside to accommodate the Fort Donelson prisoners. Among them were Camp Douglas in Chicago; Camp Butler, near Springfield, Illinois; Camp Morton, former site of the Indiana State Fairgrounds; and Camp Chase. At the same time Union officials designated Johnson's Island as a prison for Confederate officers.

With the most competent officers leading units at the fighting front, command of the new Union prisons devolved upon individuals far less capable and experienced. For example, William S. Pierson, a former mayor of Sandusky, became the commander at Johnson's Island. He had no military experience, but he was, according to Hoffman, "gentlemanly and courteous."⁵ Colonel Charles W. B. Allison, the commander at Camp Chase, appeared to owe his appointment to the fact that he was the son-in-law of Ohio's lieutenant governor. An inspecting officer dispatched by Hoffman termed him, "utterly ignorant of the most common requirements of Army Regulations" and "not in any degree a soldier."⁶ After visiting Camp Douglas in June, Hoffman reported: "There has been the greatest carelessness and willful neglect in the management of affairs of the camp." He blamed the recently departed commandant, Colonel James Mulligan, who had left things in, "a shameful state of confusion."⁷

The resulting conditions did not bode well for the Confederate captives. In March there were 112 deaths at Camp Butler, all blamed on pneumonia. Hoffman also placed the blame on the fact that the camp had but one youthful doctor, assisted by two camp physicians who had, "not energy to be of much service."⁸ The first prisoners to arrive at Camp Chase were housed in tents with insufficient wood to keep them warm. Because of poor drainage, mud surrounded them. Even after barracks went up, Hoffman's inspecting officer reported: "The spaces between the [buildings] are heaped with the vilest accumulations of filth which has remained there for months, breeding sickness and pestilence."⁹ An officer of the Sanitary Commission who visited Camp Douglas complained of, "standing water, unpoliced grounds, foul sinks, [and] unventilated and crowded barracks."¹⁰ He concluded with two recommendations: a relocation of the camp or a fire.

⁵ O.R., II, 3, pp. 479-480.

⁶ O.R., II, 4, p. 197.

⁷ O.R., II, 4, p. 111.

⁸ O.R., II, 3, pp. 364-365.

⁹ O.R., II, 4, p. 198.

¹⁰ O.R., II, 4, p. 106.

By mid-summer it appeared that the conditions in the prisons would no longer matter because the depots were soon to be emptied. On July 22, 1862, Union General John A. Dix and his Confederate counterpart, General Daniel Harvey Hill, agreed to a cartel for the exchange of prisoners. The Confederacy, strained for resources, had long pushed for such an agreement. The Lincoln Administration had been reluctant, fearful of doing anything that would in any way imply recognition of an independent Confederacy. However, as Union soldiers languished for months in Richmond warehouses, the pressure for exchange became overwhelming.

Under the terms of the cartel, captured enemy soldiers would be paroled to their homes until formally exchanged. A sliding scale would calculate the relative “values” of officers and enlisted men in the exchange process. The cartel designated Aiken’s Landing on the James River as the point of exchange for Eastern soldiers. Western parolees would go to Vicksburg. Finally, the agreement optimistically stated that any disputes that might arise were to be, “made the subject of friendly explanations in order that the object of this agreement may neither be defeated nor postponed.”¹¹

Reports that an exchange agreement was in the works reached the prisons before Dix and Hill had affixed their signatures to the document. At Johnson’s Island the Confederate officers became optimistic when a rumor made the rounds that commissary officials there had received orders to purchase no additional supplies. When the news became official, a prisoner at Fort Delaware spoke for thousands when he wrote that “all seem rejoiced at the idea of going.”¹² Soon the prisons were emptying. In July 1862 there were 1,726 prisoners at Camp Chase. By the following March the number was down to 534. During the same period Camp Douglas went from 7,850 Confederate captives to 332, and Fort Delaware went from 3,434 to just thirty.

Sadly, the cartel was doomed to failure. From the outset each side accused the other of cheating on the numbers and declaring units exchanged prematurely. The fate of irregular and citizen prisoners confused matters further. The issue sealing the fate of the agreement, however, was the question of black captives. The Union had begun enlisting black troops as Northern volunteerism waned. Many of these new soldiers in blue had recently been the property of Confederates. The South threatened to return captured blacks to their masters rather than exchange them. White officers leading black soldiers were subject to execution on the charge of leading a servile insurrection. The North responded by refusing to exchange Confederate officers. By the summer of 1863 the cartel was virtually a dead letter.

