

The Grand Bull Pen: Confederate Captives at Point Lookout, 1863 - 1865

by

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The Grand Bull Pen: Confederate Captives at Point Lookout, 1863 – 1865

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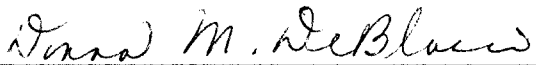

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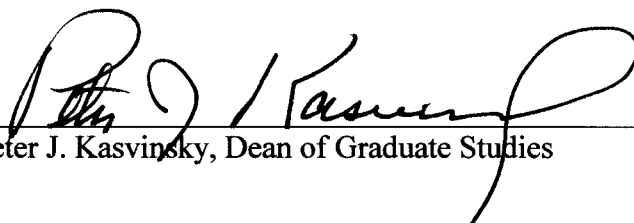
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ABSTRACT

Constructed on the tip of the peninsula where the Potomac River joins the Chesapeake Bay, Point Lookout, Maryland served as the Union's largest prisoner of war camp for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War. During the two years of its existence, from July 1863, to June 1865, Point Lookout overflowed with inmates, surpassing its intended capacity of 10,000 to a population that at one point reached well over 20,000 captives. In all, over 50,000 men, both military and civilian, were held there. Prisoners, who sometimes lived sixteen or more to a tent, were subjected to habitually short rations, limited firewood in winter, and often inexperienced and trigger-happy guards. Further exacerbating the problems, in 1864 Federal authorities decided to cut the ration and clothing allowance to rebel captives throughout the North in retaliation for alleged mistreatment and torture of Union captives in the South. Physical attributes also tormented prisoners. The flat topography of the area resulted in frequent flooding of the stockade, and captives were subjected to every extreme of weather, from blazing heat to bone-chilling cold. Polluted water, the greatest cause of illness in the camp, combined with inadequate food, clothing, fuel, housing, and medical care, resulted in the death of approximately 4,000 prisoners over a two-year period.

This study, based primarily on official records, newspapers, and prisoners' diaries and letters, investigates the daily operation of the "Bull Pen," as prisoners dubbed the camp, and sheds light on the actual conditions experienced by captives held at Point Lookout. The camp administration, including the several commandants who served during the war, and the various guard units assigned to the prison and their reactions towards the prisoners are examined in detail. Answers are sought as to why conditions deteriorated to

the point that 4,000 men died, who held ultimate responsibility for the conditions in the camp, and if anything could have been done to improve the living standards of captives and was not. The main thrust is to determine reality from exaggeration and offer an objective appraisal of camp life. Undoubtedly, poor conditions sometimes prevailed in the camp, though not as appalling as many Confederates later recalled, and certainly not as pleasant as many Northern officials wished others to believe.

*For my Parents –
who footed the bill.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: An Historic Perspective on Civil War Prisons.....	1
Chapter One: A Brief History of Point Lookout, Maryland.....	8
Chapter Two: Cracker Boxes and Hardtack.....	32
Chapter Three: "...If He Wants to Shoot, Let Him Shoot." - The Camp Guard.....	58
Chapter Four: "May This Suffering Be Upon Those Who Inflict It.".....	88
Conclusion: Disease, Death, and Heartbreak.....	110
Appendix: Illustrations.....	121
Bibliography.....	131

Introduction

An Historic Perspective on Civil War Prisons

Robert Bingham, a captain in the 44th North Carolina Infantry, marched with Lee's Army of Northern Virginia as it made its way towards Pennsylvania in June 1863. Detached to protect the army's communication lines with Richmond on June 26, which consisted of railroad lines and several bridges, he and a small group of about 80 men soon found themselves skirmishing with a Federal force several times their number. Surrounded and facing certain slaughter, the officers of the isolated Confederate companies ordered their men to throw down their arms and surrender.¹

On June 9, 1864 Anthony Keiley sat quietly in his office just outside of Petersburg, Virginia reading the Richmond newspapers. No longer in active military service, he hesitated momentarily after hearing the alarms that signaled an imminent attack by an unknown Federal force. Learning from a passer-by that a large number of Union cavalry had ventured within two miles of the city, and that only 150 members of the local militia – comprised mostly of men too old for active service – stood in their path, he quickly made his way to the local commander and reported for service. Armed with antiquated smoothbore muskets without bayonets, the small Confederate force held off several charges before being surrounded and captured by Union cavalry.²

By the end of March 1865, the fledgling Confederate nation stood little chance of survival, yet James Meade, a sergeant major in the 59th Virginia regiment, continued the

¹ Robert Bingham, 30 June 1863, Robert Bingham Diary, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

² A.M. Keiley. *In Vinculis: The Prisoner of War*. (New York: Blelock & Co., 1866), 14, 17, 23-24.

fight. On March 30, he and six others were sent on a scouting mission to determine the movements of General William T. Sherman's cavalry in the immediate vicinity. After a sleepless night with no food, fire, or blankets, the patrol rose in the morning and managed to get breakfast from a sympathetic resident at a nearby farmhouse. Temporarily distracted, the hungry Confederates failed to notice the approach of a Union cavalry patrol, which surrounded the house and waited for the oblivious rebels to emerge.³

For these men, along with tens of thousands of others, their days of soldiering were at an end. From the moment of capture, they adorned a new label, "prisoner of war." For many prisoners, their time spent in captivity would be more trying than the actual battlefield. Depression, homesickness, disease, exposure, starvation, and death filled the lives of those unfortunate enough to be taken captive during the Civil War. "It is a sad thought," wrote a North Carolina Confederate to his wife, "that first *conscious* knowledge of being a prisoner."⁴

Despite the huge number of combatants taken prisoner during the conflict, the study of Civil War prisons has only recently gained the attention of scholars and historians. Nearly 50,000 Union and Confederate prisoners of war died during the four years of war, and the enormous death toll resulted in bitter recriminations between North and South concerning which side was ultimately responsible for the suffering of captive soldiers. During and immediately following the conflict, numerous "histories" in the forms of edited prisoner diaries and memoirs appeared in print. Far from objective, many of these works were little better than post-war propaganda, the authors insistent on condemning

³ James T. Meade. *Journal of Prison Life*. (Torrington, CT: Rainbow Press, 1987), 1.

⁴ William H. Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865, William H. Haigh Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

their captors, Union and Confederate, for alleged mistreatment, starvation, and torture. For many, captivity left bitter memories not easily forgotten.⁵

Other veterans gained monetarily from embellishing their memoirs. The public eagerly devoured books on the horrors and brutality of prison camps in the years after the war. The matter of disability pensions also skewed many of the publications. With veterans pushing for Federal benefits because of disabilities suffered while in captivity, it behooved ex-prisoners to have a public sympathetic to their cause and understanding of the torment they endured – even if fabricated.⁶ The topic produced serious sectional controversy, as well, further delaying reconciliation between North and South after the war. Government officials and military officers often engaged in philippic diatribes over which side committed greater atrocities against prisoners of war, and who held ultimate responsibility. In the end, they resolved nothing, as all seemed content to absolve their own side of blame rather than seek an honest appraisal of what transpired.⁷

Not until the 1930's, after passions had somewhat cooled, did a historian undertake a serious study of the matter. William Hesseltine's, *Civil War Prisons*⁸, was the first work to examine the overall prison system, effectively debunking any remaining myths that prisoners of war were intentionally exterminated during the conflict. Yet his work contained flaws, and his Southern ancestry often interfered with his objectivity. Other, minor studies appeared intermittently for the next sixty years, but for over half a century,

⁵ William Marvel. "Johnny Ransom's Imagination," *Civil War History*. Vol. XLI, No. 3, December 1995. 181-189.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michael P Gray. *The Business of Captivity: Elmira and Its Civil War Prison*. (Kent and London: The Kent State University Press, 2001), 155-160.

⁸ William Best Hesseltine. *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology*. (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1930). 155-160.

Hesseltine's remained the definitive work on the subject. Not until the 1990's did resurgence in the interest of Civil War prisons occur. Indeed, a virtual flood of studies concerning prisons appeared over the past decade. Lonnie Speer's *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War*⁹, a comprehensive study of Northern and Southern prisons and policies, was the first such book to be published since Hesseltine and filled many voids left by his work. Other works on individual prisons, such as *Cahaba Prison and the Sultana Disaster*¹⁰, *Andersonville: The Last Depot*¹¹, *Rebels at Rock Island: The Story of a Civil War Prison*¹², *To Die in Chicago: Confederate Prisoners at Camp Douglas*¹³, and the latest, *The Business of Captivity: Elmira and its Civil War Prison*¹⁴, added significantly to the understanding of Civil War Prisons, the obstacles faced by camp administrators, and the conditions experienced by the captives. A common trait among the new generation of prison studies is an emphasis on the people involved in the daily operations of the camp, such as guards, low-level administrators, and local civilians, and on those most directly affected – the prisoners themselves. Subsequently, greater use has been made of personal diaries and letters from these sources, rather than sole reliance on official records and documents.

Noticeably missing from the collection of recent studies, however, is any significant examination of Point Lookout, Maryland, the Union's largest prisoner of war camp

⁹ Lonnie R. Speer. *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997).

¹⁰ William O. Bryant. *Cahaba Prison and the Sultana Disaster*. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1990).

¹¹ William Marvel. *Andersonville: The Last Depot*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

¹² Benton McAdams. *Rebels at Rock Island: The Story of a Civil War Prison*. (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

¹³ George Levy. *To Die in Chicago: Confederate Prisoners at Camp Douglas, 1862-1865*. (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1999).

¹⁴ Michael P Gray. *The Business of Captivity: Elmira and Its Civil War Prison*. (Kent and London: The Kent State University Press, 2001).

during the conflict. In 1983, Edwin Beitzell released, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*¹⁵, but his work, though offering an invaluable source for future researchers, in actuality consisted of a compilation of primary sources rather than any serious analysis. Further, a definite pro-Southern bias pervaded his study, preventing an objective appraisal of the camp. A thorough and balanced examination of Point Lookout is long overdue.

Constructed on the tip of the peninsula where the Potomac River joins the Chesapeake Bay, Point Lookout in Maryland served as the Union's largest prisoner of war camp for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War. During the two years of its existence, from July 1863, to June 1865, Point Lookout overflowed with inmates, surpassing its intended capacity of 10,000 to a population that at one point reached well over 20,000 captives. In all, over 50,000 men, both military and civilian, were held prisoner there. The camp was laid out into a series of streets and trenches, intended to aid in drainage, and surrounded by a fourteen-foot wood-plank stockade wall. Prisoners, who sometimes lived sixteen or more to a tent, were subjected to habitually short rations, limited firewood in winter, and often inexperienced and trigger-happy guards who sometimes fired into the camp indiscriminately. Racial tensions also posed problems, as many of the guard regiments were comprised of former slaves, some of whom were once owned by men inside the stockade walls. Altercations between white Southern captives and black sentinels resulted in several deaths.

¹⁵ Edwin W. Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*. (Leonardtown, MD: St. Mary's County Historical Society, 1983).

In retaliation for Confederate treatment of Union prisoners in the South, most notably at Andersonville, Georgia where 13,000 Federal troops eventually died, Northern authorities, at the prompting of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Commissary General of Prisoners Colonel William Hoffman, decided to cut the ration and clothing allowance to rebel captives throughout the North. Confederates incarcerated at Point Lookout suffered accordingly. Limited to a diet comprised almost entirely of beef, fish, bread, and watery soup, prisoners suffered scurvy and other diseases brought on through malnutrition.

Physical conditions also added to the hardships of prison life. The flat topography, sandy soil, and an elevation barely above high tide led to poor drainage and frequent flooding. During intense storms, much of the stockade, as well as the guard camps, remained submerged in water. The area was subjected to every imaginable extreme of weather, from blazing heat to bone-chilling cold. Polluted water, the greatest cause of illness in the camp, combined with inadequate food, clothing, fuel, housing, and medical care, resulted in the death of approximately 4,000 prisoners over a two-year period.

Yet Point Lookout did not differ significantly from other prison camps throughout the North, for as Benton McAdams, the author of *Rebels at Rock Island*, states, “the prisoners...are also mirrors, reflecting the prisoners at all the camps.”¹⁶ Most captives, regardless of the prison, suffered from a poor diet, disease, and had to live with edgy guards. An examination of Point Lookout will illuminate these issues. While there were similarities, however, the Point differed from other prisons in that it had one of the lowest mortality rates in the North. Though being a captive at the stockade was a less than

¹⁶ McAdams, 212.

desirable experience, the camp was certainly not on the same level as Andersonville, with its thirty percent death rate. In fact, despite the claims of postwar memoirs and some irresponsible modern scholars, the massive camp at Point Lookout actually possessed one of the lowest mortality rates of *any* prison in the North.¹⁷ A study of why this phenomenon occurred offers insight into the operations of other prisons, highlighting decisions that worked, and those that did not, where administrators failed, and where they succeeded.

¹⁷ Beitzell, 181; Lewis N. Wynne, ed. *This War so Horrible: the Civil War Diary of Hiram Smith*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 2-3.

Chapter One

A Brief History of Point Lookout, Maryland

Glancing at contemporary photographs of Point Lookout, Maryland, little evidence exists to suggest the location was ever more than a seaside resort and state recreational area for tourists and locals on vacation. There are fewer signs to indicate the area once held the largest prisoner of war camp in the United States. Nothing remains of the forty-acre stockade that at one time held over 20,000 Confederate prisoners of war, or the galley way atop the prison walls from which Union soldiers vigilantly stood guard and patrolled the camp. Gone, too, is the enormous hospital complex where thousands of captives spent their last days before succumbing to illness or wounds. Much of the area where men in ragged gray uniforms regularly endured exposure, disease, and hunger, and combated fear, boredom, and homesickness on a daily basis, is now dotted with camp grounds, fishing wharves, and boat docks. Indeed, a secluded cemetery miles from the prison site, where the bodies of nearly 3,500 Confederate soldiers rest in a mass grave, is the sole reminder of the suffering that occurred there a century and a half ago.

Located in St. Mary's county in the southeastern part of the state at the extreme tip of a strip of land formed by the junction of the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River, Point Lookout is an extremely low and marshy area, covered with sand by the water's edge and ponds in the interior. The lack of trees, ridges, and valleys leave it in a very exposed position, resulting in extreme seasonal temperatures – blazing hot in the summers and freezing cold in the winter, made all the more intolerable by a steady wind from the bay. Despite its relative isolation – few people actually live on the Point – it

possesses a long history dating back to the first English settlers of the Maryland colony in the early seventeenth century. On August 30, 1634 Lord Baltimore granted his brother, Governor Leonard Calvert, a major tract of land at the Point for importing what was classified as “ten able men,” in 1633. Earlier, in November of 1633, a group of Jesuit colonists sailed from England to the new colony. Father Andrew White, accompanying the colonizing party, reported that upon entering into the Chesapeake Bay the new arrivals named the Potomac River for St. Gregory, and Point Lookout for St. Michael. Governor Calvert, dividing his land into three contiguous manors soon after he took possession of the area, subsequently named the area encompassing Point Lookout, “St. Michael’s Manor,” an estate of approximately 1500 acres.¹

The name, “St. Michael’s,” did not last long, however. Even before the arrival of the Jesuit colonists, John Smith, exploring the area in 1612, named Point Lookout “Sparkes Poynt,” and a 1635 map of Virginia shows an indecipherable name attached to the peninsula. Beginning in the 1640’s, military references to “Poynt Looke out” appeared sporadically in reports and correspondence, though mariners still identified it as “St. Michael’s Point.” Not until the 1670’s did the area become commonly known as “Point Lookout,” a name apparently derived from the curvature of the peninsula at the mouth of the Potomac River, a geographic feature that interfered with normal navigation into the bay and caused sailors to have to “look out” to avoid the coastline.²

Jesuit priests and their followers predominated on Point Lookout and in St. Mary’s county in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of whom dedicated their time to

¹ Edwin W. Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*. (Leonardtown, MD: St. Mary’s County Historical Society, 1983), 1.

² Ibid.

establishing missions and proselytizing the Indians they encountered. Unfortunately for some colonists, however, their preaching was not always met with open arms from area tribes. In 1642, a group of Senecas or Susquehannas, the record is not clear, scalped and killed several colonists before retreating across the Potomac River into Virginia with two hostages who were ransomed and later returned.³ The Jesuit community continued to thrive despite these periodic setbacks, however, and actively supported the United States during the Revolution and War of 1812. It later did its utmost to help Confederate prisoners of war held at Point Lookout in the 1860's.⁴

With the coming of war against Great Britain in the 1770's, many county officials and a substantial portion of the residents sided against their mother country. In 1774, officials of St. Mary's County turned away a British ship trying to dock near Point Lookout with a shipment of tea, refusing to pay the duties imposed by the royal government.⁵ By 1775, with the outbreak of hostilities, the colony formed the Council of Safety to direct wartime activities, and each county in turn formed a corresponding Committee of Observation to assist the colonial officials.⁶ In all, out of a total population of some 8,000 people, St. Mary's county sent nearly 2,000 of its men to war against the British.⁷ The people of the county and the Point would not be left unscathed by the conflict, however. During the Revolution, and again during the War of 1812, the British repeatedly used Point Lookout as a staging ground for military forays into the colony. Its exposed position, with

³ Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*, 1-2.

Edwin W. Beitzell, *The Jesuit Missions of St. Mary's County, Maryland*. (Leonardtown, MD: St. Mary's County Historical Society, 1960) 3,22.

⁴ Beitzell, *The Jesuits of St. Mary's County, Maryland*, 104,147.

⁵ Edwin W. Beitzell, *St. Mary's County, Maryland in the American Revolution: A Calendar of Events*. (Maryland Bicentennial Commission, 1975) 1.

⁶ *Ibid*, viii.

⁷ *Ibid*, vi.

virtually no natural obstacles to prevent an amphibious landing, presented an excellent target for the enemy. Once landed, an invading army could easily march up the peninsula and occupy nearby Washington D.C. Indeed, on several occasions, dozens of His Majesty's ships lay in anchor off the bay, stopping traffic on the Potomac, occasionally firing on dwellings at the Point, and sending raiding parties ashore to burn, plunder, and seize property, causing much panic among the residents.⁸ In July of 1814, the British landed between two and three thousand troops at Point Lookout and did serious damage to property and morale before the American forces managed to drive them back.⁹ Fifty years later, Union prison officials would also find that the Point, though isolated, was far from the secure location that they hoped.

With the turmoil of the Revolution and the War of 1812 behind them, residents on the Point returned to their daily lives. While nearby Leonardtown, the county seat, continued to grow, the Point retained its slower pace of life. The land bequeathed to Governor Calvert passed through several different owners by the nineteenth century, but with the destruction of the county courthouse in Leonardtown in 1831 by fire, many of the records and deeds have been lost. It is evident by the number of known owners, however, that the land was considerably divided into smaller plots by the 1830s. In 1832, a Mr. Jenifer Taylor sold an acre of land to the federal government for the construction of a lighthouse on the Point, and in 1857 descendants of the same man sold over 400 acres, encompassing the entire area of Point Lookout, to William Cost Johnson of Frederick County, Maryland. The enterprising Johnson obviously saw potential in the isolated peninsula, for he immediately commenced construction of an ocean side resort area,

⁸ Ibid, 11-12, 74.

