

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Confederate Prisons

By **Roger Pickenpaugh**

At first the Confederacy's prisoners came in a trickle. The first public mention of them came in June 1861. Newspapers in Richmond, Virginia reported that captives were reaching the capital from Manassas Junction, Newport News, and other places where the two armies were feeling out each other for battles that lay ahead. Usually there were fewer than fifteen arriving at any one time. On July 2 the total number was still under one hundred.

The Confederate government never planned for its capital to become a permanent site for housing Union prisoners. Rather, Richmond was to serve as a temporary holding place until the Yankees could be either exchanged or shipped to established depots farther south.

Despite that goal, the June arrivals forced the Confederates to locate a site in the city to house the growing number of prisoners arriving there. That site chosen was Ligon's Warehouse and Tobacco Factory, a three-story structure located at Main and 25th Streets. On June 25 orders emanated from military officials to empty the jails and other public buildings of all military captives and transfer them to Ligon's.

On July 21 the trickle became a flood. At the battle of First Manassas the Confederates raked in nearly fifty officers, a thousand enlisted men, and a handful of Union civilians who had ridden out from Washington, DC to witness the anticipated glorious victory. Among the last group was Alfred Ely, a congressman from upstate New York.

The man responsible for dealing with these prisoners was Brigadier General John Henry Winder. A career soldier, the Maryland native had cast his lot with the Confederacy. At 61 years of age, he was too old for field command. Instead, he became provost marshal general of Richmond. It was a thankless post that left him to deal with drunken soldiers, citizens suspected of disloyalty, and the assorted riff raff that flocked to the capital city. The sudden influx of military prisoners added a new headache to Winder's duties. Winder scrambled to find additional warehouses to house them. He repeated the process after the October 21 battle of Ball's Bluff added six hundred more Yankees to the prison roster.

Union prisoners were less than impressed with the facilities Winder located. Private

Willard Wheeler of the Seventh Ohio found himself at Atkinson's Factory, where three rows of tobacco presses ran the entire length of the cavernous building. "We went to work to clean up this morning," he wrote his second day there, "and after much sweeping and digging we made the old room look more comfortable but still it is a mere hog pen."¹ Rations were skimpy, half a loaf of bread and some meat in the morning and the same amount of bread with a small quantity of soup in the evening.

For the Confederates, the ever increasing number of Union captives presented a serious logistical problem. On August 5 the *Richmond Whig* observed, "Everybody is asking, 'What is to be done with the prisoners?'"² Among those asking were Winder and Confederate Secretary of War Judah Phillip Benjamin. As autumn approached, the officials began seeking sites farther south, virtually begging governors to relieve them of their human burden.

A few responded positively. On September 10 a detachment left the Confederate capital bound for Charleston. They were housed in the jail before being transferred to Castle Pinckney, a fortification located on a small island in the harbor. The prisoners were allowed to roam the island, allowing them to secure crabs and oysters as well as fresh air. Unfortunately, the Castle proved too small, and many of the prisoners were soon headed back to the jail.

On New Year's Day 1862 many of the Charleston prisoners found themselves on trains bound for Columbia. At first most believed they had benefited from the change. Upon arriving, wrote one, the prisoners found, "the girls pretty, the officers who received us gentlemen, & our quarters small but clean."³ As time wore on, this view moderated. A prisoner who reached Columbia from Charleston on May 6 wrote, "We were incarcerated in a black looking place to which Charleston jail is a palace." The sergeant who guarded them was "ignorant boorish and dumb," he added.⁴

Other Union prisoners found themselves heading even further from Richmond. By January 18, 1862, there were 500 in the parish prison in New Orleans. The military prisoners were housed in the lower two floors of the facility. Above them were female prisoners. The Yankees occupied their time reading, sleeping, and exercising. Those with jack knives carved rings and other items from beef bones, which they sold to their guards. This allowed them to purchase bread and other luxuries.

The battle of Shiloh, fought April 6-7, 1862 in western Tennessee, left the Confederates with many more prisoners. A large number of them went to Macon,

¹ Entry for September 4, 1861, *Willard W. Wheeler Diary*, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

² *Richmond Whig*, August 5, 1861

³ Entry for January 1, 1862, *Charles Carroll Gray Diary*, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

⁴ Entries for May 6, 8, 1862, *Frank T. Bennett Diary*, Duke University Library, Durham, NC.

Georgia. They were quartered at the former fairgrounds, a site christened Camp Oglethorpe. The ground was well sodded, pine trees provided shade, and one prisoner termed it “a splendid place.”⁵ A local newspaper, the *Macon Telegraph*, saw problems. “At a time when it is difficult to feed our own population,” the paper noted, “we are to be blessed with the presence and custody of 900 prisoners of war!” The paper termed them “a very inconvenient and expensive problem.”⁶ In early November the Confederate government purchased an abandoned cotton mill in Salisbury, North Carolina. The sixteen-acre lot offered oak trees for shade and an ample supply of fresh water. In addition to the large main factory building, there were six four-room brick tenements, a superintendent’s house and three outbuildings. Guards to staff the facility proved difficult to locate at first. The problem was solved when Reverend James Braxton Craven, president of Trinity College, arrived with the Trinity Guards, a company composed of students he had recruited. On December 9 Salisbury received its first contingent of prisoners, 120 in number.