It was a controversial policy at the time, and it remains controversial among historians. Many scholars have correctly pointed out that the collapse of the cartel benefited the North militarily because of the section’s considerably larger population. There is, however, no direct evidence to indicate that the Union was anything but sincere in its resolve to stand behind all its soldiers.

¹¹ O.R., II, 4, p. 268.

¹² Entry for July 29, 1862, George L. P. Wren Diary, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta.

Whatever the motivations, the end of exchange meant the abandoned military prisons, North and South, were destined to fill quickly again. Compounding the situation for the North was the fact that Union armies had begun winning significant victories. The collapse of the cartel coincided with the Battle of Gettysburg. Three days of fighting in and near the Pennsylvania hamlet left the Union with 13,600 prisoners, 6,700 of whom were wounded.

To deal with this influx of captives, Hoffman established a new prison at Point Lookout, Maryland. Located at the tip of the peninsula between the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay, the former resort had become the site of a large military hospital on the bay side. The prison was built just north of the hospital. By late August there were 1,800 Confederate captives at Point Lookout. By November the number exceeded 9,000. They were housed in tents, making it the only Union prison at which barracks were not built. The tents made for uncomfortable winters. According to prison diarists, they also provided tempting targets for thieves among their fellow captives.

As Hoffman was establishing the prison at Point Lookout, General Meigs ordered an assistant quartermaster to Rock Island, Illinois. The Mississippi River island had long been government property, and Meigs gave orders to construct a prison there. The order proved prescient. Rock Island received its first prisoners on December 3, just eight days after General Grant took 6,142 prisoners at the battle of Chattanooga. Within five weeks Rock Island was housing 6,158 Confederate captives.

The final large prison opened by the Union was at the draft rendezvous at Elmira, New York. Northern officials hoped the facility would house many of the prisoners expected to result from Grant's planned Virginia campaign against Robert E. Lee. On May 19, 1864, Hoffman informed Elmira's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Seth Eastman, that he should prepare his camp to receive as many as ten thousand captives "possibly within ten days."¹³ Eastman protested that the barracks there could hold no more than four thousand. Tents on the grounds could house another thousand. In addition there was no hospital and an inadequate guard force.

Hoffman held off, and on June 30 Eastman reported that his camp was ready. The first prisoners arrived on July 6. By the end of August there were 9,600 Confederates at Elmira. At first they were content with their new home. "The prison here is a very fine one,"¹⁴ a Virginia captive wrote. Prisoners transferred from Point Lookout claimed to be, "much better satisfied here"¹⁵ than they had been in Maryland.

Eastman was nevertheless concerned. On August 17 he informed Hoffman that, "the pond inside of the prisoners' camp... has become very offensive and may occasion sickness unless the evil is remedied very shortly."¹⁶ He was referring to "Foster's Pond,"

¹³ O.R., II, 7, p. 152.

¹⁴ Entry for July 24, 1864, Henri Mugler Diary, West Virginia University Library, Morgantown

¹⁵ Entry for July 24, 1864, Henri Mugler Diary, West Virginia University Library, Morgantown

¹⁶ O.R., II, 7, pp. 603-604.

a stagnant pool belonging to the local farmer whose land the government leased for the camp. The pond became the receptacle for the prison sinks. Backed by the camp surgeon, Eastman pleaded for permission to dig a drainage ditch from the pond to the Chemung River. Hoping autumn rains would solve the problem, the cost-conscious Hoffman refused to approve the project. In September Elmira recorded 385 prison deaths. The next month the commissary general finally allowed a scaled-down version of Eastman's project. It was finally completed in December. By then over twelve hundred prisoners had died at Elmira.