⁹ Beitzell, *The Jesuit Missions of St. Mary's County, Maryland*, 104,107.

complete with cottages, wharf, hotel, and all the necessary outbuildings. Twenty-year leases on individual cottages funded the project, and the long list of tenants at the popular summer vacation spot included such notables as Cyrus McCormick of Chicago and Roger B. Taney, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.¹⁰

The latest owner of Point Lookout would not long keep his claim on the land. Four short years after construction of the resort, civil war erupted, jerking vacationers and residents of the area out their lazy summer days with the impact of a sudden immersion in ice water. Before the war, few outside of the area were familiar with Point Lookout. It was a sparsely populated tongue of land in the Chesapeake Bay, the nearest towns and villages miles away. The citizens of the area had not seen violence in almost fifty years. Lincoln's election, the formation of the Confederacy, and the firing on an obscure fort off the South Carolina coast in April 1861, however, dramatically changed life on the Point. Many residents of the county, formerly unable to afford the luxury of a personal vacation cottage at Point Lookout, soon found themselves housed at the location very much against their will, courtesy of the Federal military.

Residents of Maryland, like those in other border states, often experienced divided loyalties and sympathies with the outbreak of war. Though the state was never a part of the Confederacy, several Maryland regiments fought with the South, orphaned from their home state. The proximity of the national capitol to Maryland made it imperative for the Federal government to effectively secure the state in the Union, and subsequently much of the state, including Point Lookout, came under military occupation early in the conflict. The citizens of St. Mary's County and Point Lookout, however, were, in the

¹⁰ Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*, 2-3.

words of one scholar, “not conspicuous for their loyalty” to the Union during the war.¹¹ According to James H Whyte, a student of the history of the area, “no other county in Maryland contributed as many men in proportion to its population to the Southern armed forces or did as much to aid the Southern cause....”¹² Unionist sympathizers in the county, though existent, were evidently extremely rare. If more did exist than the local papers admitted, perhaps they simply feared retribution from their fellow citizens with rebel sympathies and refused to make their sentiments public. The eventual Federal occupation of the county in late 1861, and the construction of what became the largest Union operated prisoner of war camp in the summer of 1863, only exacerbated the acrimonious feelings residents felt toward the North.

In any event, the majority of the population in the county possessed no qualms of making known where they placed their loyalties. Heavy concentrations of plantations and slaveholders in the southern and eastern counties of the state, including St. Mary’s, contributed to the empathy residents felt toward the new Confederate nation.¹³ Even before the firing on Fort Sumter, military regiments were raised in the area, ostensibly for home defense. The *St. Mary’s Beacon*, the mouthpiece of the county until the spring of 1863, proudly reported on several occasions the majestic appearance of these newly formed militia units at parades and drills. Local politicians and military leaders alike toasted the militia and the Confederacy. With the fall of Fort Sumter, war appeared inevitable, and residents rejoiced in the prospect of finally being able to join their fellow Southerners as members of the newly created Confederate States of America. The

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Ibid, 17.

¹³ Richard R. Duncan. “The Era of the Civil War,” *Maryland: A History, 1632-1974*. Richard Walsh, et al, eds. (Baltimore, MD: Maryland Historical Society, 1974), 335.

Beacon reported the reaction of residents when news of the events in South Carolina reached the county on April 18, 1861: Church Bells rang in celebration, people congratulated each other in the streets, and one of the local regiments – Riley’s Rifles – fired several volleys in honor of the event. The actions, according to the *Beacon*, indicated “in the most unmistakable manner that the sympathies of our people are exclusively with the South.”¹⁴

At a public meeting held at the county seat in Leonardtown on April 23, nearly 1,000 people showed up to voice their support for the Confederacy and denounce the Lincoln administration. Before convening, board members unanimously levied a tax on residents to raise \$10,000 for the purchase and distributions of weapons and ammunition to the people of the county to assist in the defense of “their rights, and the honor and interest of our State....” The martial demonstrations that followed in the street left little doubt as to the sentiments of those in attendance. Local militia regiments, sporting names such as the “St. Mary’s Guards,” the “Clifton Guards,” and the “St. Inigoes Dragoons,” paraded through the streets, performing precision marches and maneuvers in front of a cheering crowd before being dismissed to attend a celebratory dinner. Before the festivities ended, the women of the town presented the “Riley Rifles” with a hand-made flag, modeled after the recently adopted Confederate banner. The field on the flag possessed eight stars, representing the seceded states, with room for a ninth – that of Maryland.¹⁵ For the majority of residents, it seemed only a matter of time before the state joined its Southern brethren in the fight against perceived tyranny.

¹⁴ St. Mary’s *Beacon*, April 18, 1861.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, April 25/May 2, 1861.

Whatever their ambitions and hopes to join the Confederacy, the people of St. Mary's failed to take into account the determination of the Federal government to keep the state of Maryland in the Union. With Washington surrounded on three sides by the state, the Lincoln administration had no other option, and by the end of August 1861 papers reported the presence of Union troops within the county. On August 27, Federal soldiers stopped the Leonardtown stage as it made its way out of the city, detaining two of the occupants and the driver after forcing it to return. A search of the coach turned up several contraband items, including letters addressed to parties in the Confederacy, some of which apparently implicated the involvement of Mayor Berret of Washington in nefarious activities.¹⁶ The incident was the just the beginning of military rule. On November 1, Major General John A. Dix, commanding the Baltimore District, issued a statement to the U.S. marshal of Maryland and the provost marshal of the city of Baltimore, instructing them to arrest any former resident of the state crossing from Virginia and attempting to vote in the upcoming election.¹⁷ Unable to fight with their own state, men apparently crossed the Potomac to fight for the Southern cause in Virginia. Now, with the opportunity to vote into office leaders sympathetic to the Confederacy, the same people re-crossed the river in droves to cast their ballot, an action General Dix was determined to prevent.

By the end of the year, Union forces had seized strategic points and established outposts along the Potomac River from Georgetown to Point Lookout, effectively ending preparations for war in the southern counties of Maryland, including St. Mary's, and dashing all hopes of joining the Confederacy. Men still eager to join the fight against the

¹⁶ *The Sunday Star Magazine*, August 27, 1861.

¹⁷ *St. Mary's Beacon*, November 1861.

North had little choice but to cross the Potomac and carry on the struggle from the Virginia side, enlisting under Confederate General Bradley T. Johnson, from Frederick, Maryland, Mosby's Rangers, or other existing Maryland units.¹⁸ A rise in civilian arrests corresponded with the occupation of the county, as well. On January 2, 1862, the *Beacon* reported at least a half dozen arrests since the arrival of Federal troops, and the number continued to increase.¹⁹ Southern sympathizers and those thought to be actively aiding the Confederate cause quickly found themselves in government custody. Point Lookout, as well as holding thousands of rebel soldiers, also contained several hundred civilian and political prisoners during its existence.²⁰

Before long, the virulently pro – Confederate *Beacon* came under Federal scrutiny. Federal authorities did not find amusing articles such as “Mr. Lincoln,” a page length rant against the Union war effort and the President published in May 1862, or “War on Women,” published in April 1863.²¹ After the latter editorial, military officials had had enough, and ordered the arrest of editors James S. Downs and J. F. King and the seizure of their printing equipment. Though Downs was caught and detained, King managed to slip across the Potomac River and enter Confederate service. Downs was later released, but the paper remained suppressed for several months, until publication began again in the fall of 1863 under the name of the *St. Mary's Gazette*.²² Walter Thompson, the new editor, took a decidedly different tone than his predecessors. “The Gazette,” he reported in the salutatory, “will be published as simply a news and advertising sheet, and political

¹⁸ Beitzell, *Point Lookout Camp for Confederates*, 8.

¹⁹ *St. Mary's Beacon*, January 2, 1862.

²⁰ Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*, 11.

²¹ *St. Mary's Beacon*, May 22, 1862; April 2, 1863.

²² Beitzell, *Point Lookout Camp for Confederates*, 10-11.

articles...will be excluded from its columns.”²³ Thompson was true to his word, and apparently had little trouble with authorities for the duration of the war. Though eventually back in print in a decidedly apolitical format, it is unfortunate that the paper was out of commission throughout the summer of 1863, for its views on the construction of Point Lookout prison and the first months of operation would no doubt have offered valuable insights into the local reactions to the camp.

With the all the military activity at Point Lookout, it was not surprising that business at William Johnson’s seaside resort on the Chesapeake Bay dropped off markedly. By mid – 1862, he was experiencing severe financial difficulties, and soon closed the site altogether. William H. Allen, a resident of Baltimore, held the mortgage to the property, and rather than let the area lie dormant, offered to lease the land and existing buildings to the Federal government.²⁴ Interested in acquiring the property for hospital purposes, United States Surgeon General William A. Hammond sent a surgeon to inspect the site who ascertained that, besides ample room for quarters and storage space, between 1,300 and 1,500 men could be accommodated in the cottages. On June 5, 1862, Hammond wrote to Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs, informing him of the inspection of Point Lookout and recommending the area be rented if a reasonable price could be negotiated.²⁵ Meigs, approving of the suggestion, ordered Captain L.C. Edwards, the assistant quartermaster at the Point, to commence at once on the construction of a hospital.²⁶

²³ St. Mary’s *Gazette*, October 1, 1863.

²⁴ Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*, 19.

²⁵ U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C., War Records, Surgeon General’s Office, Letter Book No. 31, June 2, 1862 to July 25, 1862, 20. Found in Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*, 19.

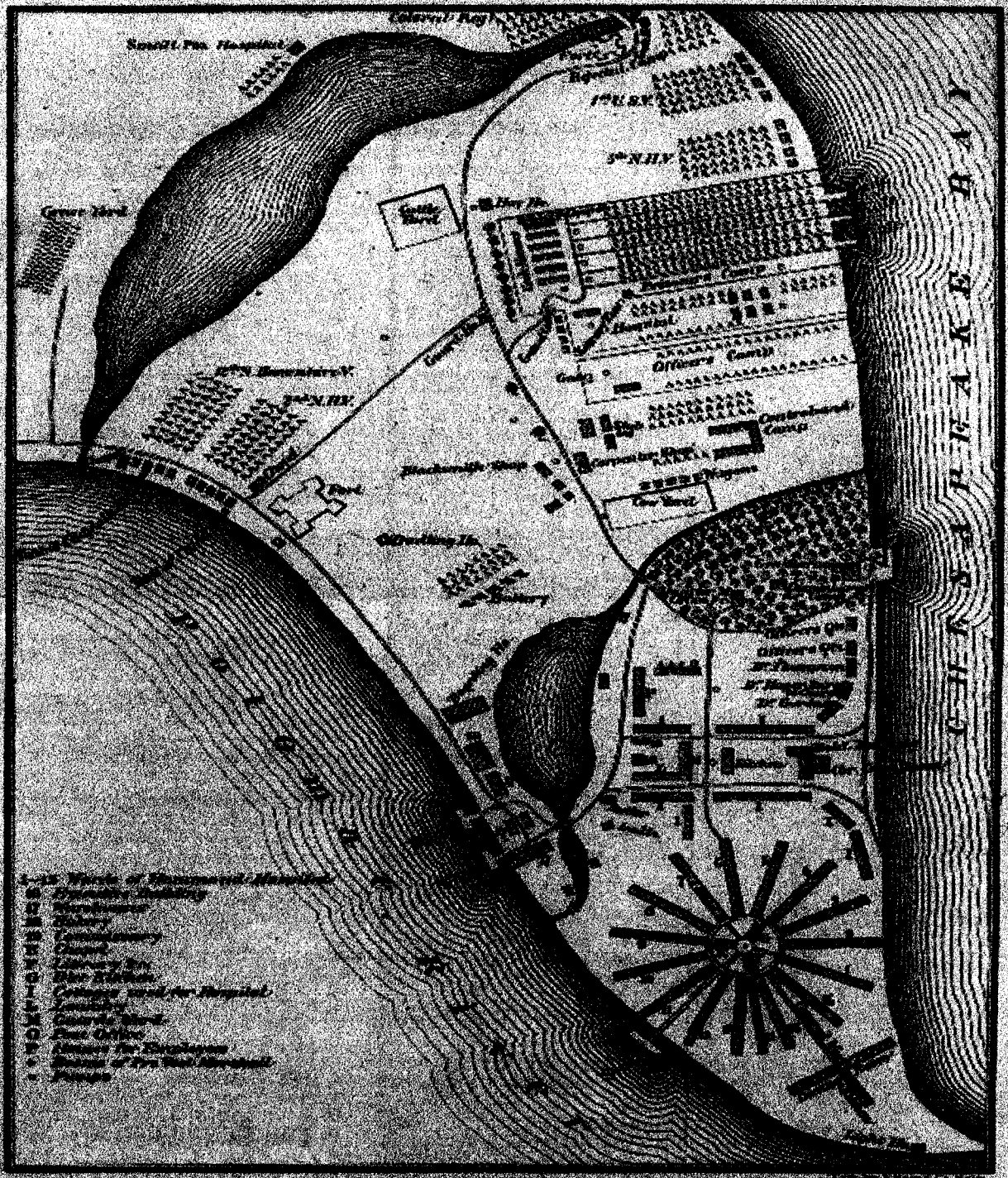
²⁶ U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C., War Records, Surgeon General’s Office, Letter Book No. 61, June 26, 1862 to August 14, 1862, 239. *Ibid.*

Edwards arrived at the Point on July 9, 1862 and promptly inspected the government's latest acquisition. In his report, he noted the existence of over one hundred cottages and a hotel, but no outbuildings. Though the cottages would be utilized for storage and quarters, a separate hospital facility would serve to house wounded soldiers. In preparation, Edwards commenced construction on dining and laundry rooms, warehouses, stables, and other structures necessary for the operation of the facility.²⁷ Finally, on July 19, the captain received from Meigs plans for the design of the hospital and orders to begin construction at once. The site consisted of twenty buildings, arranged in a circular pattern to look like the spokes of a wheel. On the outside of the circle were fifteen wards, 175 by 50 feet, plus one structure used as the doctors headquarters and storage. Connecting all on the interior of the circle was an eight foot wide covered walkway, measuring 101 feet in circumference. Inside the circle, arranged perpendicular to one another to form an "X" shape, lay four more 77 by 25 feet buildings: a chapel, kitchen, library and reading room, and baggage room. Also provided for in close proximity to the hospital was a 20,000-gallon water tank, to be used to flood the area in case of fire.²⁸

By August, the first shipment of Federal wounded and convalescents arrived at what was known as Hammond General Hospital, named after the surgeon general. On August 17, 1862, the steamer, *State of Maine*, docked at the Point with 350 sick and wounded Federal soldiers, the first of many to follow. While unloading from the ship and making their way toward the hospital, the wharf the steamer was docked at collapsed, though fortunately no one was hurt. As a result, Captain Edwards constructed a new wharf, 280

²⁷ Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*, 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*



HOSPITAL & MILITARY PRISON AT POINT LOOKOUT.

Map of Point Lookout. Hammond General Hospital is shown at the peak of the peninsula. The prison camp is to the north.

(Reprinted courtesy of the New-York Historical Society).

by 16 feet, later adding thirty feet more when the Point became a supply depot for the army. Work on the hospital and its outbuildings proved to be an ongoing task. As late as May 8, 1863 Surgeon General Hammond complained in a letter to Quartermaster Meigs about the slow pace of construction and the poor maintenance of the graveyard. Apparently no systematic procedures were being taken to properly identify the graves of the dead, which were only haphazardly marked with wooden headboards depending on the generosity of friends and ward masters.²⁹

Though a Federal military presence was well-established at the Point by the summer of 1863, political events and dealings between the two belligerent nations soon multiplied the military force in the area and had far reaching ramifications for local residents as well as combatants throughout the divided country. The commencement of hostilities in 1861 found both Union and Confederate authorities pathetically unprepared to handle significant numbers of prisoners of war. No need existed for the United States government to construct facilities to hold prisoners prior to 1861, hence both governments scrambled to adequately shelter the thousands of captives they suddenly found in their custody after the first battles of that year. Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, which formerly held a handful of political prisoners, had to provide for thousands of Federal captives, while in the North the government seized state prisons and mental asylums to house the swelling ranks of rebel prisoners.³⁰ To relieve the growing crisis, opposing generals commonly took it upon themselves to immediately, and unofficially, parole any captives taken in battle. The parolees simply took an oath not to

²⁹ Ibid. 20.

³⁰ William Best Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology*. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1930) 34.

take up arms again until properly exchanged, man for man, and then were released to their own lines. The system worked relatively well as long as officers in the field could agree upon terms of exchange.³¹ Indeed, it was the only system in place for the first year of the war, for the United States government, fearing that any official pacts with the Confederacy would only serve to legitimize the rebel government, refused to recognize an official exchange cartel. As the number of prisoners began to outstrip the capacity of generals to handle them, however, public opinion forced the Lincoln administration to accept a tentative cartel to prevent what many people perceived as the needless suffering of Union captives in Southern prisons.³²

After much wrangling and recrimination, opposing military officials reached a tentative agreement in 1862 for a prisoner exchange, ratifying the man for man exchange carried on for over a year previously. The Dix-Hill cartel, named for the men who negotiated it, virtually eliminated the need for prisoner of war camps during the first two years of the conflict, thereby sparing soldiers the unpleasant experience of languishing as enemy captives.³³ Unfortunately for all prisoners of war, the system was in operation only a year before political issues hampered exchanges. An analysis of the exchange breakdown reveals a complicated, confusing issue that cannot be resolved here, but blame can be and has been attributed to actions by both the Federal and Confederate government. The primary reasons concerned the use of hostages by both governments and the refusal of the Davis administration to recognize captured black soldiers as legitimate combatants, thereby denying them the rights traditionally accorded to prisoners

³¹ Ibid, 11.

³² Ibid, 7-10.

³³ Ibid, 32.

of war.³⁴ Instead, the Confederate government notified the Lincoln administration that all blacks captured in uniform would be returned to a state of slavery, and any white officers captured while leading blacks in battle would be executed for inciting servile insurrection.³⁵ The inability of the belligerents to resolve these issues plagued effective execution of the cartel starting in the summer of 1863, but the system continued until General Ulysses S. Grant, commander-in-chief of the Federal army, completely halted all exchanges in 1864.

Grant's suspension of the cartel caused much controversy, and the motives of the Lincoln Administration in allowing him to do so are still being debated. Though Federal officials claimed they suspended the cartel because of the intransigence of the South concerning black troops, letters from Grant to his superiors reveal additional reasons, independent of the Confederacy's actions. Upon assuming command of all Union armies, Grant assessed the overall military situation throughout the country and revised the Federal military strategy against the Confederacy. His decision to adopt a policy of total war against the Southern states changed the measure of victory from the capture of the rebel capital to the destruction of the Southern armies and the cessation of their ability to carry out active resistance. In order to win the war, not only did territory have to be occupied and held, but the Confederate military had to be destroyed, as well. As a prelude to the attrition, Grant decided to end the prisoner exchange. It was widely assumed that many captured Confederates, after being paroled and released, quickly found their way back to their units to fight again, often without first being properly

³⁴ Eugene Marvin Thomas, III. "Prisoner of War Exchange During the American Civil War." (Auburn, Alabama: Ph.D. Dissertation, 1976) 95-97, 157-159, 181.

³⁵ Hesselstine, 93.

exchanged. Conversely, paroled Federal soldiers were held in government camps in the North until exchanged, unable by the laws of the cartel to actively aid in the conflict, and frequently unwilling to reenlist once properly exchanged.³⁶

Writing to Major General Benjamin Butler, commissioner of prisoner exchange, on August 18, 1864, Grant stated, "If we commence a system of exchange which liberates all prisoners taken, we will have to fight on until the whole South is exterminated." Every rebel soldier released, he continued, "becomes an active soldier against us at once either directly or indirectly;" however, "if we hold those caught they amount to no more than dead men." He further elaborated, "It is hard on our men in Southern prisons not to exchange them, but it is humanity to those left in the ranks to fight our battles." He then warned, "At this particular time to release all rebel prisoners North would insure Sherman's defeat and would compromise our safety here."³⁷ Writing to Secretary of State William Seward the next day, Grant expressed similar sympathies:

We ought not to make a single exchange nor release a prisoner on any pretext whatever until the war closes. We have got to fight until the military power of the South is exhausted, and if we release or exchange prisoners captured it simply becomes a war of extermination.³⁸

Until near the end of the war, exchanges virtually stopped. Only occasionally were prisoners released and returned to their own lines, and in those rare instances the exchanges consisted of captured civilians and soldiers no longer fit for duty.