By the following April, there over 1,500 prisoners at Salisbury, which raised a red flag for Governor Henry Toole Clark. On April 22 he informed the War Department that feeding them had become a challenge. He added, “It is further represented to me that the government of the prisoners and discipline of the guard are somewhat demoralized.”⁷ The local press agreed. “Again we warn the public to keep a sharp look out for runaway yankee prisoners,” the *Carolina Watchman* advised on March 24, “for it seems to be impossible for the guard at the prison to prevent their escape.”⁸ The paper reported that eight had recently been recaptured.

Despite their efforts, General Winder and other officials were never able to locate enough space outside Virginia to relieve Richmond of all its Yankee captives. In March 1862, with the spring campaigns looming, he again went looking around the capital. The search led him to the three connected warehouses of Luther and George Libby. Each was three stories tall, and each floor contained three rooms approximately 103 by 43 feet. This huge space would allow Confederate officials to consolidate their Union captives, who had been spread out over a large area.

On the 26 the first transfer of prisoners, nearly 500, took place. The Yankees were less than impressed. “Room large, low, damp, dirty, cold & dark,” was one captive’s description.⁹ Soon it also became crowded, and with only two or three windows to a

⁵ Entry for April 21, 1862, *Charles Whipple Hadley Diary*, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁶ *Macon Telegraph*, May 3, 1862.

⁷ 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. 855.

⁸ Salisbury *Carolina Watchman*, March 24, 1862.)

⁹ Entry for March 26, 1862, *Charles Carroll Gray Diary*, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

room, ventilation was a problem. A more common complaint concerned the accumulation of a thick, black, greasy substance on the floors. One described it as “an oozy compound of filth, from which arose a stench more intolerable than I ever before inhaled.”¹⁰ It was an inch thick, and even with shovels was impossible to remove.

With Union Major General George Brinton McClellan’s failed campaign to capture Richmond came even more prisoners. Soon the cavernous Libby Prison was badly overcrowded, and Winder was forced to resume his search for space. The former “McDaniel’s negro jail” became Castle Godwin. Two warehouses were converted into Scott’s and Pemberton’s Prisons. A trio of factories and warehouses two blocks from Libby were rechristened Castle Thunder. It mainly housed Confederate deserters, civilians accused of disloyalty, and those charged with such minor offenses as selling whiskey.

The most fateful decision Winder made in his 1862 search for prison space occurred in July. On the 10th prisoners began arriving on Belle Isle, an eighty acre island in the James River. Within four days it was home to 3,000 Yankees, and by the end of the month the daily death toll was between five and ten. A lack of food was one cause. Rations averaged a quarter to a half pound of bread daily, a small piece of beef two or three times a week, and an occasional issue of bean soup short on beans. A lack of shelter was also a problem. Only a small percentage of the men received tents, and in cold, rainy weather the prisoners suffered greatly.

On July 22 it looked like the sufferings of prisoners North and South were soon to be permanently alleviated. Major General John Adams Dix of the Union and Confederate Major General Daniel Harvey Hill signed a cartel for the exchange of prisoners. Under its terms captured soldiers would sign a parole agreeing not to take up arms until formally exchanged. A sliding scale would then be used to exchange prisoners of different ranks.

Ironically the cartel at first increased the crowding of the Richmond prisons, as captives from Salisbury, Columbia, and other distant points arrived on their way to the North. Some 800 wounded prisoners left the capital on July 26. More departed over the next few days, but as they did, wounded captives arrived from McClellan’s army. Gradually the numbers began working in the favor of Richmond’s harried officials. By late September all Union prisoners had left Belle Isle. On November 5 the *Richmond Dispatch* reported that only 224 remained at Libby.¹¹

Much to their disappointment, these Union prisoners were not quite destined for home. Secretary of War Edwin McMasters Stanton had anticipated that the possibility of parole would provide an inducement to surrender. To counter this, the North established parole camps, where the parolees were to remain until formally exchanged. Camp Parole near Annapolis housed paroled prisoners from the Eastern Theater. Those from the

¹⁰ James A. Bell to brother, September 30, 1862, Bell Collection, Small Manuscripts Collection, Delaware Public Archives, Dover.

¹¹ *Richmond Dispatch*, November 5, 1862.

Midwest reported to Camp Chase, a Union prison located west of Columbus, Ohio. Benton Barracks near St. Louis was designated for Western parolees. The arrangement led to hard feelings. Many deserted, at least temporarily, for a quick visit home. Others ransacked their parole camps and raided neighboring farms to supplement their rations.