Hoffman's penny-pinching ways also led to insufficient vegetables being issued to the Confederate captives. The result was outbreaks of scurvy at a number of camps. Elmira's surgeon reported 793 cases of this preventable disease at the prison in August 1864. Similar reports emanated from Johnson's Island, Camp Morton, and Fort Delaware during 1863 and 1864. In none of the cases did the commissary general of prisoners call for specific actions to address the outbreaks. He did, however, inform all commandants on August 1, 1864, that antiscorbutics could be purchased, "whenever in the judgment of the surgeon they are necessary."¹⁷

With the collapse of the cartel, Southern prisoners settled in for what they feared would be a long stay in Union depots. It was a monotonous life. "Nothing to do & nothing to do it with,"¹⁸ was how one Johnson's Island prisoner summed up his situation. For men far from home, loneliness proved harder to bear than boredom. This was especially true on Sundays, when thoughts invariably turned to church services and family gatherings. The sound of nearby church bells often resulted in poignant diary entries. "I am homesick," an Elmira prisoner wrote one Sunday evening. "Get the blues or something else. This evening seems very much like Sabbath evenings at home."¹⁹

The best cure for such feelings was the arrival of a "Dixie Mail," bringing letters from home via flag-of-truce boats. Those who received such missives were considered extremely fortunate. The captives could send letters to their families as well. All had to be read by prison censors, and the length was limited to a single page. At Fort Delaware and Johnson's Island resourceful prisoners were able to send longer letters south by bribing the censors. The rate was two and one-half cents a page and many a prison diarist wrote of dispatching four-page "dime letters."

Newspapers and books, which allowed at least a mental escape from the monotony of prison life, were also prized by the Confederate captives. The former were generally kept out by prison officials, although guards would often smuggle them in for a price. Books were allowed, and many prisoners received them from friends and relatives living within Union lines.

Sometimes the captives acquired enough books to start schools within their compounds. One conducted at Elmira included ten teachers and attracted some 200

¹⁷ O.R., II, 7, p. 521.

¹⁸ Entry for October 23, 1864, John Joyes, Jr., Diary, Filson Historical Society Library, Louisville, KY.

¹⁹ Entry for September 11, 1864, Wilbur Gramling Diary, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee FL.

students according to one prison diarist. At Point Lookout a former professor at the College of William and Mary held classes in a vacant cookhouse. Over 1,000 scholars reportedly attended his “first class high school.”²⁰ Prisoners could also expand their horizons by attending lectures, often for a small admission fee. Topics ranged from astronomy to “The Influence of Women.”²¹ One enterprising Point Lookout speaker, charging five cents or a ration of meat, offered not only to present a lecture but also to “phrenologically” examine the heads of those attending.

Debates enlivened many evenings in the prison barracks. Subjects of discussion included whether an independent Confederacy should reopen the African slave trade and whether education should be a precondition for suffrage. One evening a group of Johnson’s Island prisoners debated, “whether our imprisonment is beneficial or injurious to us.” Noting this, one captive wrote in his diary that he considered this, “hardly a debatable question.”²²

Checkers, chess (often played with hand-carved pieces), and card games also helped the prisoners pass the time. Cards and other games of chance often led to gambling. The barracks were usually the scene of this activity. At some camps resourceful prisoners drove poles into the ground, placed blankets around the sides, and established small casinos. Not everybody approved of this activity. Some sadly noted that their fellow captives would often gamble away their meager prison rations at the turn of a card. Others objected from a moral standpoint. A Johnson’s Island prisoner complained when a Faro bank operating on one side of the barracks interrupted a prayer meeting being conducted on the opposite side.

Warm weather brought the prisoners outside for childhood games such as fox and geese. At Johnson’s Island, Fort Delaware, and Point Lookout, prisons adjacent to bodies of water, officials allowed prisoners to bathe one or two days a week. Johnson’s Island captives also played the infant game of baseball during the summer months. In wintertime they engaged in epic snowball battles, which, according to one observer, left the ground, “as bloody as in actual conflict.”²³

In their battle against the boredom of prison life, skilled labor was the captives’ main weapon. The purpose was twofold. Not only did pursuing an occupation help occupy the time, it also provided a means of raising funds to enhance their rations at the camp sutler’s store.

Jewelry making was the most common vocation. Prison compounds were dotted with stands offering rings, shirt studs, and breast pins. The raw material came from a variety of sources. Men scoured the compounds looking for discarded bone or buttons.

²⁰ John Malachi Bowden *Reminiscences*, Duke University Library, Durham, NC.

²¹ Entry for January 18, 1865, Francis A. Boyle Diary, in Mary Lindsay Thornton, ed., *The Prison Diary of Adjutant Francis Atherton Boyle, C.S.A.*, *North Carolina Historical Review*, 39 (Winter 1962), p.74.