While politicians quibbled and Grant and Lee battled in the Petersburg trenches, conditions in Northern and Southern prisons rapidly deteriorated. Neither side held a

³⁶ Thomas, 241-244.

³⁷ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:607.

³⁸ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:614-615.

monopoly on the worst facilities; regardless of what color uniform a captive wore, or where he was confined, in all but a few instances disease, exposure, and hunger ruled the day. Confederate authorities, hard pressed to maintain their own army, did not give high priority to the thousands of Federal troops now held captive within the city of Richmond, nor could they afford to. Crowded into appropriated tobacco warehouses, soldiers suffered from a lack of adequate clothing, toilet facilities, and food. Disease and malnutrition began to take their toll on the prisoners, as evidenced by the rising death rates. In Libby Prison, Union officers lived in squalid conditions but at least received appropriate shelter. The enlisted men at Bell Isle fared far worse, being forced to sleep in tent shelters and freezing during the winter months. The struggling Confederacy, wracked by runaway inflation and an ineffective administration, simply could not afford to purchase basic necessities such as meat, flour, clothes, and lumber, all of which became increasingly scarce.³⁹

By 1864, Richmond was thoroughly swamped with Union prisoners, causing a drain on the city's and the army's supplies and posing a danger of riots because of the shortage of food. Subsequently, Confederate officials ordered General John H. Winder, in charge of the prisons of the Richmond area, to evacuate the captives farther South. Problems ensued immediately. Authorities shipped out prisoners before adequate shelter could be constructed in many areas, and great, open stockades, such as Andersonville in Georgia, became the rule of the day. Andersonville, meant to hold 10,000 men, soon overflowed

³⁹ Lonnie R. Speer. *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 204-207.

with three times that number, with 12,000 dying from disease and scurvy over the spring and summer of 1864.⁴⁰ Other sites, though not as large, experienced similar conditions.

Federal prisons fared little better, and overcrowding, poor rations, and inadequate shelter and medical care were common. However, many Northerners responded with outrage once tales of deliberate mistreatment of Federal captives in the South reached Union lines through escaped prisoners and Sanitary Commission reports. Recounted atrocities found their way into print, and Northern papers seemed to delight in pointing out the cruelties experienced by Union prisoners. Though unsubstantiated, newspapers printed stories of murder, torture, robbery, and deliberate starvation of prisoners as fact. Commissary General Hoffman subsequently enacted retaliatory measures against Confederate prisoners in the North, further exacerbating conditions that already left much to be desired.⁴¹ With the approval of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Hoffman ordered rations cut to match those of the Confederate armies, limited the amount of clothing available to prisoners and ensured that it was of the poorest quality, and spent a bare minimum in constructing shacks to house them.⁴² Soon, prisons such as Camp Douglas in Chicago and Elmira in New York rivaled any in the South in deplorable sanitary conditions and lack of food, clothing, and appropriate shelter. Prisoners continued to suffer until Union Major General Benjamin Butler, in charge of prisoner exchanges, managed to arrange a temporary system in early 1865 – though too late for the tens of thousands of captives, Union and Confederate, who had already perished.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 259-266.

⁴¹ Hesseltine, 177-178.

⁴² *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:72-75.

With the cartel suspended, Northern camps once again overflowed with inmates in the summer of 1863. It quickly became apparent to Commissary General Hoffman that the Union would have to seek out new locations to accommodate the unexpected surge in Confederate prisoners of war. The problem became even more acute following the twin defeat of Confederate armies at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in July, which left Federal authorities with tens of thousands of rebel captives on their hands and no immediate method of disposal. In partial alleviation of the crisis several existing camps were reactivated and new ones constructed – including a proposed stockade next to the Hammond General Hospital at Point Lookout.

The peninsula appeared an ideal place for a prisoner of war camp: it was close to the theater of war, prisoners could easily be delivered by water, it seemed readily defensible, and its isolated location made it an unlikely target of Confederate raids. That the Point would soon be used for something more than a hospital and depot for the Federal army was intimated in correspondence between officials in the War Department and Major General R.C. Schenck, commander of the Middle Department, which encompassed all of Point Lookout. On July 11, 1863 Brigadier General R.S. Canby of the War Department advised Schenk of the Surgeon-General's report that only 1,400 beds were available at the Hospital, though the number of Confederate wounded from Gettysburg was thought to be between 8,000 and 10,000. Schenck, in response, wrote to the War Department that he was having large numbers of Federal convalescents sent from the Point to Baltimore, thereby clearing more room for the anticipated rebel wounded.⁴³

⁴³ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:102.

Finally, on July 20, 1863 Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs wrote to General D. H. Rucker, Chief Quartermaster of the United States Army, advising him of the plans to establish a prisoner of war depot at the Point and directing him to commence construction. The camp, Meigs informed Rucker, would eventually accommodate 10,000 prisoners, but needed to hold 5,000 immediately. No plans were undertaken for the construction of barracks or permanent shelter for the prisoners, Rucker instead being ordered to secure old tents for that purpose, as well as the necessary camp and garrison equipment. General Meigs also ordered the purchasing of the lumber required to erect kitchens and storehouses and to secure large, cast iron boilers to be used for cooking. In a second letter addressed to Rucker on the same day, Meigs requested the immediate drafting of plans and estimates for the necessary buildings and a general design of the proposed camp.⁴⁴ The overwhelming number of Confederate prisoners held in the North and the chronic overcrowding of existing prisons created a sense of urgency in the construction of the Point Lookout prison camp.

With construction underway, still left was the decision of who would receive overall command of the camp and depot. General Orders No. 226, issued by the War Department on July 23, 1863, settled the question. Federal authorities detached the entire county of Saint Mary's from the Middle Department, forming a separate military department headquartered at Point Lookout under the command of Brigadier General Gilman Marston of New Hampshire. General-in-Chief Henry Halleck informed Marston of his appointment the same day as Order 226 was issued, ordering him to report to General George Meade, Commander of the Army of the Potomac, and secure a guard of

⁴⁴ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:132-133.

300 men for duty at Point Lookout, suggesting the availability of the Second, Fifth, and Twelfth New Hampshire Regiments for that purpose. After securing transportation for his guard, Marston was to proceed to the Point, assume command over the district, and direct and supervise construction of the prison camp, making sure the lay out of the prison allowed for future extensions capable of holding 10,000 men. As an added precaution, Halleck ordered Marston to requisition the quartermaster's department for horses and the supplies necessary to mount twenty of his men to serve as patrols and scouts in the area. "The strictest guard must be kept over the prisoners," Halleck warned the new commander, "and also order, discipline, and cleanliness in their camp."⁴⁵ Further, besides a guard force of several infantry regiments and a battalion of cavalry, Marston also received protection from the sea. The Federal military left little to chance, and on July 31, 1863 Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells ordered Commodore A.A. Harwood, Commandant of the United States Navy Yard at Washington, to direct a naval force always to be in close vicinity of the prison, patrolling the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River, and remaining in contact with the commander of the district.⁴⁶

On July 25, 136 Confederate prisoners captured at Gettysburg were sent to help expedite construction on the prison. Camp Hoffman, the official name of the Point Lookout prison, when completed would consist of little more than a forty-acre, sand-covered, rectangular lot on the Chesapeake side of the peninsula enclosed by a fifteen-foot high stockade fence. To the immediate south, and separated by only yards, lay a smaller pen, approximately ten acres, meant to hold Confederate officers.⁴⁷ Camp

⁴⁵ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:141-142.

⁴⁶ *Official Record of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. 5, 313. Found in Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison for Confederates*, 20.

⁴⁷ Speer, 151-152.

officials thought it prudent to separate officers and enlisted men, thereby further reducing any semblance of a command structure and significantly limiting the odds of an organized mass breakout.⁴⁸ Towards the end of the war, however, as the prison population exploded to over 20,000 inmates, most officers were shipped to Johnson's Island or Fort Delaware, and the barriers dividing the two sections were removed to allow for more space. The planks of the fence, which protruded several feet into the sandy ground, were braced all along the outside to prevent prisoners from toppling the walls.

Approximately ten feet up the walls, a gangway three feet wide encircled the stockade on the outside, allowing guards to walk the perimeter of the camp while having a commanding view of everything inside. A number of guards patrolled a regular beat around these walkways, and from their vantage point could easily fire on anyone inside causing a disturbance. As a final deterrent against escape attempts, Federal authorities set up a "dead line" along the interior of the camp. The line, marked by posts six feet in from the stockade wall, encircled the entire prison population, and those who neared or crossed the cordoned area did so at their own risk. To discourage tunneling and to prevent a mass of prisoners from rushing and toppling the walls, guards were ordered to verbally warn away any person they felt too close to the dead line, and, that failing, to open fire on the offender.⁴⁹ The fact that the "line" was marked only by stakes intermittently placed in the ground made the area even more perilous for Confederate prisoners, for what constituted a violation of the boundary was often left to the discretion of the guard on watch.

⁴⁸ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:102.

⁴⁹ George H. Allen. *Forty-Six Months with the Fourth Rhode Island Volunteers in the War of 1861 to 1865*. (Providence, R.I.: J.A. & R.A. Reid, Printers, 1887) 260.

At the western end of the complex, inside the prison, lay several wooden buildings used as cookhouses and mess halls, where, between two and three times daily, guards escorted prisoners, thousands at a time, to breakfast and dinner. The back portions of the structures were partitioned off, and housed cooking supplies and huge “farmers boilers,” cauldrons used to prepare mass quantities of beef, pork, and various kinds of soup. The cookhouses were the only permanent structures built within the camp, to the chagrin of Confederate prisoners who did their best to make some semblance of shelter from ragged canvas tents.⁵⁰

By August 6, Colonel Hoffman learned Marston was prepared to receive prisoners at the camp, and the Commissary General subsequently ordered 500 Confederate prisoners sent from Old Capitol Prison to Point Lookout. However, more than a week later the prisoners had still not arrived, and Marston again wrote to Hoffman explaining that though the mess houses and many of the outbuildings had yet to be completed, the camp could easily accommodate 1,000 prisoners for the time being. Hoffman, surprised that no prisoners had as yet reached the camp, on August 18 instructed that 800 prisoners be sent from Baltimore and 400 or 500 more sent from Washington immediately.⁵¹ Point Lookout prison camp was officially open, and the few hundred inmates that trickled into the facility from prisons throughout the North in August of 1863 were simply the first of tens of thousands who would pass through the main gates in the next two years.

Though prisoners poured into the camp during the summer and fall of 1863, much remained to be completed in the general construction of the facility – including the stockade fence meant to prevent the prisoners from escaping. When the New Hampshire

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:214.

regiments, escorting several hundred prisoners, arrived at the camp in mid-August for guard duty, they found gaping holes in the high-board fence surrounding the facility. With bayonets and rifles at the ready, guards manned these openings until workers managed to complete the stockade walls, though several determined inmates, unable to pass on the incredible opportunity for escape, slipped by the sentries during this period.⁵²

At the end of the month, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, interested in the status of Point Lookout, ordered Union Major General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Commissioner for Exchange of Prisoners, to make a report on the camp. Hitchcock transmitted his assessment on August 31, reporting that about 800 Union wounded and sick still resided in Hammond Hospital, nearly 1,800 Confederate prisoners were encamped on the Chesapeake side of the Point, and approximately 400 Federal troops were available for guard duty. Hitchcock met with Marston during his stay, and the two discussed prison security and other issues relating to the administration of the district. Blockade running apparently posed a major nuisance in the area, and Marston believed a cavalry force of 100 men would go a long way to suppressing the operations, as well as to maintain general order throughout the countryside surrounding the camp. Further investigation by Hitchcock found that the gunboats Secretary Wells had ordered to patrol the bay next to the Point were not quite up to the task, one of them severely under-manned, and neither having the use of steam power, one engine being disabled and the other non-existent. Improvements were needed, but overall, General Hitchcock returned to Washington with a positive report of Marston and the prison camp. "I found everything apparently in

⁵² Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*, 21.

excellent order; guards well posted with every appearance of vigilance and security,” he concluded.⁵³

By the end of August 1863 a fully functional prisoner of war camp, hospital, and military depot were in operation at Point Lookout. Born out of necessity at the beginning of the exchange crisis, the camp quickly became the largest such facility in the North, and second in prison population only to the Confederate camp at Andersonville, Georgia.⁵⁴ Confederate prisoners from overflowing camps in the North and the Virginia battlefields poured into the camp hundreds at a time, and by December of 1863, roughly 9,000 rebel prisoners resided within the stockade.⁵⁵ Work on the camp, however, was an on-going task, and much remained to be completed into the winter months: guards needed to be equipped and trained, quartermaster employees hurried to contract for and stockpile sufficient supplies, and administrators required time to learn their new responsibilities. No one, however, was forced to make a greater or more radical adjustment than the increasing number of prisoners herded through the stockade gates at bayonet point.

⁵³ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:243.

⁵⁴ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:1002; *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:708.

⁵⁵ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:993.

Chapter Two

Cracker Boxes and Hardtack

In July of 1863, Brigadier General Gilman Marston, former Colonel of the Second New Hampshire Volunteers, received instructions from the War Department to proceed to Point Lookout and take command of the newly formed St. Mary's District, a position which also entailed administration of the prison camp. As the first commander of the camp, it was Marston's duty to set the bureaucracy in motion, requisitioning the necessary supplies, overseeing the layout of the prison and guard camps, and receiving the first Confederate prisoners of war. The General's background seemed to suit him ideally to this task, for he was one of the "political" generals so common during the conflict. Born in Oxford, New Hampshire in 1811, Marston graduated from Dartmouth College in 1837, and the Harvard Law School in 1840, being admitted to the New Hampshire bar in 1841. He served as a state representative starting in 1845, and was elected to Congress in 1859 as a member of the Republican Party, where he served until 1863.¹

The outbreak of war interrupted his service, however, and he was appointed colonel of the newly formed Second New Hampshire Infantry in June of 1861. A month later, while leading his men in battle at Manassas, a minie ball shattered Marston's arm. He refused amputation, however, and fully recovered in time to participate in McClellan's Peninsula Campaign against Richmond. After the Federal disaster at Fredericksburg in December 1862, both armies went into winter quarters, and Marston was able temporarily to resume

¹ Collections of the New Hampshire State House & State Library, Gilman Marston Collection.
<http://www.state.nh.us/nhdhr/warheroes/marstong.html>.

his legislative duties. With the opening of the 1863 season, however, he was appointed Brigadier General of United States Volunteers, having under his command the Second, Tenth, and Twelfth Regiments of New Hampshire Infantry. After the battle of Gettysburg in July, where the Second sustained sixty percent casualties (and some of Marston's subordinates subsequently tried to have him removed from command because of what they considered to be poor leadership) the General, along with the remnants of his battered brigade, proceeded to Point Lookout for guard duty.² For the battle-weary veterans of the New Hampshire regiments, the assignment was a welcome respite from active campaigning. Martin Haynes, a private in the Second Regiment, recalled upon entering Warrenton, Virginia the "most agreeable surprise" that awaited them. Hearing of the assignment to Point Lookout, Martin elaborated, "It was with light hearts that we took the cars for Alexandria," the first stop on their way to the prison camp.³

After a brief stop in Washington to escort a squad of three hundred rebel prisoners to the new camp, the Second and Twelfth Regiments, minus the Fifth, which had not arrived yet, steamed down the Chesapeake and delivered the first prisoners into the stockade. First impressions of the camp were favorable, at least for the arriving guard units, who looked at the assignment as more of a vacation than military duty. According to Private Haynes, the area was well suited for its purpose as a prison, for the long neck of land that jutted into the Chesapeake could easily be cordoned off from the mainland by pickets and cavalry patrols. Furthermore, the guard was reinforced by a dozen or so gunboats, which regularly patrolled the area after the earlier report complaining of their ineffectiveness.

² Ibid.

³ Martin A. Haynes. *History of the Second Regiment New Hampshire Volunteers: Its Camps, Marches and Battles*. (Manchester, NH: Charles F. Livingston, Printer, 1865) 152.

These boats, remembered Haynes, “could have poured in a fire from all sides which would have annihilated the rebels in case of an uprising.”⁴ Finally, in accordance with Marston’s wishes for a cavalry force, a detachment of twenty men from the Second and Twelfth served as mounted scouts and patrolled the surrounding countryside. As well as maintaining camp security, their duty also included investigating suspicious activity, seizing contraband goods harbored by Confederate sympathizers, and cracking down on the smuggling of supplies over the border into Virginia.⁵ As more prisoners continued to arrive, the guard was correspondingly increased. For Confederates unlucky enough to find themselves prisoners of war at Point Lookout, surrounded by an imposing fleet of gunboats, cavalry patrols, and several veteran regiments of infantry, the prospects of escape seemed dim.

Like the first three hundred prisoners to arrive at the Point, most captives, after traveling part of the way by railroad, were transported to the prison by steamship from the Chesapeake Bay, though a few were marched overland from the west. In the summer of 1863, with the exchange system at a breaking point, captives flowed into the prison from virtually every direction. Commandants of Johnson’s Island, Old Capitol Prison, and others sent huge detachments of prisoners to the new facility in a desperate attempt to relieve the chronic overcrowding of their prisons. The on-going campaign in Virginia, as well as the battle at Gettysburg weeks before, also resulted in a steady stream of Confederate captives. Lastly, a growing number of civilian political prisoners found

⁴ Ibid, 154-155.

⁵ Ibid, 155.

themselves confined within the camp, most being Southern sympathizers from the surrounding area.⁶

The journey to the Point could be harrowing, and though there were exceptions, most captives agreed it was not a pleasant experience. In numerous instances, preparatory to transfer from another prison, officials and guards lied outright to departing captives, informing them they were being sent out for exchange. Administrators hoped the ploy would minimize escape attempts, but most prisoners gave the stories little credence, having heard them on repeated occasions while imprisoned. Nearly all, however, held out a glimmer of hope.⁷

Packed onto railroad cars, it often took several days for prisoners to reach Baltimore, from where a steamer departed for the camp. Lieutenant John Blue of Virginia recalled his journey from Johnson's Island on Lake Erie to Point Lookout in the winter of 1864. The prisoners subsisted on a steady diet of crackers, with beef not being supplied until several days into the trip. The numerous stopovers at various towns allowed great opportunities for men to escape, which several did, though some made the attempt while the train was in motion. On Blue's train, at least two men managed the feat, one patiently sawing through the floor and jumping out while the train took on fuel, the other taking a more dangerous route. Apparently, guards were stationed at each end of the cars, next to the doors, along with buckets of water provided for the prisoners. Blue recalled that one of his comrades, while drinking from the bucket, placed his hand on the door latch, quickly flung it open, and hurled himself onto the snow-covered ground as the train

⁶ Lonnie R. Speer. *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 152.