From the outset, problems plagued the exchange cartel. Agents on both sides accused each other of cheating on the numbers and prematurely declaring their men exchanged. Citizen prisoners and irregular troops put strains on an agreement that did not fully address their status. The issue that eventually doomed the cartel was the South's adamant refusal to exchange black troops serving with the Union. By the summer of 1863 exchange was a dead letter. At the same time major battles were fought at Chancellorsville in Virginia and at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, forcing the Confederacy, strained for resources, once again to deal with large numbers of Yankee prisoners.

One of the first prisons to become crowded again was Libby, which was set aside for Union officers. They arrived to find their new quarters infested with lice. According to one Libby prisoner, lice hunting was "one of the greatest institutions of this place."¹²

A greater source of complaint was the prison rations. The daily allotment consisted of one-fourth to one-half loaf of bread, four ounces of meat, and soup that quite often contained bugs. By late October the rations had been reduced to bread only on many days. The occasional rations of meat were skimpy and often too full of maggots to eat. Most prisoners did not blame their captors. One diarist explained, "This Confederacy is in a bad way for Provision of her prisoners."¹³ Prisoners could enhance their rations with outside purchases, but the items did not come cheap. Sixteen dollars bought one mess a bushel of potatoes. Another paid three dollars for a pound of butter. Some prisoners also received boxes of supplies from friends and family members back home, but they often discovered that prison "inspectors" had ransacked them and removed many desirable items.

In the fall of 1862, Captain Thomas P. Turner was placed in command of Richmond's prisoners. Richard R. Turner, known as "Dick" Turner, served as his second in command and was largely responsible for discipline at Libby. The two were not related. Dick Turner, although just an enlisted man, wielded great power, often in a prickly manner. Prisoners were not allowed to lie on their blankets during daylight hours. Anyone caught doing so had his blanket confiscated. When a group of about sixty officers made too much noise one evening, Dick Turner had them stand silently for several hours. A captain of the Twelfth Pennsylvania found himself in a cell for two days after he spit on the floor.

The prisoners were not allowed to look out the windows of their prison, and the order

¹² Entry for August 17, 1863, *Louis R. Fortescue Diary*, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

¹³ Entry for November 12, 1863, James A. Penfield Diary, in James Penfield, *The 1863-1864 Diary of Captain James Penfield, 5th New York Volunteer Cavalry, Company H*. Ticonderoga: New York, Press of America, Inc., 1999, p. 152.

was strictly enforced. Shootings were rare at Libby, but when they did occur they were most often prompted by a captive at one of the windows.

On March 1, 1864, prison officials reiterated the order and also forbade the captives from hanging clothes from the windows. The cause of the restrictions was the Judson Kilpatrick-Ulric Dahlgren cavalry raid, an action intended to free the prisoners. The Confederates were afraid the officers at Libby might attempt to signal the raiders.

As the raid got under way the Confederates threatened to kill all the Libby prisoners in one tremendous blast. With General Winder's approval, Captain Turner had a trench dug beneath Libby and placed 200 pounds of gunpowder in it. Turner let the prisoners know that if they made any attempt at an uprising they would "all be blown to hell."¹⁴ Winder would later insist that it had simply been a bluff and officials had never planned to carry out the threat. On the night of February 9-10, 1864, 109 prisoners escaped through a tunnel, emerging between two buildings across the street. Colonel Thomas Ellwood Rose of the 77th Pennsylvania had masterminded the project, assisted by Major. A. G. Hamilton of the 12th Kentucky Cavalry. They began their project in a basement room the prisoners had named "Rat Hell" because of its dense rodent population. Their tools were a broken shovel and two case knives. Rose, Hamilton, and the officers they recruited encountered a number of setbacks. The untimely but coincidental arrival of a group of Confederate soldiers thwarted their first attempt. They then dug too closely to the James River canal, which broke through in a torrent that nearly drowned Rose. Their next effort, after 39 nights of digging, led them to a sewer that was made of oak so hard that their tools could not breach it. At that point, Rose determined to dig toward the yard between the two buildings.

Fifty-nine of the escapees, including Hamilton, reached the Union lines. Forty-eight were recaptured. Rose was among them, but he soon returned north via a special exchange. Two men drowned during their dash to freedom.

Like Libby, Belle Isle again filled with prisoners following the collapse of the cartel. By November 1863 there were 6,300 Union captives there. They occupied a space on the island between four and five acres. Rations were similar to those the officers at Libby received. The enlisted prisoners, however, had far less money and were therefore unable to purchase extra food. Occasionally they managed to catch fish from the James River, but most options were far less palatable. Dogs belonging to Confederate officers were often captured and eaten. Prisoners also dug up discarded bones and sucked the marrow from them. Gangs of prisoners termed "Raiders" by their fellow captives stole from their weaker comrades.