²² Entry for September 11, 1863, James Mayo Diary, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

²³ Entry for January 21, 1864, John Philip Thompson Diary, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

Location gave an advantage to prisoners at Johnson's Island, Point Lookout, and Fort Delaware, who gathered shells when they were allowed to bathe. Some received gutta-percha resin and other items from friends or relatives in the North. Others surreptitiously formed partnerships with guards, who secured the needed materials and sold the finished products on a commission basis.

The Confederate captives also turned out decorative fans. They exposed cedar or pine wood to steam, making it pliant, then shaped it and added ornamentation. Prison chair-makers found wood plentiful, but material for caning was more difficult to obtain. They solved the problem by taking apart burlap coffee sacks and reassembling the threads. Dentists, barbers, tailors, and shoemakers also plied their trades within the walls. One Confederate lieutenant, captured with his camera lens, located a tobacco tin, which provided a body for the lens. He bribed guards for plates and chemicals and set up a studio and a darkroom in the rafters of his Johnson's Island barracks. He then took photos of his fellow prisoners, which he sold to them for a dollar.

Those less skilled took in laundry, usually for a nickel a piece. Prisoners who received boxes of food from friends or relatives sometimes set up small restaurants in the prison marketplaces. Fort Delaware captives made beer from molasses, dispensing it at five cents a glass. Many prisoners believed it was healthier than the camp's brackish water.

Rations at Union prison camps were adequate but little more during the early years of the war. In 1863 an inspecting officer listed the rations at Camp Douglas and Camp Morton as, "three quarters of a pound of bacon (1 pound of fresh beef three times a week), good well-baked wheat bread, hominy, coffee, tea, sugar, vinegar, candles, soap, salt, pepper, potatoes, and molasses."²⁴ For the prisoners, the quality of the rations was more a source of complaint than the quantity. "We draw fresh beef every other day," a Camp Douglas prisoner wrote in his diary, "but it is not the number one article being mostly neck, flank, bones and shank."²⁵ At other camps prisoners complained of "liquid mushy"²⁶ bread and meat that was spoiled. Sometimes they were able to exchange spoiled rations for better ones, sometimes not.

Things changed for Confederate prisoners in the spring of 1864. Reports of horrible conditions at Andersonville and other Southern prisons had begun to reach the North. Emaciated Yankees, returning on special exchanges, seemed to confirm those reports. Outraged at what they heard and saw, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and other Union officials instituted a new policy honestly termed "retaliation." It reduced rations at Union prisons by approximately twenty percent. Coffee, tea, and sugar were eliminated altogether except for sick prisoners. Worse, from the standpoint of prison entrepreneurs,

²⁴ O.R., II, 6, p. 660-661.

²⁵ Entry for October 21, 1863, Curtis R. Burke Journal, in Pamela J. Bennett, ed., "Curtis R. Burke's Civil War Journal", *Indiana Magazine of History* 66 (December 1970), p. 128.

²⁶ Entry ca. December 1864, Virgil S. Murphy Diary, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill NC.

the captives could no longer purchase food from the sutler. The Confederates also could no longer receive boxes of food from friends within Union lines.

Before long the diaries of Southern captives included accounts of measures taken to supplement meager rations. At Camp Morton streams running through the prison supplied crawfish. Oak trees offered acorns to Rock Island captives. Other options were less palatable. Men began daily searches of their compounds, seeking out bones or any scrap of refuse. If their diaries are to be believed, the prisoners ate rats by the hundreds. Even dogs and cats that chanced into the compounds were not safe from the hungry Confederates.

Retaliation also made escape a more tempting option for Confederate prisoners languishing in Northern compounds. The challenges were daunting. The first came in the form of a wall, patrolled by armed guards, that the men would have to get either under, over, or through. Once beyond the wall, a furtive journey through many miles of hostile territory lay ahead. For prisoners at Johnson's Island, Fort Delaware, and to a lesser extent, Point Lookout, bodies of water made the beginning of the escapees' journey all the more challenging.