⁷ Lt. John Blue. *Hanging Rock Rebel: Lt. John Blue's War in West Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley*. Dan Oates, ed. (Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1994), 261.

continued to speed down the tracks. The guards, taken by surprise, ran out onto the platform at the rear of the car and fired several shots at the escapee as he bolted into the moon-lit night, but the get away proved successful. Moments later, Blue remembered, they walked back inside, disgustedly announcing that, “another damn fool has broke his neck.”⁸

Regardless of where the train departed from, after several days of cramped quarters, poor food, and less than hospitable guards, the men were happy finally to reach Baltimore. The prisoners were tired and dirty, and the train cars were a mess. Owing to the penchant of soldiers for chewing tobacco, it was a rare car that did not have a floor nearly submerged in spittle upon arrival. Marched off the train toward an awaiting steamer, many individuals again took advantage of the situation and managed to escape, darting into the throngs of sympathetic Baltimore residents who often swarmed the arriving trains with parcels of food and clothing, never to be seen again.⁹

Disagreeable as the prolonged train ride or overland march may have been, by all accounts the final leg of the journey to Point Lookout, which consisted of transport by steamship, was decidedly worse. After reaching Maryland, John Blue and 400 of his compatriots were crammed into the hold of the steamer *New York*, only 100 being allowed on deck every hour.¹⁰ Crowded conditions prevailed, and at times the ships were forced to dock during the journey and discharge a portion of the passengers to relieve conditions, leaving them to march the rest of the way to camp.¹¹ Frequently, cargo ships

⁸ Ibid, 262-265.

⁹ Ibid, 265.

¹⁰ Ibid, 266.

¹¹ Francis Atherton Boyle. 14 May 1864, “The Prison Diary of Adjutant Francis Atherton Boyle, C.S.A.,” Mary Lindsay Thornton, ed. *The North Carolina Historical Review*. Vol. 39, no. 1 (Winter 1962), 60.

were appropriated to transport prisoners, so the human payload often had to contend with the remains of whatever had come before them. Anthony Keiley, captured near Petersburg in June 1864, found the boat arrangements less than agreeable when he and others were forced to sleep in empty horse stalls that had yet to be cleaned from a previous trip.¹² On other transports, bacon, molasses, and other food stuffs left the holds covered in grease, the floors sticky, and the odor almost unbearable. Adding to the general discomfort, and the stench, was the inevitability of seasickness, and men commonly found themselves forced to wallow in each other's vomit. Randolph Shotwell remembered that, "a cargo of decayed eggs would have seemed like rose water in such a place."¹³

Packed into the hold below the water line, with no windows to let in any fresh air or light, men gained relief only if they managed to make their way on deck during the general rotation that occurred every hour or so. On occasion, even this luxury was denied the men. Prisoners incessantly sought escape in any situation, and on John Blue's transport, rumors of a proposed attempt to seize the boat by force and sail to Virginia circulated among the men. Whether any organized plan for the hijacking actually existed is uncertain, but the Federal guards, catching wind of something suspicious, locked every prisoner below deck for the remainder of the journey.¹⁴ A similar incident occurred on the transport carrying Randolph Shotwell, and only after several men passed out from the

¹² A. M. Keiley. *In Vinculis; or, The Prisoner of War*. (New York: Blelock & Co., 1866) 54-55.

¹³ Randolph Shotwell. "The Prison Experiences of Randolph Shotwell," J.G. De Roulhac Hamilton, ed. *The North Carolina Historical Review*, April 1925, Volume II, Number 2, 150-151.

¹⁴ Blue, 266.

heat did the Federal guards become alarmed enough to bring prisoners above deck a few at a time.¹⁵

At last, after a journey that in some cases lasted more than two days, the steamship docked off of Point Lookout. As prisoners disembarked on the wharf specially constructed for the purpose, their initial impressions of the area were predictably poor. Anthony Keiley, carried to the camp by tugboat because of low tide at his arrival, sarcastically wondered how the area acquired its name, "...as there is nothing in the prospect to make the most curious inhabitant 'look out' in any direction."¹⁶ For those first arrivals in the late summer and early autumn, the ensuing wait officially to become a resident of Point Lookout was tolerable, but for those unlucky enough to be sent during the colder months, the process could be agonizing. Prisoners were admitted until sunset, after which camp officials forced all subsequent detachments to wait at the end of the wharf until morning, when all could be safely registered and searched in an orderly fashion.

Private Keiley and his mates landed at night in the middle of a storm, and the sharp wind that blew down from the northwest caused severe suffering among the guards, who were clad in heavy blue overcoats. Though told by an officer their charges could not be received until morning, the guards did not feel they should have to wait that long, nor did they think it necessary to leave the huddled group of poorly clothed Confederates on the exposed extremity of the wharf. Accordingly, they marched the captives a short distance to land, where all attempted to get some sleep outside the stockade walls. Without warning, the receiving officer, a Lieutenant Philips, approached the men, showering the

¹⁵ Shotwell, 150-151.

¹⁶ Keiley, 55.

captives and their guard with a torrent of profanity and abuse, and demanded the prisoners be taken back to the end of the wharf. The guards, grumbling and cursing the Lieutenant, reluctantly did as ordered, and were forced to weather the storm until seven o'clock the next morning. The Confederates, many fresh from Southern battlefields, must have suffered acutely in their thin shell jackets and summer campaign garb.¹⁷

At daybreak, the registration of prisoners commenced. Guards marched squads of arrivals to the office of the provost marshal, who administered the interior of the stockade, where names were taken and bodies searched. After arranging prisoners in double ranks, the provost marshal and several others performed the searches, which usually entailed stripping the men down to their underwear. Generally, guards performed the search rather perfunctorily, and many captives managed to save a few dollars by placing coins in their mouths or socks. On occasion, however, an overzealous guard might go as far as to rip the lining out of pants and shirts. Camp rules allowed prisoners to retain their pocket knives, which were considered indispensable items, but money, jewelry, watches, and other contraband items were seized and put into individual prisoner accounts, which inmates could use as credit in the stockade to purchase goods from the sutler. Supposedly, administrators returned all property in the account to the owner after his release, though as many later complained, this was not always the case. Finally, before entering the stockade, each prisoner received a blanket and on some occasions a tent, and their division assignment.¹⁸

The entrance to the stockade consisted of a large wood-planked door on the southwest corner of the pen, next to the provost marshal's headquarters, which butted up against the

¹⁷ Ibid, 56-57.

¹⁸ Ibid, 57.

southern wall. For any who still harbored doubt as to their destination, a placard with the writing, "Prisoner's Camp," hung above the archway that led inside.¹⁹ Men were now prisoners in earnest. Scanning the interior, soldiers saw no green anywhere – trees, shrubs, and grass were decidedly lacking. Sandy soil covered the entire yard, and initially, the prison was marked by a void of any structures save for a row of cookhouses on the east end.²⁰ As more prisoners entered the stockade, a literal city of tents appeared in all shapes and sizes. Unlike the Confederate stockade at Andersonville, however, Federal administrators laid out a specific street plan for the captives from the beginning, which significantly helped with order and sanitation. In front of the cookhouses ran a dirt street about 20 feet in width, and beyond the street and running perpendicular to it, ran rows of tents called divisions, each separated by another street. The layout proved simple and efficient. Each row, or division, contained one thousand men, divided into ten companies of one hundred men each. Each company received a letter designation, such as company "A" or "B," which expedited roll call. In this manner men were assigned units for housing and other functions, and a person assigned to "Second Division, Co. H," could be located with relative ease.²¹

The rebels themselves participated in the command structure of the prison, though their doing so was for the sake of efficiency, and they certainly contributed little to major decisions. A Confederate sergeant, supervised by a Federal corporal, managed each division. They took roll call twice a day, sent the sick to the surgeon's call, marched their

¹⁹ Edwin W. Beitzell. *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*. (Leonardtown, MD: St. Mary's County Historical Society, 1983), 56-57.

²⁰ Keiley, 58.

²¹ William H. Haigh to wife [Kate], 24 May 1865, William H. Haigh Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

men to the cookhouses for meals, and requisitioned for soap and other supplies. Each sergeant answered to a rebel sergeant major in charge of the entire camp, and he in turn reported all relevant information to a supervising Federal sergeant.²² Confederates filled other roles, as well. Each division received a surgeon, drawn from their own ranks, and Confederate surgeons also worked in Hammond General Hospital. Even the camp bugler was a Confederate. The responsibility of policing the camp and maintaining sanitation also fell to the captives. An appointed Police Sergeant, along with a work detail, attended to the onerous, but crucial, duty of cleaning streets, dredging ditches, and dumping all refuse into the nearby Chesapeake Bay. It also included cleaning the “sinks,” or latrines, constructed on the eastern side of the stockade over the bay waters, and emptying the large tubs and boxes set inside the camp for night use by the prisoners. The prevailing sanitary condition in camp often depended upon how effective the administration was in ensuring the group carried out its responsibility.²³ Because of the sheer number of prisoners in the camp, Confederates by necessity filled a multitude of other positions, as well. Rather than depleting manpower by using Federal guards, camp administrators found it easier and more efficient to use rebels as cooks, clerks, accountants, hospital stewards, and for various work details outside of the prison walls.²⁴

With a rudimentary organization in place, men entered the prison with their moldy government issued tents, located their assigned division, and went about constructing their new homes. There was little hope for any permanent barracks, for though General Marston had written to Colonel Hoffman in October 1863 concerning construction

²² James T. Meade. *Journal of Prison Life*. (Torrington, Conn.: Rainbow Press, 1987), 4.

²³ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

²⁴ Keiley, 113-114; Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

proposals for permanent housing before winter, the idea had been rejected. Hoffman concurred with the Commandant, but Secretary of State Edwin Stanton ended all consideration after the proposal reached his desk. Writing to Marston, Hoffman explained, “Your plans and estimates for barracks at Point Lookout have been submitted to the Secretary of War for his approval, but he declines at this time to order the barracks constructed.”²⁵ Instead, Marston received orders to have on hand enough tents to accommodate at least 10,000 prisoners, at four per tent, and a warning that the number would likely continue to increase.²⁶ In accordance with government policy, the tents were of poor quality – mildewed, torn, and rejected for use with the Union army – and came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Initially, the “four per tent” rule governed prison housing, but as the population increased, administrators took what they could get. After a few months, the stockade yard began to look more like a circus than a prison pen. Huge, wig-wam shaped “Sibley tents,” which housed as many as eighteen men, stood alongside pup-tents and “A” tents, which held between two and five men. Others made due in “fly” or “wall” tents, an open shelter that in essence was little more than one side of a tent supported by poles.²⁷ Given time, however, prisoners managed to add to their simple tents and construct very elaborate shelters.

Depending on the time of day the new prisoners arrived, initially they often had little time to do anything but sleep. Trudging into the camp at dusk, many simply dropped to the ground in the most out of the way place they could find, catching some badly needed

²⁵ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:390.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 369.

²⁷ Keiley, 59-60.

rest before attempting to orient themselves to their new environment.²⁸ Not that there was much to orient themselves to. Routine was the rule of prison life, as captives quickly discovered. Reveille was sounded between dawn and sunrise, and men fell into line by company for roll call. This function was a time consuming process, lasting up to several hours, and proved particularly agonizing in the winter for men dressed in shoddy clothes and second-hand military uniforms. Orders and the threat of punishment could not prevent many men from creeping back to bed until it neared time for them to be counted, however.²⁹

At eight in the morning, the sergeants in charge of each division formed their men into line and marched them to the cookhouses for breakfast.³⁰ “Simple” best described the construction of the houses. Measuring 160 by 30 feet, five wood-planked structures (later expanded to seven) rested in the northwest corner of the stockade, lying parallel to one another, and one sat in the neighboring officers’ pen.³¹ Large, double doors, flanked by twelve-paned windows on either side, allowed entrance from the front of the buildings after walking up a small set of stairs, and six more sets of windows on either side of the house let in sufficient amounts of light. Inside, four rows of tables lying parallel to each other stretched through the building from front to back. The kitchen itself consisted of nothing more than the back quarter of the structure, partitioned off from the dining area by a planked wall. Contained within was all the necessary equipment for feeding the

²⁸ Meade, 4.

²⁹ Keiley, 64.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Speer, 152.

was not the case, the comment came close to the mark.³⁵ The meat ration, after being boiled, left a residue in the hundreds of gallons of water that remained, and this residue was quite often served as soup.³⁶ Most of the prisoners agreed that the food, though adequate during the first few months of the prison's existence, left much to be desired.

Sub par as the food may have been, the quality of the water, or lack thereof, did cause serious health problems among the prisoners. The charges of contaminated water by the captives were not idle complaints, and many testified as to its poisonous effects on the consumer. Administrators found that the easiest way to supply water for thousands of prisoners was through the use of wells dug inside the stockade walls. Pumps placed throughout the yard allowed for easy access regardless of location, and all should have been well supplied. Unfortunately for the captives, the water contained a high amount of reddish sediment – probably copper or iron – which led to severe cases of diarrhea, one of the leading causes of death in the stockade.³⁷ William Haigh wrote to his wife expressing his concerns about the water. “Take a piece of cotton cloth (white) and wash it in this water, and it soon becomes Nankin in color,” he insisted. “In boiling, it has a sour yellow ochre, and poisonous in appearance and effect.”³⁸ Randolph Shotwell remembered the water having a brackish, coppery taste, so saturated with some mineral as to be able to color an egg a bright red within an hour. “Every cupful acted as a powerful diuretic,” he noted, “reducing hale, hearty men to staggering weakness...”³⁹ Several of the Federal camp surgeons, too, complained of the injurious effects the water

³⁵ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Speer, 188-189.

³⁸ Haigh to wife, 1 June 1865.

³⁹ Shotwell, 154.

had on the prisoners and their patients. Surgeon James S. Thompson filed a report in June 1864, blaming a dramatic increase in disease and its fatality on the water and demanded immediate improvement.⁴⁰ Besides the water in the area being naturally bad, poor drainage, deficient pumps, and over crowding contributed to the problem, as waste not removed immediately quickly leached into the sandy soil.⁴¹ Indeed, the situation became so bad water that boats were eventually ordered to supply the stockade with river water.⁴²

Besides eating, drinking, sleeping, and roll call, officially, little else consumed a prisoner's day. Administrators allowed periodic bathing in the Chesapeake when weather permitted, though some of the more squeamish, aware that all waste from the prison was dumped in the same area, declined the offer. Many, however, took the opportunity to supplement their diet by scavenging for fish, crabs, and oysters, to wash their lice infested clothing, or to maintain a minimal level of hygiene.⁴³ In addition to the sanitary benefits of the bay, swimming also provided a needed break from the monotony of camp life, offering a form of recreation that helped prevent men from falling into despondency over their situation. Lieutenant John Blue recalled the first time guards opened the officers' pen to the bay, allowing everyone the opportunity to swim for two hours. Within a short time, the stockade was virtually empty except for one man from every squad left behind to guard each tent. Marched out under guard, "at the water's edge we

⁴⁰ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:399-400

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 448-449.

⁴² *Ibid*, 835.

⁴³ Leeland Hathaway, *Leeland Hathaway Recollections*, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

broke ranks and soon several hundred Confeds were enjoying a treat which many of us had never enjoyed before, which was bathing in salt water,” he explained.⁴⁴

Mail, at least to the rebels, came irregularly, so this function was seldom a daily occurrence, but it also provided much needed distraction from the dreariness of prison life. Letters from home, and how often a soldier received them, had a serious influence on physical health and state of mind. Tired, hungry, and homesick, with little to occupy their time, soldiers looked with great anxiety for letters from home and loved ones. To receive a package was to set a prisoner’s mind at ease. To return from the express office empty-handed proved to be depressing. Letters from soldiers at Point Lookout asked relatives to send them money, stamps, tobacco, clothing, food, books, and variety of other goods they might be able to use on the inside. Above all, they asked, in some cases begged, for someone to answer their letter, to let them know that someone on the outside actually acknowledged and sympathized with their condition. Joseph Kern wrote to his sister in August 1864, “Another Dixie mail and nothing from any of you – why don’t some of you write? You know how anxiously I must look for your letters.”⁴⁵ Marc Stevenson wrote to his mother in the same distressed tone a month later, “Again, I have to record the receipt of no letters. I cannot understand it.... Please write immediately as you know I must be anxious to hear from you.”⁴⁶ The camp “Bulletin Board” served as point of concentration in the camp. As one inmate reported, it was a “great place of resort every hour of the day.” At this spot, captives received all their news from the outside world. Notices of camp church meetings, plays to be put on, express packages to

⁴⁴ Blue, 272.

⁴⁵ Joseph Kern to sister, 30 August 1864.

⁴⁶ Mark de Wolf Stevenson to son, 1907, Mark de Wolf Stevenson Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

be picked up, and all forms of advertisements and lists were posted on the board. Men milled around the area continuously, hoping a package would arrive from family or friends, or just in search of some bit of news.⁴⁷

Finally, a select few, the “lucky men,” as others called them, managed to get assigned to a work detail in or around the prison to relieve the monotony. Details included unloading supplies arriving at the wharf, grinding axes and chopping wood for campfires, and helping in various construction projects on the outside. Inmates eagerly volunteered for any duty outside the stockade walls for several reasons: the situation offered a better chance for escape, extra food rations were issued to those willing to work, and again, it helped relieve the monotony of prison life.⁴⁸ In case boredom still managed to settle in, however, frequent searches by the guard, in which the entire population was forced to stand at attention for hours while their shelters were turned inside out and searched for contraband, significantly reduced complacency among the prisoners.⁴⁹ Concluding the daily prison routine, as the last official action of the day, a bugler sounded taps an hour after sunset, all lights went out, and no talking was allowed until reveille the next morning.⁵⁰

Prison regulations allowed for little variety or excitement and much routine. The tedium and dullness of the situation eventually took its toll on many captives. Much more existed in a prisoner’s life than is revealed by camp regulations, however, for these basic activities consumed only a portion of a prisoner’s day. For the most part, captives were left to their own devices as to how they spent their time, and there was always

⁴⁷ Haigh to wife, 1 June 1865.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Joseph Kern Diary, 14 February 1864.

⁵⁰ Keiley, 65.

something to keep them busy. Battling “graybacks,” as lice were commonly known, and other vermin, became a full time occupation in prison. Lice infestation in camp was almost inevitable, and most fell victim shortly after arrival. William Haigh of North Carolina complained bitterly of his first experience with the creatures in a letter to his wife. “My tent mates,” he grumbled, “were of the unwashed, unclean order,” and it was not long before “a feeling of something, that I never felt before, startled me – something creeping & crawling next to my skin.” He expressed his disgust upon discovery that, “...for the first time in my experience, I found that I was lousy. Oh horror of horrors! And no change of garments!! I don’t believe that I ever premeditated suicide before – but if such a thought be ever pardonable, it would be under such circumstances as I then found myself.”⁵¹ Overreaction aside, lice infestation posed a serious nuisance among prisoners, and made life all the more uncomfortable. To rid themselves of the creatures, men attempted a number of delousing techniques. They picked the creatures off their clothes by hand, held garments over an open fire and listened for the tell-tale “popping” of the parasites being sent to their doom, and submerged themselves and their clothes in the bay in the hopes of drowning their tormentors. Not all captives willingly maintained themselves, however. Some despondent prisoners, literally crawling with vermin, had to be forcibly stripped and washed by their messmates.⁵² Men standing around half-naked while their clothes were being roasted or washed became a common sight at Point Lookout, and after a time no one gave such scenes a second glance.⁵³

⁵¹ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

⁵² Meade, 16.

⁵³ Ibid.