As fall arrived, the lack of shelter became a source of suffering. As early as September 19 a diarist observed, "The men that are without Tents suffered considerable

¹⁴ Entry for March 3, 1864, *William A. Noel Diary*, Rare Book Department, Boston Public Library

last night and this morning from the cold wind and rain.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, firewood was so scarce that prison officials often could only issue it to men lacking tents. By winter the conditions were deplorable. A prisoner who arrived on January 21, 1864, wrote, “It is a shocking place. Froze hard last night. Morning verry cold. Had no shelter. About 600 of us had to sleep in the open air. Several had their feet frozen and some died from the cold.”¹⁶ Once again desperate for prison space, the Confederates turned their attention to Danville, a Virginia city located near the North Carolina border. There, six tobacco factories left vacant by the war, were available. On November 11 some 4,000 prisoners left Richmond and headed south. A second contingent departed two days later. The buildings proved porous, and a number of Yankees tunneled their way to freedom. One group of between sixty and seventy got away the third night the prisons were in operation. Another seventy or eighty escaped in late January, and on February 27, seventy more left Prison 5 via a tunnel.

The escapes made life much worse for the captives left behind. Fearful of more departures, prison officials herded the remaining prisoners into upstairs rooms, resulting in severe crowding. A shortage of water also posed problems. The entire supply for all the Danville prisons came from the Dan River, some distance away, all of it delivered in pails.

In early December smallpox broke out in the prisons. By the 19th a prisoner was writing, “Smallpox is increasing. Dr. has not been to our prison for three days & men lie helpless upon the floor, no medicine or warm food.”¹⁷ How many men died of the disease is not known. As March ended one prisoner put the total number of deaths at 500. In April another observed that all three stories of his building had been packed with captives in November. Now all were confined to two levels with far less crowding.

Farther south and west, the Confederates began confining prisoners at Cahaba, Alabama in the spring of 1863. Cahaba had been used as a temporary holding facility the previous year. Now, as the cartel was ending, the prisoners arriving there were destined to remain longer. The 15,000-square-foot prison was a warehouse started on the eve of the war and never finished. Most of the prisoners slept on the open ground. Because the roof had not been completed, there was an opening of 1,600 feet above them.

Even farther west a pair of Texas prisons, Camp Groce and Camp Ford, housed the bulk of the Union captives taken in the trans-Mississippi. Located near Hempstead, Camp Groce had opened as a Confederate training camp in early 1862. It had been abandoned a year later because officials considered the site unhealthy, but they reopened in 1863 as a

¹⁵ Entry for September 19, 1863, *John A. Boudwin Diary*, Pearce Museum Collections, Navarro College, Corsicana, TX.

¹⁶ Entry for January 21, 1864, *Michael Dougherty Diary*, Andersonville National Historic Site, Andersonville, Georgia.

¹⁷ Entry for December 19, *Bergun H. Brown Diary*, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia.

prison.

The cartel temporarily emptied Camp Groce, but it resumed operation in June 1864. Soon nearly 700 captives occupied the tiny camp. The Confederates impressed slaves from nearby plantations to extend the walls. This eased the crowding, but the health problems remained, largely because of the camp's poor water. Two wells offered only "a slimy, smelly ooze," and the poorly named Clear Creek "carried a steady stream of human and equine waste" from two nearby cavalry camps.¹⁸ To the east, Camp Ford, located four miles northeast of Tyler, became the largest Confederate prison west of the Mississippi. Like Camp Groce, it had begun as a training camp. The first prisoners arrived on July 30, 1863. At first the camp had few prisoners and no walls. When 461 captives arrived in early November, camp officials, playing on the fears of local residents, persuaded them to supply slaves to erect a stockade.

The spring of 1864 saw a tremendous increase in Camp Ford's prison population. April 15 marked the arrival of 1,100. More reached the camp over the next several weeks, and by May 27 a guard placed the number of Yankees at 4,400. This time Confederate officials impressed slaves to extend the walls of the prison. Inside those walls the pen was a hodgepodge of shelters. The early prisoners had been allowed outside to secure wood to erect cabins. Later arrivals improvised tents from poles and blankets or simply burrowed into the ground. A few slept in the open air.

On November 24, 1863, James Alexander Seddon, the latest Confederate secretary of war, ordered Captain William Sidney Winder, son of the provost marshal, to Georgia. His assignment was to consult with local officials and establish a military prison. Beyond that Seddon offered few details. That Confederate officials wanted the Richmond prisons emptied was beyond doubt. That they were concerned with the finer points of caring for the departed captives is subject to considerable doubt.

Many of the factors that would result in over 13,000 deaths at Andersonville were apparent from the time that Sidney Winder, as the captain was known, arrived in Georgia. President Davis objected to his first choice for a prison site, a location near Albany, because he feared it would be vulnerable to a Union raid. Locals vetoed his second choice, a spot between Americus and Plains. Winder finally was able to lease the area that would become the Andersonville prison from a pair of landowners.