Tunnels were the most often tried method of escape, but in many ways the most difficult. For one thing the prisoners had to be very careful whom they enlisted to assist in their efforts. Many prisoners would inform on their comrades for extra rations or other special treatment. Commandants also planted detectives among the prisoners. Not all betrayals were so nefarious. Rainy weather collapsed one tunnel at Camp Chase, and a delivery wagon broke through another.

Still there were occasional successes. On December 3, 1863, some one hundred Confederates, including a number of General John Hunt Morgan's cavalry raiders, passed out of a tunnel at Camp Douglas. In reporting the incident to Hoffman, Colonel Charles De Land, the camp commandant, wrote that "if there had been less hurry among them many more could have escaped,"²⁷ a detail he might have wisely omitted. A number of the escapees were eventually recaptured.

In percentage terms the most successful tunnel escape from a Northern prison was the exodus of ten prisoners from Elmira on the night of October 6-7, 1864. Three men had begun their tunnel in a vacant tent on August 24. Working with pocketknives, they went down six feet before starting their horizontal 68-foot shaft to the wall. The group enlisted a select group of volunteers, swearing them to secrecy under penalty of death. They worked in pairs, one doing the digging as the other removed the dirt. As the shaft expanded, air was at a premium, and eventually, as one noted, "a minute [at the end of the shaft] was enough to give one the most violent, racking headache."²⁸ The determined prisoners persevered, and their shaft eventually led them to freedom. Although one of the escapees was never heard from again, none was recaptured.

²⁷ O.R., II, 6, p. 637-638.

²⁸ Susan Benson, ed., *Berry Benson's Civil War Book: Memoirs of a Confederate Scout and Sharpshooter*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992, pp. 139-140.

Scaling the wall was another option for would-be escapees, albeit a risky one. Six Camp Douglas captives succeeded on the night of September 6, 1864, largely due to the incompetence of the guards. The Chicago sentries had fallen into the habit of exchanging unused firing caps when a new relief came on duty. This saved them the trouble of firing then cleaning their weapons. It also fouled the caps, rendering them useless. As a result several failed to discharge when the guards attempted to thwart the escape.

Just three weeks later the guards had more success thwarting an attempted escape at Camp Douglas. Twelve prisoners were involved in the plot. One tossed a blanket over a nearby lamp as a second followed with a plank of wood. He intended either to breach the fence or to allow the escapees a means of getting over it. His designs will never be known because a guard shot the daring prisoner in the face, mortally wounding him. Although one captive claimed to have heard some twenty-five shots, nobody else was wounded. Still, the shooting ended the charge, and nobody escaped.

Prisoners at Camp Morton made the attempt on the night of September 27, 1864, a night chosen for its extreme darkness. A group of some twenty captives assaulted the sentries on their platforms with stones, thus drawing the guards' fire. Then they charged the fence with homemade ladders. Some were fashioned from tent poles. Others consisted of the prisoners' short bunk ladders, fastened together. Two prisoners were shot and killed. Three escaped, although blood trails suggested that two had been hit,

The bloodshed did not serve long as a deterrent. On the night of November 14, forty-eight prisoners made their escape. The method was similar. While one group of prisoners attacked the sentinels with "stones and other missiles,"²⁹ another party rushed the fence a short distance away. They got over with ladders made from boards taken from the bottoms of their bunks. At least seventeen of the escapees were later recaptured.

Often pure deviousness was the most successful means of effecting an escape--but not always. One Camp Douglas prisoner learned this lesson in May 1864. Watching a group of thirty citizens take a tour of the camp, he slipped into civilian clothes and blended in with them. As the tour ended and he neared the gate with the group, a fellow prisoner greeted him, thus alerting the otherwise unsuspecting guard.

On other occasions, acts of subterfuge worked. In the fall of 1864 a pair of Rock Island prisoners absconded by perfectly forging the passes of contract surgeons who served the camp. A less skilled prisoner wrapped himself in a blanket and went out in an ambulance with a group of sick captives. Another simply concealed himself beneath one of the doctors' carriages.

In late 1864 a prisoner at Camp Douglas had himself lightly nailed inside a large vinegar barrel. The barrel was carried to a refuse pile in the garrison square. After night

²⁹ Ambrose Stevens to William Hoffman, November 23, 1864, Camp Morton, Indiana, Letters Sent, Record Group 393, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

fell the occupant kicked out the weakly secured barrelhead and made his way out of the camp. In a similar vein, an Elmira captive was nailed inside a coffin at the prison “dead house.” One prisoner wrote that the driver of the wagon that then went to the cemetery was bribed. Another insisted that the driver was not involved in the plot and was most surprised when he heard a sound and turned to witness one of his passengers emerging from the coffin.