Fighting vermin may have been a losing battle, but there was something captives could do to combat the elements – and needed to do if they hoped to pass their time in any comfort. Because of Stanton’s refusal to allow the construction of barracks, inmates hunkered down in flimsy canvas tents that offered little protection from the screaming bay winds and freezing temperatures that accompanied the onset of winter in 1863-1864. To make matters worse, camp rules allowed only one blanket to be distributed to each prisoner, any extras being subject to confiscation. Overcoats were rarely issued, and replacement clothing and shoes were distributed sparingly and only if a prisoner could supply an old articles in return. Most prisoners made due with the ragged uniforms in which they arrived.⁵⁴ William Haigh’s first night at the Point was shared by thousands of others throughout their stay. “Cold, cheerless, raining, sleeting, snowing & blustering, - the ground partly frozen and partly slushy,” he remembered, “we were put into that old rickety tent without fire or fuel to pass the night on the damp frozen ground, with no covering but a blanket & nothing to protect us from the ground.”⁵⁵ Because tents on the eastern half of the stockade butted up against the Chesapeake Bay, violent storms and high tides also added to the misery, as captives were frequently flooded out of their homes. “The tide is higher on the Chesapeak than I ever saw it,” noted Charles Warren Hutt of the 40th Virginia Infantry. “Our camp is very muddy, so much so that the streets are nearly impossible...the whole camp is overflowed – in some houses knee deep.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Keiley, 91; Joseph Kern Diary; E. H. Andrews to sister, 28 October 1864, William P. McCorkle Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁵⁵ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

⁵⁶ Charles Warren Hutt. “The Diary of Charles Warren Hutt,” *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*. Edwin Beitzell, ed. (Leonardtown, MD: St. Mary’s County Historical Society, 1983), 71.

Anthony Keiley remembered, “in the winter, a high tide and an easterly gale would flood the whole surface of the pen, *and freeze as it flooded.*”⁵⁷

Because of the weather and the lack of protection from it, men spent an inordinate amount of time and effort improving their prison homes. What began as a simple canvas refuge when men arrived often became an elaborate structure of brick and wood. “Cracker box houses,” as they were known, quickly covered the stockade yard. Prisoners could purchase the shipping crates containing the ubiquitous hardtack crackers when emptied. Commonly, a squad or mess of captives pooled their money and purchased several boxes. The crates were carefully pulled apart, all the nails collected, and the boards used as construction material. What emerged was a four-sided wooden structure with a canvas roof. Sometimes men even managed to produce a wood-planked floor. Industrious Confederates took advantage of the abundance of sand and clay, manufacturing bricks by letting the material bake in the sun, and selling them to their fellow captives. As a result, some shelters contained brick stoves, sides, and chimneys. With furniture and beds made from scrap lumber, a few prisoners rested more comfortably than when they were campaigning with their own army. Along with a pair of good boots, “a cracker-box house filled the measure of any genuine Point Lookouter’s ambition,” noted Anthony Keiley. “To want these, was to be the *subject* of envy – to possess them, was to be its *object*...”⁵⁸

A prison economy also emerged inside the stockade as more captives arrived, with tobacco and hardtack crackers serving as the exchange medium.⁵⁹ As the economy grew,

⁵⁷ Keiley, 68.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 71-72.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 78.

so did an apparent class system that mimicked that on the outside. An “upper class,” who lived in cracker-box houses, possessed their own furniture, and could afford to sell food to others, contrasted with a decidedly worse off “lower class,” who had to subsist on Federal rations, and sometimes sell their own clothes to obtain enough food. The latter were often seen scrounging around the pen, looking for scraps of food thrown out by others, and chewing the “quids” of tobacco already used by their more fortunate neighbors.⁶⁰ It was no doubt one of these men, witnessed by a fellow captive, who retrieved a dead seagull from the bay and “devoured it with gusto.”⁶¹ In between, as in the free world, existed a large middling class of prisoners, who, while not living in “cracker-box” extravagance, managed to carve out an adequate living in the stockade.

How money got into the prisoners’ hands to begin with is somewhat of a mystery, since policy dictated that all currency be seized and put into an account upon a captive’s entry into the stockade. It is probable that a soldier’s wealth in prison almost totally depended on the ability of his friends and families on the outside to send packages containing tobacco and other items that could be bartered, as well as hard currency. Though tobacco could be taken into the prison and traded, money was issued to the prisoners in the form of sutlers checks, expendable only for supplies at the store in the stockade. Many Confederates noted, however, that for a small bribe, sutlers could be encouraged to distribute cash payments, thereby supplying a ready source of money in the stockade.⁶² The prisoners eagerly accepted United States “greenbacks” in the pen, as well as any gold or silver. In this economy, as throughout the South, Confederates

⁶⁰ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

⁶¹ Shotwell, 157.

⁶² Keiley, 78-79.

rapidly discovered the worthlessness of their own nation's currency as inflation mercilessly drove down the purchasing power of the rebel dollar.⁶³

While hardtack served as the basic unit of exchange in the stockade, a plethora of trades and occupations could be found among Confederates who were willing to sell their services for a fee. Tailors, cobblers, dentists, and barbers somehow found or manufactured the tools necessary to carry out their trade in the pen, while others perfected the art of making various sweets, such as gingerbread and molasses candy. Confederate "washerwomen," soldiers willing to clean the encrusted uniforms of their comrades in the ocean, were also in abundance.⁶⁴ Many captives with a flair for art or a specialty in some craft also managed to make good use of their skills. "Seaweed art" became a coveted commodity with the many civilian visitors to the stockade and also among the Federal guards and administrators. Captives, with nothing but time on their hands, discovered that seaweed from the bay, when placed on paper and allowed to dry, resulted in unusual designs that could be sold for profit.⁶⁵ The most ingenious works belonged to a rebel who somehow fashioned a working clock from a canteen, and later outdid himself by manufacturing a steam-powered drill he used to carve trinkets from wood and rock! Several other Confederate sources substantiated this incredible feat, and the industrious inventor eventually sold his works to some of the Federal guards.⁶⁶ The most common method of making extra money in the stockade, however, was through the gutta-percha "industry." Gutta-percha – a hard, rubber-like substance – could be found in

⁶³ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

⁶⁴ Keiley, 75.

⁶⁵ Robert Bingham, 18 February 1864, Robert Bingham Diary, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁶⁶ Keiley, 76; Joseph Kern Diary, 22 March 1864; Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

buttons and other sources, and Confederates carved rings, necklaces, and other forms of jewelry from the substance and sold the finished projects to camp guards and civilians who visited the camp. Some of the artistry was quite elaborate, and captives turned out rings inlaid with ivory, gold, and silver. The novelty of having jewelry produced by rebel captives also served to increase the value of the items among buyers.⁶⁷

Almost inevitably, as men acquired more money than what they needed to survive on, captives began to spend their money on what could only be classified as “entertainment purposes.” Prisoners commonly put on dances, plays, and minstrel shows for the benefit of their fellow captives, charging a nominal fee for entrance. Flyers on the bulletin board announced the performances, such as a minstrel show put on in late 1863 that promised, “the best Dancers; the sweetest Singers; and the Finest Musicians that ever before appeared in any one establishment in the States.” The comedic musicals, coupled with a variety of musical instruments, including the guitar, violin, cornette, and banjo, were extremely popular among the prisoners.⁶⁸

Gambling, too, was another activity at which men with extra cash could risk a few dollars if so inclined. On the bay face of the prison, outside of the stockade, existed a small strip of land leading to the ocean that was left open to the prisoners each day. Here, as remembered Anthony Keiley, one could find a multitude of professional gamblers, men “who, under hastily constructed booths, which they erected every morning, and slept every night, carried on every game of cards at which money is staked.” Dice, as well as faro, monte, and dozens of other card games presented themselves to captives. Beginning with the basic hardtack unit, everything that could be bartered was accepted as

⁶⁷ Keiley, 74.

⁶⁸ Joseph Kern Scrapbook.

currency.⁶⁹ Some captives actually sacrificed a better part of a meal in order to ante up enough hardtack in a small time poker game.⁷⁰ Betting also became a major form of amusement. Prisoners bet on anything in which the outcome was uncertain, no matter how ridiculous or absurd. Bartlett Yancey Malone, a young private from the Sixth North Carolina Infantry, after making his way to the commissary on a December day in 1864, found two of his comrades caught up in an unusual wager. “Mr. Walas had bet Mr. Barby five dollars that there was a man in Camp that could eat 5 lbs of Bacon and 3 Loafs of Bread each loaf weighing 2lbs at one meal,” he recorded in his diary. “When I left he had onley about ¼ of a pound of Bacon and a half of a loaf of bread....” The talented Confederate apparently finished the entire meal, costing someone five dollars.⁷¹ As much as this incident demonstrated how far captives would go to combat boredom, it also highlights a much more important point concerning prison camp life – if men could afford to use food in such a frivolous manner, surely they were not being starved to death.

Until the summer of 1864, Confederate prisoners of war at Point Lookout lived a comparatively stable, if routine and monotonous, existence. The prison population, though increasing substantially after the deterioration of the exchange cartel, still remained within manageable limits, hovering around 10,000 men at the end of July 1864.⁷² Captives overcame the lack of permanent shelter by expanding on their tents and constructing cracker box houses and other semi-permanent structures. Initial sanitary problems under General Marston, described within a Sanitary Commission report, such

⁶⁹ Keiley, 77-78.

⁷⁰ Joseph Kern Diary, 10 June 1864.

⁷¹ Bartlett Yancey Malone, 25 December 1864, Bartlett Yancey Malone Diary, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁷² *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:997.

as waste management and the lack of adequate hospital facilities, were apparently remedied under new command. As proof of this, as late as 1865, several prisoners noted that policing the camp of garbage was one of the few duties their captors managed to carry out efficiently.⁷³ The problem of water supply remained a major problem, however, as demonstrated by the high percentage of chronic diarrhea cases that often resulted in death. Despite the effort of the camp administration to ship in barrels of water from outside sources, the demand could never be met, and the difficulty to lingered. As for the food supply, rations issued by the administration were not always of the best quality or of large amounts, but neither were prisoners put on a starvation diet. Many claimed enough food was given to keep men alive, but left them in state of perpetual hunger. Prisoners at Point Lookout, however, unlike at other facilities in the North (or South, for that matter), possessed the unique opportunity of supplementing the regulation ration through fishing in the Chesapeake Bay. Mackerel, crabs, and particularly oysters, which could be found in huge beds immediately off the coastline, became staples of a prisoner's diet. Furthermore, the camp sutler carried on a thriving business with his Southern clientele, selling every variety of fruit, cookies, pies, and other eatables.⁷⁴

Only after Colonel Hoffman, with the approval of Secretary Stanton, decided to cut the food and clothing allowance to prisoners in a retaliatory response to the treatment of Federal prisoners in Southern camps in 1864, did suffering dramatically increase.⁷⁵ Scurvy, the plague of Southern installations, made its first appearance at Point Lookout after the camp administration eliminated vegetables from the prisoners' diets, and

⁷³ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

⁷⁴ Meade, 5.

⁷⁵ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:72-75.

prevented the camp sutler from selling his supplies in camp. Hoffman, though guilty of being obsessively tight with money, was certainly no murderer, and after the disease became prevalent enough to raise alarm with the camp commandant, he ordered the distribution of the necessary remedy – namely fruits, vegetables, vinegar, and anything else containing Vitamin “C”.⁷⁶ Perhaps the best indication that prisoners were not starving at Point Lookout was the emergence of a prison economy, and in particular on what that economy was based. It seems highly unlikely that starving men would be willing to make hardtack crackers, and edible item, a basis of exchange.

In general, there was much prisoners could do to improve their situation without the assistance of the camp administration. Out of necessity, Confederate captives in the stockade managed to improve their situation substantially by taking advantage of the relatively few aspects of prison life they could control, helping to keep the mortality rate low. Several aspects of their environment lay beyond their manipulation, however; a captive who contracted an illness, whether smallpox, diarrhea, or influenza, often faced death because of poor hospital facilities and a general lack of medicine. As one captive reported, “this is a bad place to be sick, I find.”⁷⁷ The weather, too, sometimes wreaked havoc on the prison population, and despite attempts to construct better shelters, a few men froze to death in the relentless storms of winter.⁷⁸ But these obstacles were both faceless tormentors. Within close proximity of the prisoners, within gunshot, to be precise, existed a more human danger, but just as potentially lethal – the stockade guards.

⁷⁶ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:489.

⁷⁷ Joseph Pryor Fuller to sister [Mary Olmstead], 17 October 1864, Joseph Pryor Fuller Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁷⁸ Robert Kern Diary, 29 January 1865.

Chapter Three

“...If He Wants to Shoot, Let Him Shoot.” - The Camp Guard

During its two years of existence, four different district commanders and no less than fifteen separate guard regiments or parts of regiments served at Point Lookout. The camp administration consisted of district commanders, provost marshals, members of the quartermaster department, detachments from the army medical corps, and a myriad of other military and civilian positions necessary to the operation of the camp. Though district commanders had overall control of the prison, and often set the example for their subordinates, most of the time it was not these men who had the most direct contact or greatest influence over the prisoners. This responsibility often fell to line and non-commissioned officers, particularly the provost marshal and his assistants, who managed the interior of the stockade and camp guard. Indeed, the district commander, though in theory having total control of the camp, in reality left the daily decision most affecting the prisoners in the hands of subordinates. Feeding and clothing prisoners, ensuring proper policing of prison streets, punishing offenders and escapees, and maintaining general order all fell into the realm of the provost marshals, soldiers on guard duty, and other subordinates. Inevitably, with so many different men involved in the administration of the camp, relations with the Confederate soldiers within fluctuated depending on the mentality and temperament of those in charge. Some commanders were rather sympathetic towards the plight of the captives, and did much to help them, while others were often indifferent, or even brutal, in their manner toward their charges.

The most important position at the camp also called for the most interaction with the Confederate captives – and could be the most lethal. Guards from several states – Wisconsin, Ohio, Massachusetts, and others – served at the Point, as well as detachments from the Veteran Reserve Corps (VRC), or the “Invalid Corps,” as it was known. Because of their race, the units that undoubtedly caused the most commotion in the camp, however, at least among the Confederate soldiers, were the several regiments of United States Colored Infantry that arrived in the spring and summer of 1864. Regardless of their home state or skin color, guard regiments all experienced the same routine of daily watches, patrols, and drills. After experiencing the carnage of the front lines and trenches, the slower pace of prison duty suited most veterans of battle, and few men had any desire to return immediately to action.

The VRC battalions, consisting of wounded and recovering soldiers, added yet another scene to camp life. The heterogeneous composition of the camp guard resulted in varying relations with prisoners, depending on their time of duty. Veteran organizations tended to get along better with the prisoners, while greener, less experienced regiments, such as one hundred day volunteer units and the several black regiments, often applied regulations more stringently. Relations between units often resulted in problems, also, as evidenced by some of the racism aimed at black regiments by their white counterparts. Guards at Point Lookout were not without their share of controversy, either. Shootings of prisoners did not occur on a daily basis, but incidents arose frequently enough to warrant several official inquiries and investigations. Some incidents were justified, while for others no clear explanation or fault can be determined. An overall examination of the camp administration, and an evaluation of the guards who most directly affected the

quartermaster clerks and officers, and the provost marshal and his adjutants. In addition, a number of other structures between Hammond General Hospital and the officers' quarters, including a hotel, photograph gallery, laundry houses, a bakery, and a printing office, gave the Point the look and feel of a bustling community.³

In the guard camps, too, it took but a short period before soldiers raised structures other than their living quarters. Unlike active campaigning, the semi-permanence of their camps allowed for the construction of log churches, Masonic halls, and regimental hospitals. Surgeon William Child of the Fifth New Hampshire explained the general duties of his regiment during its tenure as guards. "Its labors were not severe, he remembered, "yet the highest order of military discipline, drill, inspections, and reviews were constantly enforced."⁴ The statement described the typical experience for those on guard duty at Point Lookout. Most, such as George Allen of the Fourth Rhode Island Infantry, welcomed the opportunity as a relief from the battlefield. Upon learning of his regiment's transfer from Point Lookout in the spring of 1864, he lamented that, "Our few months' respite from the battle-line was ended, and henceforth...we must bear the heat and burden of an active campaign."⁵ Another guard agreed that in general their duties were relatively easy, and men frequently passed their free time in wrestling matches, playing baseball, staging enormous inter-regimental snowball fights in the winter, and a multitude of other activities. Soldiers evidently managed to secure whiskey to help pass the time, and one soldier actually died from alcohol poisoning in January, 1864.⁶

³ Ibid, 237-238.

⁴ Ibid, 241.

⁵ George H. Allen. *Forty-Six Months with the Fourth Rhode Island Volunteers*. (Providence, RI: J.A. & R.A. Reid, Printers, 1887), 270.

⁶ Child, 239, 248.

Though drill may have been a constant in a soldier's life, "the highest order of military discipline," was not always kept, as evidenced by several incidents that occurred among the guard. In one unfortunate case on May 7, 1864, a guard accidentally shot and killed one of his comrades just before going on duty. While waiting in the guardhouse to go on shift, Patrick Gallagher and Charles Melarkey, both of the Fourth Rhode Island, were "engaged in fooling" when Melarkey's gun discharged, sending a ball through the head of his friend that killed him instantly. "This sad affair," noted George Allen, "stopped further fooling with loaded rifles."⁷ The very next day, May 8, a deserter from the Fifth New Hampshire faced a firing squad comprised of men from his own regiment for the crime of desertion. Attempts at clemency failed, and the execution proceeded. Officers ordered all men not on guard duty to attend, hoping to deter others who might be entertaining similar actions.⁸

Like the prisoners they watched over, the Union regiments assigned to guard detail led a life of routine. Drills and dress parades dominated their day. As the number of prisoners reached into the thousands – far outnumbering the guard force – emergency training to counter a possible mass breakout attempt became standard, as well. At the sound of a particular drumbeat, all soldiers fell into line of battle and prepared to meet any contingency. The randomness of these drills prevented soldiers from knowing if the situation was real or drill, and one man claimed his company took less than three minutes to reach the outside of the stockade walls fully armed and equipped after rising from a dead sleep.⁹

⁷ Allen, 265.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 266-267.

It required an entire regiment to cover a day's guard detail. Generally, duty was broken up into three, eight-hour shifts, but at times limited numbers forced the adoption of twelve hour shifts and sometimes longer, thereby ensuring tired sentinels and increasing the risk of incidents within the stockade. To cover the stockade perimeter effectively, forty-four sentinels patrolled a beat along a plank walkway constructed about ten feet high on the outside of the walls. The day watch proved relatively simple. At night, however, the duty became more difficult and required extra precautions. All campfires within the stockade, when they were permitted, were extinguished after taps, and for unknown reasons, camp administrators never ordered the use of torches around the stockade walls. Subsequently, guards had to watch over thousands of prisoners by moonlight, and poor visibility on overcast nights led to dangerous situations. Unable to see clearly, guards were apt to be edgy, and prone to fire at anything moving, real or imagined.¹⁰ On one dreary night in March 1864, a sentinel from the 36th Colored Infantry mistook a log floating in the bay for a prisoner trying to swim to freedom. Challenging the "escapee" and receiving no reply, the guard opened fire, calling the neighboring sentries to his support. According to one prisoner, a dozen or so shots were fired before the long roll - a series of drumbeats - was sounded, alerting the entire guard camp. Within minutes a cavalry force rode through the camp, and finding everything quiet, noticed the firing was aimed outside the stockade. Upon discovery of the log that caused the disturbance, the regiments returned to their camp, "with curses loud and deep against the 'niggers.'"¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid, 264.