Both Sidney and his cousin, Captain Richard B. Winder, who arrived in December to serve as post quartermaster, soon ran up against local intransigence that made it nearly impossible to get anything done. The war had robbed the region of capable white workers, and slave owners were reluctant to hire out their chattels. In a rare instance of support, Seddon, desperate to clear the Richmond prisons, empowered the quartermaster to impress slave labor. This got the project moving, but the delay was such that Andersonville's first prisoners would arrive before the stockade was completed.

¹⁸ Amy L. Klemm, *A Shared Captivity: Inmates and Guards in the Texas Military Prison System, 1863-1865*. Master's Thesis, University of Houston, 1997, pp. 7-10.

Meanwhile supplies were so scarce that prison officials dispatched a civilian to Cartersville, well north of Atlanta, just to secure cooking kettles.

On February 26, 1864, Colonel Alexander W. Persons of the 55th Georgia was named commander of the facility, officially dubbed Fort Sumter. (Brigadier General John Henry Winder would replace him in June.) The first prisoners, a detachment of sent from Richmond, had arrived late the previous evening. Because of the lack of coordination in Confederate prison policy - and the resultant poor planning - these captives, who had spent a bitter winter on Belle Isle, would now face summer in the broiling sun of southern Georgia.

They would also spend their summer with Captain Heinrich Hartmann ‘Henry’ Wirz, who arrived at Andersonville in early March. In 1862 Wirz had served John Winder in a variety of capacities. He had been in charge of captives sent west from Richmond and briefly commanded the small military prison at Tuscaloosa, Alabama. For a time, he had supervised prisons in Richmond. During that time he had established a reputation as a severe disciplinarian but also as an officer who worked tirelessly to improve the prisoners’ condition. The ambivalence the prisoners felt to Wirz was perhaps best summed up by Wisconsin soldier Elisha Rice Reed, who wrote at Tuscaloosa, “How we hated that man in Richmond, but now he is the best friend we have.”¹⁹ Wirz brought those same traits to Georgia. “Captain Wirz... is very firm and rigid in the discipline of the prisoners,” one inspector wrote, “and at the same time exercises toward them all proper acts of kindness.”²⁰ Sadly, circumstances conspired against Wirz in his efforts to improve the lot of the prisoners. A case in point was his plan to improve sanitation in the stockade. Wirz planned to construct twin dams on the stream that bisected the facility. This would create a pool for drinking water and a downstream pool for bathing. The sinks would be below the lower pool, and both dams could be opened to flush the waste. The plan was sound, but the lack of tools and lumber doomed it to failure.

By May 8 there were over 12,000 Union prisoners at Andersonville. The following month the number exceeded 18,000. Among them was a number of the “Raiders” who had terrorized their fellows at Belle Isle. The trip south had done nothing to change their ways; and the constant influx of prisoners, many of whom arrived with money, guaranteed a steady supply of victims. “A great deal of thieving going on at nights,” one prisoner wrote in May. He termed the Raiders “a mean low set of fellows,” adding, “They hesitate not to rob the sick the weak and the blind.”²¹ By June the Raiders had become bolder, attacking and robbing their fellows even in daylight. On the 29th the prisoners appealed to Wirz, and the commandant sent in a squad of guards to assist a fledgling prison police force, termed the “Regulators.” Together they began rounding up Raiders. Fourteen, identified as the worst offenders were kept outside the stockade to be put on trial. Of them, six were sentenced to death by a jury composed of prisoners. On

¹⁹ Entry for February 4, 1862, *Elisha Rice Reed Diary*, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁰ O.R., II, 7, 136

²¹ Entry for May 20, 1864, *Michael Dougherty Diary*, Andersonville National Historic Site, Andersonville, GA.

July 11, after gallows were erected near the south prison gate, the sentence was carried out.

Camp officials addressed another problem in late May when they began a project that extended the prison fence to the north. Prisoners provided much of the labor, reasoning that alleviating the crowding of the camp justified performing work for the enemy. The old wall came down on July 1, and the prisoners had ten extra acres of space.

Other problems proved more difficult to address. Among them was the lack of shelter. Numerous inspectors called for the erection of barracks, citing exposure to the elements and difficulties with policing the camp. Unable to secure even enough lumber to dam the creek, Wirz was powerless to provide shelter for the prisoners. As a result the prison was a hodgepodge of crude tents largely fashioned from poles and blankets. Others burrowed into the ground for shelter, while some simply remained outside and took whatever weather conditions came along. May and June proved to be wet months. One rainy, windy morning a captive observed, "Many of the poor prisoners are standing like horses and cattle, with their backs to the storm and no shelter."²²

Securing good drinking water was also a problem for the Andersonville prisoners. The stream running through the camp was often fouled by slops from the cookhouse and by prisoners who used it to wash. Many tried digging wells, but success was far from guaranteed. One group had to go down 62 feet before striking water. Some dug even deeper and still came up dry. A few secured water by trading knives or other personal items for a share in a well already dug. Relief finally came following an August 9 storm, which opened up a spring of fresh water. The flow was beyond the prison dead line, but the Confederates erected spouting to bring the water to the prisoners.