The guards whose job it was to prevent escapes came to Union prisons from a variety of outfits. Few stayed for any length of time, and many were inexperienced and inept.

About the only exceptions were the Ohio camps. At Johnson’s Island four companies, christened the “Hoffman Battalion,” were raised in early 1862 to serve as a guard force. Two years later the unit was increased to regimental strength. On October 27, 1862, the First Battalion of Governor’s Guards was mustered into Federal service and assigned to duty at Camp Chase. The following July the outfit became the 88th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. With the exception of a brief assignment to Cincinnati in late 1863, the 88th remained the nucleus of the Camp Chase guard force.

This consistency was not to be found at other Union facilities. At Elmira, which did not open as a prison until the summer of 1864, at least a dozen regiments came and went as guards. The story was much the same at other camps. The reasons were many. Some prisons continued to function as recruiting facilities, and trainees were often pressed into service. Temporary regiments, raised for only one hundred days of duty, also filled the ranks frequently. At Fort Delaware units from Maryland and Delaware often served as guards. Fearing that the border state sentries might become too familiar with Confederate prisoners, officials shuffled the units.

At several prisons specially raised units also served as guards. Among them was the 37th Iowa Infantry. Known as the “Graybeards”, they were mainly composed of men over fifty years old. One was reportedly eighty. The regiment served at St. Louis, Alton, Rock Island, Camp Morton, and Camp Chase. At every camp they failed to impress. Inspectors complained of lax discipline, men talking and laughing while on guard duty and gazing off in the distance, not even facing the prison yard. At Rock Island they kept pigs within the limits of the compound. There were also reports of heavy drinking. One inspector concluded that the Graybeards were, “the most unpromising subjects for soldiers I ever saw.”³⁰

Receiving somewhat better reviews were members of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Although Congress approved the enlistment of black soldiers in July 1862, none were mustered in for nearly a year. Eventually over 185,000 served. Most served behind the lines. Included among them were guards at Rock Island, Point Lookout, and Elmira.

³⁰ O.R., II, 7, p. 65.

At Rock Island, Colonel Adolphus Johnson, commanding the camp, was critical of the black guards, blaming them for at least one escape. However, one of their white officers termed them “the best guards I ever saw.”³¹ Another, filing a daily guard report, wrote: “I join with Officers of the Guard in saying that I have never seen Guard duty better performed.”³² A white officer of the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry, one of the black outfits serving as guards at Point Lookout, offered a measured assessment. “I am just learning the names of my men and also their characters and dispositions,” he wrote to his wife, “who are the good soldiers and who are the shirks, for there are some of the latter, even in the fifth cavalry.”³³

Members of the Veteran Reserve Corps (VRC) were utilized at virtually every Union prison. Established in March 1863 as the Invalid Corps, the outfit was composed of officers and men who were wounded or otherwise disabled. Veteran soldiers, they generally performed well. In fact, Colonel Ambrose Stevens of Camp Morton was so impressed by the VRC soldiers that he twice requested additional companies of them.

Many officers commanding VRC guard units became commandants of the prisons where they served. Among them were Colonel James Strong and Colonel Benjamin Sweet at Camp Douglas and Colonel Johnson at Rock Island.

Indeed, it was the war itself that solved Hoffman’s problem of finding capable commandants for Union prisons. Colonel Stevens arrived at Camp Morton after being wounded at Perryville, Kentucky. General Albin Schoepf, who assumed command at Fort Delaware in April 1863, had been thrown from his horse. Before his arrival at the camp, four men had commanded it in the previous twelve months. Schoepf remained for the duration.

Among the most competent commandants of a Civil War prison was Colonel William Richardson, who assumed command of Camp Chase on February 10, 1864. Wounded at Chancellorsville, Richardson was an energetic officer who was popular with guards and prisoners alike. He worked hard to provide for the prisoners’ comfort, overseeing a project to rebuild the prison barracks. Richardson also addressed the longstanding drainage problems that had posed a health threat since the facility opened.