¹¹ Joseph Kern, 17 March 1864, Joseph Kern Diary, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Complementing the sentries on patrol, a group of six to eight non-commissioned officers undertook the unenviable duty of patrolling the *interior* of the camp every night. Surrounded by thousands of potentially hostile prisoners, the men necessarily entered the stockade heavily armed, carrying cutlasses and a brace of revolvers. Each man walked a certain section of the camp, entering around nine in the evening, and working until morning or when relieved. The group enforced the no-talking policy after taps and maintained general order. To further ensure their safety, under no circumstances was anyone allowed to approach them without first giving a predetermined sign known only to those in command or on patrol. Confederates did well to avoid trifling with the men, for orders allowed the patrol to open fire at the least sign of insubordination from the prisoners. "The most careful and trusty men were appointed," recounted a former guard who performed the duty, "and their orders were of the strictest character, as their position was one of great danger."¹² Even so, altercations did sometimes occur between the patrols and Confederate prisoners, resulting in several deaths among the captives. Later, when black troops replaced whites inside the stockade, the clashes increased between the guards and captives. Two reasons account for this phenomenon: First, the inexperience of the black troops, who rarely saw battle before assignment to the Point, and second, the overt hostility many Confederates held toward the black guard. Several of the shootings occurred after direct, provocative actions on the part of Southern prisoners who resented being placed under control of former slaves.

The daily administration of the camp, including matters pertaining to the guard, fell upon the office of the provost marshal. Three men held the post at different times during

¹² Allen, 263-264.

the prison's existence, each with varying degrees of concern towards the prisoners.¹³ Coupled with the district commander, the manner and attitude the provost marshal exhibited towards the prisoners often set the example for the camp guard. If a guard happened to shoot a captive while on duty, whether justified or not, the extent and thoroughness of any post-incident investigation depended upon the willingness of administrative officials to review the case. Rigorous investigations frequently resulted in more stringent orders that permitted guards to fire on a captive only in extreme situations, while other cases, almost cavalierly dismissed, could do nothing but encourage more of the same actions from the guards.

The provost marshal, usually a captain or major, also had subordinates under his command to help manage prison affairs. Captain Joab Patterson, who served as the first provost of the camp from the summer of 1863 until February 1864, left the maintenance of order within the stockade to Captain George E. Sides, of the Second New Hampshire Infantry.¹⁴ Captain Sides is an obscure figure, for there is little mention of him even in his own regimental history. It is difficult, therefore, to gain insight into the man's personality. What is clear is that the prison population detested him and his readiness to use deadly force to uphold camp policies and regulations. In December 1863, an altercation took place inside the stockade in front of the camp gates. For security concerns, camp rules prohibited the congregation of large groups of prisoners in the street in front of the cookhouses and in front of the main entrance gates to the stockade, located just yards away. Administrators rightly feared a concerted effort by prisoners to crash

¹³ Beitzell, 181.

¹⁴ Martin A. Haynes. *History of the Second Regiment New Hampshire Volunteers*. (Manchester, NH: Charles F. Livingston, Printer, 1865), 158.

through the gates and overwhelm the pitifully outnumbered guard. On December 16, for reasons unknown, a large group of captives violated the directive, thronging about the main entrance. Whether these men were plotting escape, or just eager to learn information from newly arrived prisoners, cannot be ascertained. Regardless, Captain Sides, obviously alarmed over the situation, pulled his revolver and fired into the crowd, wounding five men, one mortally.¹⁵ The confrontation occurred in daylight, and hundreds must have witnessed the episode. Yet, while several Confederates mentioned the shooting in their diaries, nothing is found in any official records concerning the incident, leaving the conditions surrounding it a mystery.

Several months later, in February 1864, Captain Sides again provoked the ire of prisoners with a surprise search of the entire camp. Hearing rumors of a possible escape attempt, the Captain ordered guards to ransack the stockade. Prisoners stood outside their tents and shelters for hours while soldiers rummaged through their belongings, tossing clothes, blankets, utensils, and other personal affects into the streets in their search for contraband. "Everything was seized," complained one prisoner, "all things of value were carried off..."¹⁶ Besides extra (and illegal) blankets and virtual mountains of gutta-percha buttons, which the prisoners used to make their rings and trinkets, the search also turned up a number of digging implements and evidence of tunneling, as well as at least one musket. The greatest find, however, was the discovery of two small canoes, complete with paddles, manufactured from the same cracker boxes inmates used to fortify their shelters. Their questionable seaworthiness aside, the make-shift getaway

¹⁵ Bartlett Yancey Malone, 16 December 1863, Bartlett Yancey Malone Diary, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹⁶ Joseph Kern Diary, 14 February 1864.

boats belonged to several men from Company A, Fourth Division, who concealed the rafts in the sandy soil beneath their tents. Punishment for the escape plot came swiftly. "The Sergeants tent in which one of them was found," recounted Joseph Kerns, "was torn down by order of the redoubtable Captain Sides."¹⁷ The unfortunate sergeant's shelter, formerly adorned with a sign reading "Home Sweet Home," lay in shambles on the frozen ground. Not despairing, and not wishing to freeze to death, he and his messmates wasted little time in erecting a new shelter, renaming it "Home Again." Shortly after the incident, new regulations prohibited the further sale of cracker boxes to the prisoners.¹⁸

Escape attempts from Point Lookout were common. Indeed, among some captives the activity qualified as a hobby, and despite the punishments, attempts continued until the end of the war. It did not take long for the first squads of prisoners to survey the stockade and locate any weak points that might be used to make good an escape. During the first month of the prison's existence, several Confederates simply strolled through the huge gaps that remained in the uncompleted stockade walls.¹⁹ To deter tunneling and climbing, the administration ordered the construction of a small ditch several inches deep around the entire interior of the stockade, placed approximately fifteen feet in from the walls.²⁰ A prisoner crossed this "dead line" at his own peril, for orders instructed guards to warn the transgressor verbally only once before opening fire, though at times no warning was given at all. One day in November 1863, the Fifth New Hampshire drilled just outside the stockade to the tune of "Dixie" played by the regimental band. Hearing the familiar song, a prisoner peered through the cracks in the stockade planking to gain a

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Anthony Keiley. *In Vinculis; or, The Prisoner of War*. (New York: Blelock & Co., 1866). 73-74.

¹⁹ Beitzell, 21

²⁰ Allen, 260.

better view. A moment later, a gun hammer clicked softly, followed immediately by an explosion of a rifle that sent the man reeling backwards into camp, his head grazed by a ball.²¹ If prisoners wished to survive, they kept their distance from the line.

Some captives refused to be intimidated and chose to risk death to gain freedom rather than wither in a Union stockade. Attempts ranged from the predictable to the incredible. With the prison located along the Chesapeake Bay, and Virginia just across the Potomac River, soldiers frequently attempted to swim or float to freedom, but rarely succeeded. Administrators realized the danger, and took precautions by extending the stockade walls on the Chesapeake side into the bay, driving piles into the ocean bed to prevent Confederates from slipping away while bathing. For adventurous prisoners who managed to get past the pilings, a warning shot fired from one of the gunboats anchored off shore usually made them reconsider the wisdom of their decision.²²

Determined escapees, though, paid little heed to the obstacles. Quartered in Hammond General Hospital after arriving at the Point, John Blue and several of his compatriots learned of a possible escape route from another “prisoner” who in actuality turned out to be a Federal detective in disguise. Administrators commonly planted undercover agents among the prison population, hoping to learn of possible escape attempts or uprisings and to take the appropriate preemptive measures. The agent instructed Blue to make his escape while in the hospital, security being more lax than in the stockade, and suggested wading around the pilings that had been placed on the Potomac side of the river. Deciding to act on the generous “tip” soon after, ten men

²¹ Malone Diary, November, 1863.

²² Leland Hathaway, Leland Hathaway Recollections, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

quietly gathered on the beach outside the hospital under the cover of darkness. As they waded into the river and neared the pilings, they discovered their way illuminated by lanterns placed on the fence at fifty-yard intervals. Continuing around the fence in spite of the ominous sign of detection, the group was nearly to shore when someone commanded them to halt. "To our surprise, and may I say, horror," Blue recounted, "we discovered at least a score of dismounted cavalry drawn up in a line not more than 25 paces away." The Lieutenant in charge of the patrol ordered the wet and freezing men out of the water, concluding a mid-March swim that lasted nearly three hours. "Come ashore boys you may take cold," he mockingly retorted, "it's rather early for bathing, is it not?"²³

Floating out with the stockade garbage offered another method of escape. All trash at the camp was emptied into the Chesapeake, which often included large boxes and scraps of wood. While bathing, clever prisoners sometimes concealed themselves underneath a box or crate and simply floated out with the tide.²⁴ Other times men buried themselves in the sand, though the success of this approach depending on a well executed distraction of the guards. Normally, a group of a dozen or so prisoners would congregate on the beach, feigning a religious or educational meeting. Concealed within the circle, and out of sight from the sentinels, two or three men quickly dug a pit large enough to accommodate them, and then were buried by their comrades, who left only a small hole for breathing. As the tide came in at night, the water loosened the sand and the escapees easily emerged

²³ John Blue. *Hanging Rock Rebel: Lt. John Blue's War in West Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley*. Dan Oates, ed. (Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1994), 266-267.

²⁴ Lonnie Speer. *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 193.

from their hiding places.²⁵ Finally, captives prepared flotation devices of all kinds in attempts to sail to freedom, as evidenced by the two canoes discovered by the camp guard under Captain Sides. Maneuvering the Chesapeake proved dangerous, though; guards found several drowned prisoners floating in the bay during the camp's existence, suggesting some attempts may have gone awry.²⁶

Escaping from within the confines of the stockade proved to be more difficult, but still possible. Obtaining a detail job outside of the prison provided ample opportunity for captives to wander off while chopping wood or unloading ships.²⁷ Some inmates bribed their way out, paying off guards in gold or greenbacks in return for freedom. Bribery was a risky venture for the captive, however. On numerous instances, guards accepted pay from prisoners, only to alert others or shoot when the escapee tried to make good on the bargain.²⁸ Other men scaled the walls with rope ladders, or tried to tunnel their way out of the stockade, concealing the opening within the confines of their shelters.²⁹ An unforeseen structural weakness in the walls themselves added another means for prisoners to break out. Though the stockade planking projected several feet into the ground, thereby forcing men to tunnel underneath, holes in the planks from where they were nailed to supporting posts allowed captives to escape *through* the walls. The grouping of the holes, located at two-foot intervals on each plank, created a weak point on the boards. With effort and time, a few Confederates managed to whittle away at the

²⁵ Haynes, 158-159.

²⁶ James T. Meade. *Journal of Prison Life*. Gordon Minnigerode, et al., eds. (Torrington, CT: Rainbow Press, 1987).

²⁷ Keiley, 114.

²⁸ Jonathan W. Stevens. *Reminiscences of the Civil War*. (Hillsboro, TX: Hillsboror Mirror Print, 1902), 150

²⁹ Francis A. Boyle, 10 June 1864, "The Prison Diary of Adjutant Francis Atherton Boyle, C.S.A.," Mary Lindsay Thornton, ed. *The North Carolina Historical Review*,

walls with knives, quietly break off several pieces of planking, and slip away into the night.³⁰

Punishments for being caught varied. If not killed outright, protocol called for would-be escapees to wear a ball and chain around their ankles for a certain period of time. Guards forced other men to carry logs on their shoulders while forcing them to march back and forth in front of the guardhouse.³¹ Although a few hours of this exercise was enough to deter most captives, in severe cases, mostly involving repeat offenders, administrators implemented a method akin to torture. Being strung up by the thumbs was a common form of discipline in prison camps throughout the North and South, and Point Lookout was no exception. A Confederate witness of the procedure at the Point described it in detail:

A pole was arranged similar to that prepared by a farmer on which to hang hogs; a small cord of sufficient strength was looped over each thumb and made fast to the beam over head, which was then wound up like a windless until the victim was compelled to rest the weight of his body either on his toes or on his thumbs; when the...toes fail, the strain is all on the thumbs, when the pain often became unbearable and victim loses consciousness, the Sergeant who bosses the job would order him lowered, and when consciousness returned the prisoner was either sent to the pen, or to the guard house...to nurse, as best he could, his lacerated thumbs until the next day at the same hour, when he was made to take another course of the same medicine. This punishment was considered the most severe, and, but little short of the death penalty.³²

The act of escape, regardless of the consequences, helped to combat the depression and melancholy so dangerous to a captive's well being. Rather than living an aimless, routine life while waiting for an exchange that seemed unlikely to be settled at anytime in the foreseeable future, the prospect of escape, and working towards that end, gave men hope in an otherwise hopeless environment.

³⁰ Stevens, 151.

³¹ Blue, 269.

³² Ibid.

Whether marching prisoners into the stockade, patrolling the prison, or thwarting escape attempts, camp guards wielded absolute, immediate, and sometimes capricious power over the Confederates in the pen. Camp administrators may have legislated the rules, but how effectively and to what extent they were carried out depended upon the soldier on duty. While some guards fired on prisoners for relatively minor infractions, others, for whatever reasons, decided to spare offenders, even for serious transgressions. Jonathan Stevens, a Texas Confederate, related in his memoirs a run-in one of his comrades had with a black guard during an escape attempt in 1864. After whittling through several of the stockade planks one stormy night, the captive discreetly slid down a drainage ditch that led underneath the prison wall. Unable to see the guard in the darkness, the intrepid Confederate assumed wrongly the guard could not see him. The sentinel, standing above him as he neared the hole, stopped the prisoner cold. "Now, see here," the guard allegedly responded, "you jes git up from dar an' go back. I done been a watchin' you ever since you started in that ditch, an' I don't want to hurt yo', but if yo' comes any furer I'se a gwine to shoot shore." The escapee did not need to be told twice, and quickly made his way back to his tent unscathed.³³

Not all guards showed such magnanimity towards their charges. Because the monthly reports filed for Point Lookout do not list causes of prisoner deaths, it is difficult to determine the exact number of Confederates wounded and killed by guards from 1863 to 1865. Judging by Confederate letters and diaries, however, the number killed was less than twenty men over the two-year period.³⁴ Several post-war memoirs by ex-prisoners claim a far higher number and stress the barbaric behavior of the camp guards, but closer

³³ Stevens, 151-152.

³⁴ Speer, 190-191.

examination dispels this myth.³⁵ Few shootings occurred without some sort of provocation, whether it was crossing the dead line, escaping, or some other defiance of the guard. Problems occurred because of the inexperience and poor marksmanship of some of the guard units, coupled with misinterpretations of orders. The random shootings many captives reported were in actuality stray bullets meant for someone else. Sentinels who fired at transgressors often missed their targets, killing or wounding oblivious captives in nearby shelters. The unpredictability of the guards understandably contributed to the outrage and uneasiness felt by Confederates in the pen.

One of the most controversial shootings at the Point, however, was very deliberate, there being no doubt as to who the guard intended to shoot. Early in 1864, several Confederate officers captured in John Hunt Morgan's ill-advised raid into Ohio the previous year arrived in the officers' section of the prison pen. On March 20, Sergeant Edwin Young of the 2nd New Hampshire shot and killed a Captain Peyton, an officer in one of Morgan's Kentucky cavalry regiments, in broad daylight.³⁶ Several versions of what transpired exist, with many Confederate witnesses insisting, naturally, that Sergeant Young wantonly murdered their comrade without provocation. What actually happened on that day was more complicated, and neither party was without guilt.

John Blue remembered Sergeant Young as personable, and always willing to do anything in his power to help the prisoners. "He seemed to have been well raised and well educated," he added, "very quiet, not over bearing or insulting to the prisoners, which was not always the case with those in authority." According to Blue, most of

³⁵ James Huffman. *Ups and Downs of a Confederate Soldier*. (New York: William E. Rudge's Sons, 1940), 91; Stevens, 148; Keiley, 70.

³⁶ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:1101.

Morgan's men were gentlemen, but a few were cocksure and degrading towards their guards, who they obviously believed beneath them. Captain Peyton, in particular, fit the description, and for whatever reasons, took a dislike toward the Sergeant, going out of his way to insult and verbally abuse him.³⁷ On the morning of March 20, Peyton and a cohort of fellow Kentuckians arrived by ship at the Point, and immediately went to work constructing shelters. Sergeant Young, after helping some prisoners set up a stove in their tent, encountered Peyton and another Confederate officer, asking him for alcohol. "You look like a damned old whiskey head," blurted Peyton, "can't you get us some whiskey." According to witnesses, the Captain had been drinking all morning on the ship before disembarking, which undoubtedly contributed to his belligerent behavior.³⁸ Young declined, stating he did not indulge in the article, that the substance was illegal in the prison, and made it clear to the officers he would not procure it for them.³⁹

Peyton became irritated by the Sergeant's response. "Do not make a God damn fool of yourself here, you fanatical philanthropist," he declared, "or you will go to heaven." Young, kneeling on the ground putting the last piece of a tent in place, stood up after the remark. Peyton continued, refusing to give up the issue. "We have got greenbacks, and you will get it for us," he brazenly remarked. Young looked at the Captain, smiled, and again declined. Peyton began to mock the Sergeant. Surveying the black sentinels walking along the prison walls, he queried Young as to who made the better guard, "you or the Negroes?" The Sergeant laughed, and replied that the blacks made better guards. In a sarcastic tone, Peyton retorted, "yes, I suppose the Negroes are superior." Young

³⁷ Blue, 274.

³⁸ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:1100-1102.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 1102.

asked him what he meant by the comment, at which point the Captain asked him if he was a Bay State man. Finding he was from New Hampshire, Peyton snapped, “so much the worse,” pointed to the black guard and told Young he was a fit subject to associate with them.⁴⁰

The Sergeant became visibly upset at the remark. “I then told him he could talk to some men that way,” he stated in his deposition, “but not to me while doing my duty.” Peyton matter-of-factly stated that he could talk to anyone that way, and if the Sergeant did not like it, he could leave. Peyton used an oath, and the tension thickened as Young dropped his hand to his holster, plainly meaning to go for his revolver. Peyton witnessed the action, and dared him to pull the trigger. “God damn you, shoot,” he taunted. Young threatened to do so if the Captain did not “dry up,” and pulled his revolver from the case. Again, Peyton shouted at him to shoot.⁴¹ The Captain’s comrade, a Lieutenant Dunlap, realized the danger and stepped in, positioning himself between Peyton and Young, and tried to persuade him to go back to his tent. Agitated, he yelled out, “No, I won’t; if he wants to shoot, let him shoot.” Dunlap attempted once more to distract Peyton, tugging at his arm, and begged the Sergeant not to fire. Young holstered his weapon, probably relieved at the distraction, turned, and attempted to walk away as Dunlap led Peyton back to his quarters. The fiasco had not ended yet, however, for the Captain refused to let up. He broke away from Dunlap and caught the Sergeant on his way out, shook his fist in his face, called him a coward, and again dared him to shoot. Young swung around and pulled his revolver, aimed it at the Captain, and informed him he would shoot if he did not back off. Not wishing to be in the line of fire, Dunlap stepped out of the way and let

⁴⁰ Ibid, 1099, 1102.

⁴¹ Ibid, 1102.