If thirst was a frequent problem for the Andersonville prisoners, hunger was their constant companion. Rations represented the efforts of harried prison officials to keep up with the demands of an ever swelling captive population. With few exceptions, those efforts were doomed to failure. Early on the standard rations at Andersonville consisted of cornbread and bacon. By June rice and beans were often issued in lieu of cornbread. The following month molasses sometimes replaced meat. By then quantities were growing much smaller.

The quality of the rations was also poor - and definitely unhealthy. There was no equipment to sift the cornmeal, and the prisoners received it cob and all. The cornbread, prepared in open troughs, attracted flies, which quickly became part of the mixture. Prison diarists frequently made mention of peas full of dirt, bugs, or worms, and meat too spoiled to eat, despite the prisoners' hunger.

In August Andersonville's prison population peaked at over 33,000. The death toll that month neared three thousand. Eventually 13,000 Unionists would occupy

²² Entry for June 17, 1864, John B. Kay Diary, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Andersonville graves, more than one of every three held there. The causes were many, and often they were beyond the control of the prison's keepers. In the early months the Belle Isle prisoners, who arrived weak after enduring a bitter winter in Richmond, made up a large portion of the death toll.

The poor rations were a prime cause of sickness and death. As early as May mentions of scurvy were appearing in the prisoners' diaries. By August post surgeon Isaiah White reported, "Scurvy prevails to a great extent."²³ A prisoner wrote, "The ravages of this disease are terrible. Many [are] going about the camp with bleeding mouths and teeth actually dropping out."²⁴ Diarrhea and dysentery were also common maladies. One medical inspector wrote that virtually every prisoner in the camp suffered from one or the other. They were caused, he reported, by exposure, the smoke and filth of the camp, and the cornbread prepared from unbolted meal. The debilitating effects of diarrhea often led to actions that further threatened the prisoners' health. One sufferer wrote, "Diarrhea very bad. John Early dug me a hole [in the] street to use as a sink."²⁵ Medical inspectors wrote that it was a common practice.

The prison hospital was crowded, resulting in a pathetic lottery that took place whenever a sick call was announced. Hundreds of even thousands would show up, some hobbling or crawling on their own, others assisted by friends, some carried on blankets. There they waited in the broiling sun as the doctors slowly conducted examinations. A prisoner who witnessed the procession in early August wrote, "The day was mostly spent in getting out the sick. From early morn till past noon there was a constant crowding through the gate. Men in all stages of disease. And not the half of them were taken. Many died in the crowds & many more died afterwards. It was perfectly awful."²⁶

Although the death toll was high at Andersonville, shootings were relatively rare. The oft-repeated tale that camp guards received furloughs for every Yankee they shot was not true. However, prison diaries indicate that shots would ring out at the slightest contact with the aptly named "dead line." Despite this, there were fewer than twenty shooting incidents during the operation of the prison. Considering the number of youthful, inexperienced guards-- and the crowding of the prison - the sentries appear to have been restrained.

Andersonville's days as a Confederate prison appeared to be numbered on September 2, when Major General William Tecumseh Sherman captured Atlanta. Three days later camp officials received orders to ship the prisoners there and at Macon to Charleston and Savannah.

²³ O.R., II, 7, 525.

²⁴ Entry for August 12, 1864, *Nehemiah Solon Diary*, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford.)

²⁵ Entry for July 22, 1864, *Samuel L. Foust Diary*, Andersonville National Historic Site, Andersonville, GA.

²⁶ Entry for August 12, 1864, *Samuel Henderson Diary*, Duke University Library, Durham, NC.

The prisoners at Macon were Union officers. The Confederates had reopened Camp Oglethorpe for their reception, and they began arriving in May. Conditions there were far better than those the enlisted prisoners endured at Andersonville. Fresh water came from a spring, a well, and a creek that ran through the compound. The prisoners received lumber to construct barracks. Rations of corn bread or corn meal, rice, beans, and pork were issued every four days in quantities the prison diarists considered adequate. They also received salt and soap, two items rarely distributed at Andersonville. The Confederates provided a skillet and a two-quart cooking dish to every squad of ten men.

When the Confederates evacuated Macon, many of the Union officers found themselves bound for Savannah. They stayed in a hospital yard, where they were crowded into tents. The water there was foul tasting and muddy. However, the prisoners also found improved rations, including an occasional issue of fresh beef.

Other officers were sent to Charleston, where they spent their first two weeks in the jail yard. They were in the path of Union artillery shells, which were then bombarding the city. Their lot improved on August 23, when the Confederates transferred the officers to the Roper Hospital and the Marine Hospital. Although still harassed by friendly fire, they received acceptable rations and perhaps the most comfortable quarters experienced by any Union prisoners.