Despite the presence of humane commandants such as Richardson, punishments inflicted for various offenses could be cruel. Studies of camp records and prisoners’ diaries suggest that they were not as common as post-war memoirists claimed. Still, they were not unheard of.

³¹ Leroy B. House to “Friend B.,” September 26, 1864, Leroy B. House Collection Ives Family Papers, Connecticut Historical Society Museum, Hartford CT.

³² Rock Island Barracks, Illinois, Guard Reports, Record Group 393, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

³³ Edward J. Bartlett to wife, October 23, 1864, Edward J. Bartlett Correspondence, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston,.

Stealing and fighting were common offenses resulting in punishment. So, too, was complaining about insufficient rations. Prisoners often found themselves attached to balls and chains as a result of some misdeed. "Riding the mule," forcing prisoners to sit upon the sharp side of a board placed on a platform, was also a frequent punishment. "Bucking and gagging" involved forcing a block of wood into the offender's mouth. It was then fastened with a strong cord to the back of his head, which was drawn painfully tight. Other prisoners were hung by their thumbs, with their toes barely touching the ground, for long periods. As severe as these punishments were, they were often meted out to miscreant guards and recruits as well as prisoners.

Close confinement was considered a serious punishment at Johnson's Island. Those thus sentenced found themselves in a windowless room about twelve feet square. Often they were crowded in with several other prisoners. By contrast, Elmira's "dungeon" consisted of several individual cells, also with no windows. Camp Douglas had a dungeon that one medical inspector termed, "a 'dungeon' indeed." He described it as, "a close room about eighteen feet square lighted by one closely barred window about eighteen by eight inches.... A sink occupies one corner, the stench from which is intolerable." After remaining a few seconds, the officer reported, "feeling sick and faint."³⁴

The ultimate punishment, of course, was shooting. Every camp, North and South, had an aptly named "dead line", a few feet from the fence, over which no prisoner dared to step. A row of stakes marked Johnson's Island's dead line. At Camp Douglas it was a railing about eighteen inches high. Elsewhere a ditch served the purpose.

Prisoner diaries are well garnished with accounts of trigger-happy guards. In addition to crossing the dead line, offenses included "committing a nuisance" outside the sinks and being outside the barracks after dark. In the fall of 1863 four shootings occurred at Camp Chase. Three resulted in the deaths of prisoners. In two cases the prisoners' only offense was failing to extinguish lights in the barracks. The outbreak attracted Hoffman's attention, especially when he received a report from a medical inspector stating that one of the victims had not received medical attention until the following morning. "Such treatment of prisoners, whatever may be the necessity for wounding them", Hoffman informed the commandant, "is barbarous and without possible excuse."³⁵

On September 9, 1864, exchanges were resumed, albeit on a limited basis. The agreement applied only to sick and wounded prisoners, men who would be unable to return to duty for at least sixty days. The following February exchange became more general. Still, General Grant insisted that men from areas safely in Union control be sent south first. Officials sidestepped the prickly question of exchanging black soldiers by first returning the prisoners who had been held the longest.

³⁴ O.R., II, 6, p. 374.

³⁵ O.R., II, 6, p. 868.

Sadly, February 1865 was also the month that deaths in Northern prisons peaked. The eight largest camps reported that 1,664 Confederate captives died that month, 499 at Camp Chase alone. Many of the victims belonged to John Bell Hood's Army of Tennessee. These men suffered tremendously from illness and exposure during Hood's ill-fated campaign in Tennessee. Many arrived at the prisons shoeless and near death.

When the war ended Union officials were eager to rid themselves of the problem of Confederate prisoners. By July, except for the 150 captives consolidated at Johnson's Island, most camps were virtually empty. Elsewhere the only remaining prisoners were those who were too sick to travel. They were unguarded. At the end of October only four Confederate prisoners, besides Jefferson Davis and other government officials, were in Union hands. All were political prisoners, and the last was released at the end of March 1866.

By then the walls of many Union prisons had come down. Some, such as Camp Chase, Camp Morton, and Camp Douglas, were used as mustering out camps before being abandoned. Others, including Fort Delaware, Fort Warren, and Rock Island, reverted to their pre-war uses. Otherwise, about all that remained were memories and a Confederate cemetery, the latter being a potent, tangible reminder of a tragedy within a tragedy.