Peyton continue.⁴² In a final act of defiance, the Captain actually threw open his coat, exposing his chest to the Sergeant, and shouted, "...God damn him, if he wants to shoot, let him shoot." Young leveled his revolver, cocked it, and fired. Peyton dropped to the ground, and died moments later. Without a word, Young turned and quickly walked out of the stockade to report the incident to his superiors.⁴³

A board of inquiry held days later acquitted Young as being justified in firing while carrying out his duties. The decision was not unanimous, however. Although Commissary General William Hoffman found the Sergeant "fully justified" in his action after being "grossly insulted and defied by a prisoner of war," General Edward Canby, who also sat on the board, demurred. "The killing was, in my judgment, entirely unjustifiable," he explained. "The sergeant should be put on trial for murder."⁴⁴ General Benjamin Butler, commissioner of prisoner exchange and Hoffman's superior, did not learn of the result of the inquiry until a week later. Miffed because Hoffman had bypassed him and consulted only with Commandant Marston, Butler offered a rebuke to the Commissary General, and a suggestion on how to act in future cases. He pointed out the conflict of interest by having the board of inquiry packed with officers from the same regiment in charge of guarding the camp. If outside officers had been appointed, he responded, the results "might have been more satisfactory." Butler's primary concern was the reaction of Confederate officials to the shooting, and possible retribution against Union captives. He explained the situation to Hoffman, stating, "it seems to me that in the very delicate matter of inquiring into the taking of the life of a man, especially a

⁴² Ibid, 1099.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 1103.

prisoner of war, which may be misrepresented to our rebel enemies and lead to attempted retaliation, it should appear that the facts were found by a board which, like Caesar's wife, should be beyond suspicion."⁴⁵

Though Sergeant Edwin Young was acquitted of any wrongdoing, and no further official action was taken on the matter, the incident highlights the concern of administrators towards the shooting of prisoners. Even in justifiable cases, administrators worried about the ramifications on Union prisoners, and therefore tried to curb guards who tended to be trigger-happy by issuing more stringent orders allowing guards to shoot only in life-threatening situations. What was also clear from the incident was that Confederates who drew the fire of guards were not always innocent victims, as demonstrated by Peyton's outlandish behavior.

In the exchange of words that led to the shooting of Peyton, Young did not seem visibly upset, even after the Captain called him "a damned old whiskey head." Only when Peyton compared him to the black guard did he become angry. Young's response typified the relationship between the Colored Infantry, and the other guard units and prisoners. A number of colored regiments served at Point Lookout, including the Fifth Massachusetts Colored Cavalry, the Third and Fourth Maryland Colored Regiments, and the 36th United States Colored Infantry.⁴⁶ The 36th, formerly the Second North Carolina, arrived for duty at the stockade in February 1864. Composed primarily of ex-slaves from the Virginia-North Carolina border region, the regiment had seen little active service before being assigned to prison duty. Colonel Alonzo G. Draper, commander of the

⁴⁵ Ibid, 1106.

⁴⁶ Beitzell, 181.

regiment, assumed control as district commander soon after his arrival, the third man to hold the position since the opening of the stockade in the summer of 1863.⁴⁷

Born in Brattleboro, Vermont on September 6, 1835, Draper was a child prodigy with a photographic memory. In 1850, his family moved to Boston, where young Alonzo gave his first temperance speech at the age of fifteen, and eventually organized his own temperance society. Draper graduated at the head of his class in 1854 from Boston's English High School, and his commencement address, entitled, "Compromises with Slavery," was so radical the principal instructed him to alter the content for fear of offending the city's mayor. Unable to afford college, Draper moved to Lynn, Massachusetts in 1855, where he hoped to study law as a legal apprentice. The city was a major nineteenth century shoe-manufacturing center, and within weeks Draper found employment in the local factory. By 1860, he had become a major labor leader and spokesman for the workers, and after a series of strikes, he traveled across New England, speaking and writing on behalf of his fellow employees. The recognition he gained from his labors allowed him to win election as an assistant city marshal in Lynn a few months later.⁴⁸

With the start of war in 1861, Draper enlisted a company in the 14th Massachusetts Infantry, serving as its captain. When recruiting of black regiments began in earnest, he petitioned Governor John Andrew for the opportunity to command, believing it the best way to realize his talents. Already a major, Draper was promoted to colonel and placed in charge of the Second North Carolina Colored Regiment, soon to be the 36th United

⁴⁷ James Kenneth Bryant, "The Model 36th Regiment: The Contribution of Black Soldiers and Their Families to the Union War Effort, 1861-1866." (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Rochester, New York, 2001), 193.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 146-149.

States Colored Infantry. Though he did not believe blacks to be equal to whites, he understood the advantages of arming former slaves to fight against the rebellion, and believed serving in the military was the best way to raise their status to free men. The new colonel was strict disciplinarian, swift to punish subordinates and men who disobeyed his wishes. The former slaves under his command, however, generally judged him to be fair, and he in return took a fatherly interest in their well being. Draper was a highly ambitious man, and took every opportunity that presented itself to improve the reputation of his officers and regiment.⁴⁹ As district commander of Point Lookout, he still retained control over his old regiment, and during his tenure led a number of raids in the surrounding countryside. Indeed, often he seemed more interested in garnering laurels for his beloved regiment than tending to his administrative responsibilities.⁵⁰

On February 28, 1864 the 36th United States Colored Infantry arrived at the wharf on Point Lookout and soon after marched into the stockade, the first of several black regiments to stand guard over the Confederate prisoners. A correspondent from the *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser* witnessed the event. Marching to music, "they presented a fine appearance and kept most excellent time and a glance along the lines while marching showed every foot raised to a step as regular as clock-work." According to the correspondent, there was a good deal of jeering among the prisoners, as well as much curiosity, for most had never seen a black soldier.⁵¹ As the regiment entered the main gates, officers drew and cocked their pistols, and every soldier held his rifle at carry arms with fixed bayonets. They apparently expected some sort of

⁴⁹ Ibid, 150-151; 156.

⁵⁰ Beitzell, 182.

⁵¹ Bryant, 193.

demonstration by the prisoners, who could have easily overwhelmed the regiment. Anger, shock, and dismay filtered through the prison population as rebels learned of the arrival of the black guard. John W. Stevens of the 5th Texas Infantry echoed the sentiments of others in his recollections of the regiment's arrival. He did not blame the ex-slaves for the situation. Instead, his anger focused on those in charge.

It was a feeling of the most inexpressible contempt for the government which had lowered the dignity of the United States soldiery by placing its uniform, escutcheon and arms in the hands of pressed slaves...The bulk of them [soldiers] were young, black, slick looking fellows, and were doubtless highly inflated with the idea that they were U.S. soldiers...Prompted, doubtless by their officers, they soon became overbearing and very insulting.⁵²

When the 36th arrived, the guard at Point Lookout consisted of three white infantry regiments and a battery of artillery, and relations were strained at times. Not only did black guards endure abuse from Confederate prisoners, but also from fellow guards and civilian employees in the area. On April 17, 1864 an incident occurred outside of the camp involving five black guards returning to camp after duty. As the soldiers walked down the road, three mounted soldiers of the 2nd New Hampshire, accompanied by a mounted civilian, forced the men out the way. The New Hampshire men charged the black guards several times, forcing one to his knees while brandishing cutlasses against the rest. A similar episode transpired days later. As Larry Griffin, a black drummer, returned to camp with a group of his comrades, a local resident named Frank Smith galloped into the soldiers, kicking Griffin in the stomach as he passed. Riding off, Smith yelled out, "get out my way, you damned black sons of a bitch!"⁵³

With such animosity shown them by their own army, black troops could hope for little respect from their Confederate charges. Some of the rebel captives once *owned* members

⁵² Stevens, 151.

⁵³ Bryant, 200-201.

of the new guard, and the supposed popular saying of black troops, “the bottom rail is on top now,” referring to their new authority over their former masters, did not sit well with many prisoners.⁵⁴ To Southerners, it was an unnatural hierarchy, and captives looked on with contempt at comrades who fraternized and tried to curry favor with the colored sentry.⁵⁵ Captives initially held a dangerous complacency around the new guard, taunting and openly provoking them. On their first day on duty, black troops marched in wearing all accoutrements and their knapsacks. After several hours of patrolling, many dropped their heavy packs, laying them down next to the beat they walked. One unfortunate guard placed his next to the tent of a Louisianan from Roberdeau Wheat’s regiment. The “Louisiana Tigers,” as they were known, consisted of a hodge-podge group of New Orleans riff-raff, nicknamed “wharf rats.” Predictably, as soon as the guard turned his back, the knapsack disappeared, stolen by one of the “rats.”⁵⁶ Adding to the problems, prisoners physically assaulted guards when they could get away with it. On dark nights, men stealthily slipped out of their tents, gathered handfuls of rocks, and hurled them at the unsuspecting guards walking beats along the stockade walls. Before the sentries could focus on where the missiles originated, the culprits sprinted to their tents, feigning sleep.⁵⁷

The contempt men held for the colored guard can best be captured by the reaction of prisoners to an accidental shooting about a month after their arrival. On April 12, 1864 two sentries patrolling a street inside the stockade met at their end of the beat and

⁵⁴ Huffman, 92.

⁵⁵ William H. Haigh to wife [Kate], 24 May 1864, William H. Haigh Letters, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁵⁶ Stevens, 152.

⁵⁷ Huffman, 92.

commenced what they called, “playing bayonets.” In actuality, the sentries may have been practicing the manual of arms, rather than fooling around, but the outcome was the same. As the men continued, a crowd gathered to watch the spectacle. “I was watching them at the time, as were several others,” wrote John Stevens. “...In an attempt to play the “lock bayonet” act, one’s gun went off and shot the other dead in his tracks. He fell to the ground with his neck broken.”⁵⁸ Panicking, the other guard knelt over his fallen comrade, saying, “Jim, Jim get up from there, you’re not hurt, you’re just trying to fool me.”⁵⁹ Eventually, he dropped his gun and ran off. “We all laughed heartily,” recalled Stevens.⁶⁰ A similar event occurred two weeks later, when a guard accidentally shot himself through the mouth.⁶¹ Episodes such as these, though not common, solidified rebel preconceptions of black guards as being slow-witted, awkward, and uncoordinated.

Though they considered blacks their social inferiors, prisoners seemed to forget sentinels carried loaded weapons that did not discriminate. Their lack of respect and provocative actions often led to shootings that otherwise could have been avoided. In April of 1864, a black guard shot a prisoner in the foot, a wound from which the captive later died, for defecating outside the designated sink areas. As camp sanitation was vitally important, administrators outlawed prisoners from relieving themselves at any location other than the latrines. At night, large tubs were placed in the streets for the prisoners, eliminating the need for them to travel across the camp. Still, many captives found it easier to go wherever convenient, thereby avoiding the hassle of walking across camp or elbowing through crowds of men. If guards caught someone using a location

⁵⁸ Stevens, 153.

⁵⁹ Malone Diary, 12 April 1864.

⁶⁰ Stevens, 153.

⁶¹ Malone Diary, 29 April 1864.

other than the sinks, they were to give them three warnings to stop, and afterwards were permitted to open fire on the offender. On the evening of April 21, Private Mark Lisk walked behind a cookhouse to relieve himself, when a guard saw what he was doing and ordered him to stop. Lisk responded that he would “do his business first,” and moved to the front of his tent to continue. Again the guard ordered him to stop, and received the same response. Refusing to debate the issue, the sentinel fired his musket. Lisk, shot in the foot, “hallooed until they came and pulled him into the tent,” the guard later reported.⁶²

Events came to a head within the stockade after the Lisk shooting. Confederate Sergeant Major William Laird, who managed the enlisted prisoners and acted as their spokesperson, brought a list of grievances, to the assistant provost marshal, detailing previous abuses by black guards toward the captives before the Lisk shooting.⁶³ While enforcing their orders, black guards often shot at prisoners in situations that were not life threatening and did not require a lethal response. At least one man was killed when a sentinel fired into a crowd of prisoners returning from the cookhouses, apparently upholding the order to prevent men from crowding around the buildings.⁶⁴ While on night patrol inside the pen, black patrols supposedly harassed captives in their tents for making harmless comments, which technically violated the no-talking rule after taps. One man, after remarking to his comrade, “you are pulling the cover off me,” was ordered out of his tent at gunpoint and forced to double-quick across the stockade and

⁶² *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:164.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 384.

⁶⁴ Huffman, 91.

back. Several other men were wounded for making such innocuous comments after guards fired into their tents to quiet them rather than give a verbal warning.⁶⁵

In the officers' pen, the situation grew much more serious, and an open revolt against the guard threatened. Perhaps because of the officers' perceived upper class status and superiority to the blacks, their reaction to what they considered offenses and abuses was more explosive than in the enlisted men's stockade. After the Peyton killing, and a series of other allegedly unjustified shootings, a council of officers convened in March or April 1864 to discuss the situation. A Colonel Alexander, from a Louisiana unit, acted as spokesman for the officers, and flagged down Major George Weymouth, provost marshal of the stockade, as he rode through the camp. The Colonel recounted the list of shootings and beatings suffered under the guard, and stated, "we have come today plainly and respectfully that this must all be changed." Whether Alexander actually stated his case with such tact is unknown, but he demanded the respect of their rights as prisoners of war. "If the outrages which I have enumerated are not stopped," the Colonel boldly continued, "we will attack the garrison – no matter its strength & know that we can capture it & will not answer for the fate of the troops, particularly the Negroes and their officers."⁶⁶

Major Weymouth must have felt a mixture of amusement and concern over the threat, for though the idea of a serious revolt seemed absurd, the prison population by that time outnumbered the guards five to one. He reminded the Colonel of gunboats patrolling the bay, and of the well-armed guards. "But Colonel...even if you overrun us with numbers," he assured Alexander, "it will cost you fearfully in killed & wounded. You

⁶⁵ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:384.

⁶⁶ Hathaway Recollections.

will be recaptured &...I will not answer for the consequences.” Alexander plainly stated that the men knew the consequences. “We have considered all that,” he declared. “It is as well to die in hot blood as cold blood.” The men parted, and the Colonel returned to his men and waited anxiously for the result, possibly wondering if Major Weymouth would call his bluff.⁶⁷

Administrators held inquiries concerning several of the shootings, and a subsequent reissuing of orders and operating procedures emerged. General Order No. 25, issued by Commandant Draper on May 24, 1864 clearly laid out the circumstances under which guards were permitted to fire on prisoners. Guards could justifiably shoot captives who crossed the dead line or tried to escape, violently resisted the guards, or repeatedly ignored the orders and warnings of the sentinels. In all minor offenses, the order instructed guards to take the offender into custody, rather than open fire, and escort the captive to the commander of the guard for appropriate punishment. The sentinel “will not resort to violent measures to enforce this order except where violence is attempted on himself, when he will do whatever may be necessary in self-defense,” Draper concluded.⁶⁸ A short time after the issuance of Order No. 25, administrators removed black patrols from the interior of the stockade, though they still continued to walk a beat around the stockade walls. The withdrawal proved only temporary, however, and by 1865 black troops once again made the rounds inside the pen.⁶⁹

In general, the behavior of the guards at Point Lookout was not nearly as bad as many Confederates asserted. Of the diaries and post-war recollections used in this study that

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:165-166.

⁶⁹ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865; Hathaway Recollections; Blue, 278.

insist prisoner shootings were a common occurrence, all have an ulterior motive of trying to prove Northern camps were worse than those in the South, rather than recording an objective account of life at the Point. There is no doubt shootings occurred, some justified, and others more questionable. Temperamental stockade commanders, such as Captain Sides, could make life difficult for the prisoners, while others, like Provost Marshal A. G. Brady, exhibited a more fair and humane treatment of the captives.⁷⁰ The actions of the guards, as well, in large part depended of the personality of the sentinel on the beat. Some fired first, and asked questions later, while others went out of their way to warn an offender of his potentially lethal error.

According to inquiries in official records, there is some truth to the Confederate claim that black soldiers fired on Confederates more frequently, and were more erratic in hitting their mark, than the other guards. It must be taken into account, however, that many shootings resulted from provocative actions on the part of Confederates with little respect for their colored guard, and the general inexperience of the ex-slaves as soldiers. Most prisoners simply did not give blacks fair credit. African-American sentinels were instrumental in breaking up a ring of thieves known as “tent cutters” who had plagued the camp for months. The name derived from the criminals’ method of cutting a hole in a captive’s tent at night, quietly robbing the victim while he slept. After apprehension, the guards forced the men to march back and forth through the camp, wearing barrel shirts with a placard that read, “tent cutters.”⁷¹ Further, after a rash of shootings, and complaints by prisoners, the administration issued stringent orders outlining the

⁷⁰ Meade, 13; Speer, 189.

⁷¹ Speer, 192.

circumstances under which guards could and could not fire on a captive. At no point did officials encourage guards to shoot prisoners unprovoked.

By the summer of 1864, Confederates interred at Point Lookout would have much more to be concerned with than random bullets and accidental shootings. As rumors about the alleged intentional mistreatment, starvation, and torture of Union prisoners of war in Southern prisons began to filter to the North, many officials, especially Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Commissary General Hoffman, clamored for retaliatory measures against Confederate captives. Subsequently, administrators cut the amounts of food, clothing, and other necessities available to the prisoners, dramatically increasing their hardships. The food at the Point, never of the best quality or greatest amounts, was reduced even further, and clothing made even more difficult to procure. By order of Colonel Hoffman, the camp administration outlawed food parcels from outside parties, and ordered the sutler shop closed, thereby blocking a major source of sustenance for captives. Prisoners did not starve, but were left in a perpetual state of hunger. They suffered from malnutrition, particularly scurvy, and became more susceptible to infectious diseases. The last year of the war would be the worst for prisoners on both sides.

Chapter Four

“May This Suffering Be Upon Those Who Inflict It.”

By mid-1863, war had raged across the United States for two years, resulting in hundreds of thousands of casualties in Northern and Southern armies. Tens of thousands of others fell into enemy hands as prisoners of war, doomed to linger in squalid prison camps and stockades after the breakdown of the exchange cartel. Though mass exchanges of soldiers stopped completely by the summer of 1864, special circumstances allowed commanders in the field to arrange small-scale exchanges upon their own responsibility. Several mercy exchanges were arranged during this time as well, allowing weak and invalid prisoners, who obviously posed no threat, to be sent back to their own lines. Both sides took advantage of the arrangements, and Confederate authorities especially jumped at the opportunity of ridding their nation of Union soldiers who only exacerbated the already precarious food and supply situation.¹

Out of the good will measures, however, serious problems ensued, followed by bitter denunciations. Naturally, most soldiers returning to their lines were, by necessity and in accordance with agreements, men too ill to return to the front and whom authorities felt stood a better chance of recovery at home. Still, Union authorities and doctors who met the first shipments of Northern prisoners were shocked at what they saw. Men sent North from places like Bell Isle in Richmond resembled living corpses, with sunken eyes and bones grotesquely protruding underneath pale skin. Deprived of a sufficient diet, wracked by scurvy, diarrhea, and a multitude of the diseases, soldiers slowly wasted

¹ Eugene Marvin Thomas, “Prisoner of War Exchange During the American Civil War.” (Ph. D. Dissertation: Auburn University, Alabama, 1976), 212-215.

away, and men sometimes returned weighing less than ninety pounds. Escapees from Southern prisons expounded on the tales of horror, and rumors drifted north concerning a massive prison stockade in central Georgia, near Andersonville Station, where the prison administration supposedly carried out a policy of extermination against Union captives. The condition of many of the returning prisoners from other camps lent credence to the otherwise unbelievable accounts of murder, torture, and intentional starvation.²

In his work, *Civil War Prisons*, William Hesseltine convincingly proved in the 1930's that at no time during the conflict did Confederate authorities ever enact such a policy of extermination. Soldiers starved because of inept administrators, a decaying bureaucracy no longer able to ship supplies, a shattered transportation system, and finally, because supplies simply were not available. Authorities in Richmond, with little food available, understandably showed a greater concern toward feeding their own army than the captured enemy. The Lincoln administration, as well as civilians throughout the North, were unable, or unwilling, to examine the facts objectively. Major newspapers printed exaggerated stories, proliferating the rumors of extermination, while former captives also contributed to the propaganda, embellishing their accounts of captivity. Outraged citizens, many of whom had relatives in the war, accused the government of coddling rebel captives, of providing them with too much food and clothing and allowing them to live a life of luxury and relaxation behind the lines while Northern soldiers withered in Southern prison camps. The administration understood the volatile nature of the issue, and when Commissary General of Prisoners William Hoffman requested rations and clothing to Confederate captives be cut in retaliation, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton

² Ibid, 200; 209-211.

eagerly approved the measure. Rations were gradually reduced, eventually matching those given to Confederate soldiers in the field by their own army, which was substantially less than their Union counterparts. Consequently, the quality of living at Point Lookout, as well as prisons everywhere, declined markedly in the last year of the war.³

Initially, cutting prisoner rations had more to do with saving money than retaliation. In mid-1862, Colonel Hoffman struck upon the idea of creating a government “prison fund.” Essentially, the savings from money allocated for prisoner use was put back into the fund, and all future expenditures came from this pooled source of revenue. For Hoffman, a military bureaucrat and martinet, the fund became an obsession. He strove to save the government money, frequently to the detriment of the prisoners. The primary source of revenue for the fund came from the reduction of prisoner rations. The more cuts in food, the more savings accrued. Supposedly, money saved was to be used for the benefit of the prisoners to construct barracks, hospitals, and buy other necessary supplies. In reality, the Commissary-General kept a tight grip on the purse strings, doling out funds grudgingly, at best.⁴

Hoffman made the first round of reductions in April 1864, though the order only slightly reduced the distributed ration, cutting two ounces of hardtack, two ounces of pork, or six ounces of beef. For those who questioned the advisability of the cuts, he claimed the prisoners wasted food, and that far too much was being issued to men leading such sedentary lives. As proof Hoffman collected letters from several of his

³ William Best Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology*. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1930), 1-4.