In late September the Charleston officer prisoners were sent on to Columbia, South Carolina. The Savannah prisoners followed them to Charleston. Those captives, in turn, went to Columbia in October. They occupied a “high piece of waste land”²⁷ three miles west of town. Rations were worse than at Savannah or Charleston. The only time the prisoners enjoyed meat between October 6 and December 9 occurred when an unfortunate wild boar roamed into the camp.

By early October there was also frost on the ground many mornings. Despite that, the prisoners went without wood for another three weeks. When finally allowed out to gather fuel, many also brought in the raw material for crude shelters. The details also allowed a number of prisoners to escape. The guards, almost entirely the very young and the very old, were inexperienced. All a prisoner had to do, some diary keepers insisted, was tell the novice sentries that they had been paroled as members of the work parties. According to some, bribery worked as well. However it was accomplished, one diarist estimated that 275 walked out in a 48-hour stretch in early November.

In July 1862 the United States Congress approved the enlistment of black men into the American armed forces. Two months later President Lincoln announced his intention to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation beginning January 1, 1863. Both soon had a drastic effect on Union and Confederate prison policies.

Many of the new Northern recruits were former slaves, and the Confederate response

²⁷ Nathaniel Rollins to Timothy O. Howe, January 26, 1865, *Nathaniel Rollins Papers*, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison

was predictably vociferous. On December 23, 1863, President Jefferson Davis issued a proclamation declaring that “all negro slaves captured in arms” would be delivered to the governors of the states “to which they belong.”²⁸ Their white commissioned officers were to be jailed, charged with inciting servile insurrection.

The fate of individual black soldiers generally depended upon the attitudes of Confederate officers and men on particular battlefields. This did not bode well for the men of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). One Southern soldier summed up the feelings of many in a letter home when he wrote, “I hope I may never see a Negro Soldier or I cannot be... a Christian Soldier.”²⁹ Among the first place such feelings were demonstrated was Milliken’s Bend, a federal supply base along the Mississippi in Louisiana. In the wake of a Confederate attack in June 1863, Adm. David D. Porter reported, “The dead negroes lined the ditch inside the parapet... and were mostly shot on the top of the head.”³⁰ Following later actions in the same area, a number of black soldiers were reported to have “died” following their capture. Writing after the April 18, 1864, Battle of Poison Spring, Arkansas, one Confederate bragged that “at least 400 darkies were killed. [N]o black prisoners were captured.”³¹ The racial incident best remembered-- and most controversial-- in Civil War annals is the “Fort Pillow Massacre.” Some 570 Union soldiers composed the Tennessee garrison on the Mississippi River. Just under half were black. On April 12, 1864, Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest’s troopers captured the fort. When it was all over, nearly a third of the fort’s defenders, most of them black, lay dead. A Congressional committee concluded that at least 300 had been murdered. Later scholarly studies would reduce that number, but they would still conclude that both black and white Unionists were killed after they surrendered.

Blacks who survived to become prisoners often faced the specter of slavery or forced labor. Logistical problems often made it difficult to “restore” slaves to their masters, but military officials had no difficulty in finding projects for black captives. Over 500 were put to work on the defenses of Mobile. Others were put to work in the trenches in the vicinity of Richmond.

A small number of black prisoners reached Confederate prisons. At Andersonville they arrived with their white officers, the only officers held at the camp. The “Negro Squad” was quickly assigned such menial tasks as unloading lumber for proposed barracks and serving on wood and burial details. Those who refused ran the risk of being whipped.

²⁸ O.R., II, 7, 797.

²⁹ Irvin Wiley Bell, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987, p. 314.

³⁰ ³⁰ O.R., I, 24, pt. 2, 454.

³¹ Gregory J. Urwin, *We Cannot Treat Negroes as Prisoners of War’ Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in Civil War Arkansas*,” *Civil War History Magazine*, 42, No. 3 (1996), p. 197.

In early September the Andersonville prisoners began following their officers east. Those who went to Savannah found it to be a decided improvement. Rations of both food and wood were better, and local citizens turned out to supply bread, clothing, and tobacco. The captives transferred to Charleston were also pleased with the change. Their “prison” was a race track. There was no wall, but a furrow made with a plow served as the dead line. Rations were scant at first, but they improved as time went on. As at Savannah, citizens turned out in large numbers to offer food and tobacco, despite threats from the guards.

From Savannah a few prisoners went to a new facility at Millen, Georgia. Others arrived there directly from Andersonville. General Winder commanded the prison, which received its first prisoners in October. The 42-acre site had a substantial stream running through it, meaning both water and sanitary facilities were much better than at Andersonville. It was also far roomier. Indeed, had this site been selected rather than Andersonville, the summer’s death toll would likely have been much less. As it turned out, with Sherman advancing, “Camp Lawton” served as a prison for only about a month. On November 19 Winder received orders to transfer all the prisoners to Savannah.

By that time Florence, South Carolina, had become the Confederacy’s newest military prison. It was destined to become one of the worst.

On September 11 Major General Samuel Jones, commanding at Charleston, learned that 24,000 prisoners from Georgia were headed for Charleston. Fearing he was about to be overwhelmed, Jones immediately dispatched a staff officer to Florence to scout out a site for a new prison. The first Andersonville captives arrived three days later. Their compound consisted of a guard line and a picket line with a few artillery pieces surrounding it. Slave laborers went to work, and by October 2 they had completed the stockade, which enclosed 24 acres.

Prisoners from Charleston began arriving the same day. At least two of them wrote in their diaries that the place looked worse than Andersonville. Cold weather soon made the prisoners’ situation even worse. The Confederates issued clothing and blankets sent from the North, but it did not come close to meeting the demand. The wood they supplied was so green it was almost impossible to get it to burn. Writing on December 18, one prisoner observed, “The past week has seen a dozen or more poor fellows numbered with the dead the verdict being ‘frozen to death.’”³² By then rations were down to a pint and a half of either rice or meal. Occasionally a few beans or a little salt was also issued. The prisoners received no meat the entire month. It was not only prison diarists who complained of the shortages. On January 31, 1865, Lieutenant Colonel John Iverson, the camp commander, warned Winder, “The ration being issued to the prisoners at this prison is totally insufficient for their sustenance, as large numbers are dying daily, and I am satisfied it is from not being properly fed.”³³ The report was forwarded to Lucius C. Northrup, the

³² Entry for December 18, 1864, *Henry Tisdale Diary*, Andersonville National Historic Site, Andersonville, GA

³³ O.R., II, 8, 160.

Confederacy's prickly commissary general of subsistence. Northrup replied that he did not have enough food to supply the soldiers in the field, adding ominously, "It is just that the men who caused the scarcity shall be the first to suffer from it."³⁴ Florence's death count, 2,802 of the twelve thousand sent there, would exceed that at Andersonville.

The Confederates also pressed Salisbury back into service. Conditions there were similar to those at Florence. Arriving from Danville on October 19, a prisoner wrote, "Was put in a yard where was confined about 7000 of our men without any shelter." He added, "Not many of them have any blankets. Their sufferings are unparrilled."³⁵ A Salisbury guard informed his family that the daily death toll was between ten and 25.

The Confederates issued tents, but they could only provide one for every fifty prisoners. The commissary officer sent out agents with instructions to buy, borrow, or impress supplies for the 13,000 individuals that composed the prison and the post. He even visited the Salisbury railroad depot to impress trainloads of passing supplies. Despite his efforts, the failure of North Carolina's wheat crop and the sheer numbers combined to thwart him.

On November 25, 1864, the Salisbury prisoners launched a desperate escape attempt. About 200 of them attacked a portion of the guard force that had just been relieved, securing their weapons. They then opened fire on the parapet. The prisoners failed to secure the gate, however, and two rounds of canister, fired from a pair of six-pounders, quelled the uprising. When it was all over, three guards were dead and some ten were wounded. The prisoners lost sixteen killed and sixty wounded.

The majority of prisoners who left Millen in November began a circuitous odyssey marked by cold weather and hunger. They first went south, ending up at a hastily established camp at Blackshear, in southeastern Georgia. They remained there for two weeks before moving on to the southwestern Georgia community of Thomasville. Their stay there was even briefer. The captives departed on December 19. By Christmas most were back at Andersonville.

On February 6, 1865, John Winder suffered a fatal heart attack as he was inspecting the prison at Florence. Two months earlier he had finally been named Confederate commissary general of prisoners and given the authority he needed to do the job. The assignment came about three years too late to accomplish any real good.

By then exchange had finally been resumed. Even here the shortages that plagued the Confederacy interfered, and many captives left their compounds only to return because of a lack of transportation. Still, the prisons slowly began to empty, and for thousands of captives a nightmare often measured in years was about to end.

³⁴ O.R., II, 8, 160-161.

³⁵ Entry for October 19, 1864, *Harvey Henderson Diary*, Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library, Albany

Many of those who left Andersonville and Cahaba never made it back to the North. At Vicksburg they boarded the steamer *Sultana*, a vessel rated for 376 passengers. Some two thousand clambered aboard. In the early morning hours of April 27, the third day out, a boiler exploded. Although the death toll will never be known, it had been estimated at anywhere from 1,200 to 1,600.

A different type of victim was Henry Wirz. The Andersonville commandant was arrested in May and put on trial before a military commission in November. They blocked potential defense witnesses and allowed the prosecution to present sensational and often inaccurate evidence. Predictably Wirz was found guilty and he was hanged on November 10.

Other camp commanders were captured, and a few were tried. Wirz's conviction, however, seemed to satisfy the appetites of those in the North determined to seek revenge. Nobody else was convicted, and few remained imprisoned long. Historians have since largely exonerated Wirz, who was placed in a situation far beyond his control. Blame might be better placed with a Confederate war department, fighting for its country's existence, which never developed a coherent policy for dealing with prisoners. The result was a disaster, and its victims ranged from Henry Wirz to thousands of Union captives.