⁴ Benton McAdams. *Rebels at Rock Island: The Story of a Civil War Prison*. (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 9.

commandants, written by prisoners to friends and family, which insisted all prisoners had to do all day was eat and sleep, and that their accommodations were adequate. To use the letters as a general description of the prison situation was rather dubious, but it gave sufficient grounds for the cuts to begin. Throughout 1862 and 1863, ration cuts proved minimal, and most reductions occurred as a punishment for escape attempts or other violations. For the most part, Hoffman left the question of how much the ration should be reduced to the commandant in charge of a particular prison. He wasted no time, however, in reprimanding those commanders who refused to comply or did not reduce rations enough and left his fund short-changed.⁵

By June 1864, however, retaliation became another motive for cuts, though Hoffman was still more concerned with conserving funds than countering Confederate policies towards Union captives. After seeing the deplorable conditions of returned Northern prisoners, and still hearing reports of the pampered conditions of rebel captives who continued to waste food, the administration responded. On May 10, 1864, L.C. Skinner, the commandant of Camp Douglas in Chicago, wrote to Hoffman with a proposed ration cut. He suggested a further reduction of the bread and vegetable ration, along with the outlawing of candles, as they served no purpose for the prisoners "except to be used in tunneling or in studying up some other means of escape." Hoffman sent the suggestion to Stanton, who endorsed the statement. General-in-Chief Henry Halleck agreed, and ordered even further cuts than what Skinner originally suggested, insisting the rations should equal those given by the Confederate authorities to their troops in the field. Surgeons agreed the reductions would not endanger the health of the prisoners, except for

⁵ Ibid, 94-95.

those in the hospitals. From then on, prisoners received only 10 ounces of pork, or 14 ounces of beef, and no candles.⁶

The situation rapidly deteriorated throughout the summer as rumors of Andersonville and the conditions there became more prevalent. The final measure came with a report issued by Governor John Brough of Ohio in the summer of 1864, complaining of prisoner access to sutlers in Camp Chase that allowed the Confederates to live a life of luxury in comparison to Union captives in the South.⁷ When the report reached Washington, Hoffman took action, claiming he had never approved of sutlers in camp, and sought to remove them once and for all.⁸ Earlier, in December 1863, the Federal government closed down camp sutlers in response to alleged mistreatment of Union prisoners held in Richmond. Once it was ascertained that conditions had improved, though, administrators allowed the sutlers to return in February 1864.⁹ This time, the order was permanent. On August 10, Hoffman released a circular preventing sutlers from selling any kind of foodstuffs to the prisoners. Only tobacco, sewing supplies, soap, and other hygienic supplies could be procured. Hoffman did not stop there, however. He also cut the clothing allowance, instructing camp commandants to give each captive no more than one blanket, and ensured that clothing was of the poorest quality, usually rejected for use by the army. Unless absolutely destitute, a captive had a difficult time obtaining new clothes. Finally, at Point Lookout and elsewhere, Hoffman no longer allowed prisoners to receive food and supplies from family and friends, unless the captive was sick.¹⁰

⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

⁷ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:528.

⁸ *Ibid*, 531.

⁹ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:774.

¹⁰ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:573-574.

Ostensibly, Hoffman directed the June cut in rations to curb the wasting of food and supplies by prisoners. The August 10 order served no other purpose but vengeance. With the reality of Andersonville confirmed, the administration reacted accordingly, and the captives at Point Lookout soon felt the ramifications of the political decisions. With packages from family outlawed, the import of tobacco, money, and food stopped, depriving many prisoners of their source of income in the prison economy. Even if they had money, however, the closing of the camp sutler prevented them from spending any of it. Men now depended solely on the government issued ration that two months earlier had been cut by one third.

A striking difference can be found in the prisoner diaries and letters written in 1863 and the first half of 1864, compared to those written after the retaliation. Robert Bingham, a captain in the 44th North Carolina Infantry, who arrived in February 1864, expressed satisfaction at the state of the camp, and found the arrangements much better than the prison on Johnson's Island in Ohio, from where he had been transferred.¹¹ Generally, prisoner received two meals a day, enough to keep most men satisfied, though the quality of the food was sometimes suspect. If still unfulfilled, most captives could count on packages from home or purchases from the camp sutler to supplement their diet. This barely tolerable situation changed noticeably in the summer of 1864. Francis Boyle described the shrinking portions of food distributed in June of that year:

The manner in which the rations of prisoners are managed here is curious and must redound to the benefit of somebody very extensively. The first item after our arrival was the entire withdrawal of the coffee & sugar rations. Next the quantity of meat was reduced one-third. Then, molasses till this time issued tri-weekly disappeared from the festive scene. Then as the only thing left to operate on, the loaves one of which was issued to each man daily, began to grow smaller...till they increased perceptibly, and henceforth *two* men were to divide

¹¹ Robert Bingham, 14 February 1864, Robert Bingham Diary, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

each loaf instead of each holding undisputed right thereto. This ingenious *dodge* in the art of subdivision was nevertheless to patent to pass undiscovered, for as we had anticipated the new edition began to show the same propensity for *shrinking* that the original had done.¹²

The perceptive Boyle was correct in his deductions. The management of the prison rations did directly benefit someone, namely Hoffman and his prison fund. As the cuts continued, hunger reigned, and scenes many prisoners looked upon earlier with derision and disgust, now became common and even acceptable. Rats, seagulls, dogs, cats, and any other animal unlucky enough to fall into the hands of a hungry rebel often wound up in a frying pan or roasting on a spit. "A man went by with a large rat and said he was going to eat him," James Meade entered in his diary on April 9, 1865. "It is a positive fact rats are eaten here constantly. Rations are so short that they will scarcely feed a child, much less a man."¹³ Jonathan Stevens concurred. "Rats – did you ever eat one," he wrote in his memoirs. "I have not seen a rat in 30 years that I did not think of Point Lookout."¹⁴

Like hounds flushing a fox from the bushes, men eagerly joined together to hunt down the rodents. Through trial and error, they developed a system that allowed them to net dozens of rats at a time. The cookhouses sat upon strips of lumber approximately four inches in diameter, leaving a small space underneath where the creatures swarmed. An empty space of thirty to forty feet divided each house, and since prisoners were not supposed to congregate in these areas, tall weeds and grass sprouted unimpeded. Towards evening, hundreds of rats in search of food regularly emerged from holes in the

¹² Francis Atherton Boyle. "The Prison Diary of Francis Atherton Boyle," Mary Lindsay Thornton, ed. *The North Carolina Historical Review*.

¹³ James T. Meade. *Journal of Prison Life*. (Torrington, CT: Rainbow Press, 1987), 7.

¹⁴ Jonathan W. Stevens. *Reminiscences of the Civil War*. (Hillsboro, TX: Hillsboro Mirror Print, 1902), 145.

ground on the sides of the cookhouses where they had burrowed underneath, and the vegetated plots literally crawled with the vermin. A group of men with sticks stealthily positioned themselves in front of the holes, while another captive herded the rats through the weeds from the other side. As the creatures darted for their burrows, the carnage commenced. "...a dozen – twenty, maybe fifty would be killed," remembered Stevens. "They would gather up the game, throw them into a barrel and retire and in five minutes they [rats] would be out as thick as ever again; and I have seen this thing continue until a barrel would be filled."¹⁵

The next morning, the act of "ratting" began in earnest. Men split up cracker boxes for fuel, improvised frying pans from a canteen half, and scrounged for extra grease from the cookhouse. Generally, a group of five to eight men squatted around the fire, some skinning, some frying, and others eating. The process continued until they consumed the entire catch. "There were not many who would eat rats," concluded Stevens, "but there were enough of them to make it very unhealthy for the rodents."¹⁶

Desperate prisoners, those on the prison economic pecking order who had to depend on issued rations, did what they could to get by. Rumors abounded of captives eating dogs. One incident allegedly involved a member of the Louisiana "wharf rats," the same group responsible for stealing knapsacks from the black guards, though nothing conclusive can be located in prisoner diaries or letters.¹⁷ Regardless, it is probable some prisoners did manage to capture dogs, though to whom they belonged is a mystery. Most likely they accompanied the sutler or other civilian employees into the camp. There is

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 145-146.

¹⁷ Ibid, 146.

“...and his whole arm was one mass to all appearances of coagulated blood.” An artery had been cut, and the wounded captive later died.²⁰ At the end of May or the beginning of June, yet another altercation occurred, leaving a man dead after being stabbed in the chest. Again, on June 1, a major fight broke out on one of thoroughfares through the camp, though no fatalities were reported. The cause of all of these incidents turned out to be arguments over food and accusations of bread stealing. “These things tell of *hungry* mouths,” wrote one prisoner to his wife. “Sad commentaries on prison fare.”²¹

With ration cuts and the corresponding drop in nutrients, coupled with chronic overcrowding – over 10,000 captives were held at the Point by the end of 1864 - prisoners almost inevitably became more susceptible to infections and other maladies. Bad water continued to remain a problem, resulting in chronic diarrhea among the captives. Fevers and pneumonia also took a toll on the population, and scurvy again made an appearance, though prisoners tried to combat its effects with doses of vinegar. Finally, several smallpox patients still occupied the small hospital built specifically for that purpose just north of the main camp. By June 1864, prison clerks listed over 1,400 prisoners on the sick rolls, stretching to the limit the available space in the prison hospital and Hammond General Hospital. The number of dead continued to increase, as well. From June 1863 until May 1864, approximately 739 prisoners died in captivity, producing a mortality rate of 5.85%. After June, however, the death rate increased dramatically, jumping from twenty-four deaths for the month of May, to 105 by the end of the next month. After the retaliation, from June 1864 until the camp closed in June

²⁰ Ibid, 21.

²¹ William H. Haigh to wife [Kate], 1 June 1865, William H. Haigh Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

1865, at least 2,221 more captives died according to the official rosters. Even taking into account the increased population, which exceeded 20,000 Confederates in the month of May 1865, and the correspondingly increasing number of deaths, the mortality rate still rose to almost 12%, doubling the rate of the previous year.²²

James H. Thompson, chief surgeon at the prison, realized the danger to the welfare of the prisoners, and outlined the basic problems in a letter to his superiors on June 23, 1864. Upon learning of the imminent transfer of even more prisoners to the post, he wrote, "I...respectfully call the attention of the commanding officer to the already crowded condition of the prisoners or war camp at this post, and as sanitary officer of the camp...respectfully protest against the reception of additional numbers of prisoners, there being now fully 14,000 prisoners within the camp..." Thompson's protests were three-fold. First, the limited amount of space available at the Point was not conducive to a large population. Secondly, the poor quality of the water was having a detrimental effect on the health of captives, and repeated water analysis tests had already shown several of the wells to be unfit for use. To this fact, he contributed the huge increase in disease and death for the prior month. Finally, though administrators ensured thorough and excellent policing of the camp, the surgeon feared further overcrowding would lead to an unavoidable outbreak and epidemic of some disease that would affect not only the prisoners, but all inhabitants of Point Lookout.²³ Thompson pleaded to no avail, as the transport ships continued to arrive with more prisoners. Beginning in June 1864, however, the camp administration took action to relieve some of the overcrowding. All captive officers were sent from the pen to nearby Fort Delaware that summer, clearing

²² *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:991-1002.

²³ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:399-400.

their ten-acre section of the camp for use by the enlisted men.²⁴ With the continual flow of new captives into the prison, the undertaking proved to be nothing more than a stopgap measure.

While administrators and military officials quibbled back and forth over exchange problems and retaliatory policies, prisoners of war at Point Lookout dealt with the situation as best they could. To take their mind off a steady, and significantly reduced, diet of boiled mackerel, stale bread, and weak soup, as well as poor shelter, ragged clothing, and disease, captives organized a number of activities and social organizations. Members of the Masonic order established regular meetings, and those involved had a distinct advantage over those outside the circle. From receiving help while en route to the Point, to gaining extra rations while inside, members of the Masons found access to areas blocked to others. William Haigh, awaiting transport to the Point, found help from an unlikely source. "Glad enough were we to get anything to eat," he wrote to his wife, "and thanks to the Masonic order, I found friends among my enemies. I shall ever remember with grateful heart Capt Wm. S. Marble 7th Conn. Vols, and Rev M. Eaton Chaplain of the same Reg."²⁵ Leeland Hathaway recalled how a member of his mess, an affiliate of the organization, managed to get extra medicine from the hospital for his entire squad through a rebel surgeon, who also claimed status as a brother Mason.²⁶ Another prisoner, E.H. Andrews, wrote to his sister in October 1864, expressing the hardships of prison life and his desire to go home. "Please say to those influential friends

²⁴ Ibid, 389.

²⁵ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

²⁶ Leeland Hathaway, Leeland Hathaway Recollections, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

that I can pledge them the word of a Master Mason for good faith for anything they may do for me," he wrote.²⁷

Prisoners eventually established a school, as well, making use of an empty cookhouse for the purpose. A Professor Morgan from William and Mary, captured while fighting for the Confederacy, opened the schoolhouse in the spring of 1864, and by July had well over 1,200 men in attendance. Men in the prison, as well as benevolent organizations in the North, collected books, and shortly thereafter a library was also available to captives. "Much good is done by means of the School and Prof. Morgan deserves the greatest credit for his untiring exertions in its behalf and management," wrote Joseph Kern.²⁸

Besides teaching, Professor Morgan also organized a religious service every evening in front of the schoolhouse, which proved to be the exception in camp. Though the position of camp chaplain existed, and each prisoner division in turn also had a chaplain, normal conveyance of prayer throughout the pen was through street preaching.²⁹ Some prisoners were not impressed with the arrangement. "With the exception of the Romanist Church, none other seems to pay any attention to the prisoners," remembered one captive. "The religious world here is a barren wilderness, with that exception... It is true there is a kind of street preaching all over Camp, but how ridiculously are the scriptures expounded."³⁰ Others refused to attend on political grounds. Early in the camp's existence, Hoffman issued an order banning ministers and priests from the civilian sector known to have Southern sympathies.³¹ As a result, only preachers with definite Union

²⁷ E.H. Andrews to sister, 28 October 1864, William P. McCorkle Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

²⁸ Joseph Kern, 14 July 1864, Joseph Kern Diary, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Haigh to wife, 1 June 1865.

³¹ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:284, 363.

sympathies were permitted to hold “official” services, and their bias generally showed in their sermons as they spoke of the evils of slavery and sins of secessionism. Robert Bingham, a Confederate prisoner in Hammond Hospital, attended one of the sermons. “I was not pleased with the experiment,” he wrote. “I don’t want to hear any body preach that does not pray square that God will bless the Confederacy - & drive the Yankees out of it...”³² Regardless, if prisoners were willing to forego some ceremony, they could with relative ease find someplace in camp to attend a religious service held by their own men.

Perhaps the most important factor in enduring prison life was how well a captive retained a sense of humor about his circumstances. Fortunately for the captives, pranksters and good-natured bantering were a few of the things not in short supply at the prison. “Hard jokes are told of every state,” wrote William Haigh of North Carolina, “and my good old State comes in for her share.” A common wisecrack concerned a visiting old lady, supposedly a relative of one of the soldiers, and her conversation with a captive. “Mister, are you from North Carolina?” asked the lady. “No Ma—m (drawled out the fellow) I’s been sick, wot makes me look so ugly.” Another incident concerned the black guards, who apparently had a habit of clearing their weapons after every change of shift in the morning by firing them into the air. At the sound, veteran soldiers captured in the trenches around Richmond always gave the precautionary cry to their fellow captives to “lie down.” One morning, some clownish Confederate varied the call slightly, drolly yelling out, “Sit down, children, daddy’s come home drunk again,” and then mimicked the distressed voice of a woman. Even at night, the antics continued. Despite

³² Robert Bingham Diary, 28 February 1864.

the no-talking policy, rebels adept at imitating the calls of birds, cats, dogs, and a variety of other animals could be heard showcasing their talent throughout the night, irritating guards and delighting fellow captives. “The truth is,” asserted Haigh, “that if it were not for such men as these here, I should die of the blues.”³³

Many captives simply reached the limits of their endurance, however, and because of disease, depression, or a variety of other factors, could hold out no longer. With the exchange stopped, men who wanted to be released took the Oath of Allegiance to the United States, or “Hoffman’s bitters,” as the prisoners coined it. Guards separated those who took the Oath from the rest of the prison population, as there was a great deal of resentment against them for “selling out,” particularly early on when a Confederate victory still seemed feasible. “Hundreds did it,” wrote one prisoner of those captives who signed the Oath before Lee’s surrender, “but that did not lessen the crime of desertion of which they were guilty.”³⁴ Even after taking the oath, however, a substantial delay might await the captives. By enlisting in the United States Army or Navy, prisoners gained immediate release, and thousands of them took advantage of the opportunity during the two years of the prison’s existence. These “Galvanized Yankees” resided in a camp north of the main stockade, where officials organized them into their respective units. Wisely, regulations prohibited the men from being sent into combat where they might encounter family, friends, or members of their previous regiments on the battlefield. Instead, officials sent the battalions to frontier outposts west of the Mississippi, far removed from any serious action.³⁵

³³ Haigh to wife, 1 June 1865.

³⁴ Ibid, 24 May 1865.

³⁵ Edwin Beitzell. *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*. (Leonardtown, MD: St. Mary’s Historical Society, 1983). 112.

In the last year of the war, from January to April 1865, the numbers of those wanting to take the oath dramatically increased as the fortunes turned against General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. Many captives gambled on the outcome of the war, trying to sift through the “camp grape” and rumors to determine the status of the Southern cause before making the decision to proclaim their loyalty to the Federal government.³⁶ The task proved difficult, as prisoner diaries suggest. On February 25, 1864 Robert Bingham reported hearing that General William T. Sherman had been badly beaten, had lost 10,000 men, and was in the process of retreating north.³⁷ On May 12, Charles Warren Hutt wrote in his diary, “we heard that Grant is thrashed,” but illustrated the crux of the problem of learning accurate information in the next sentence – “We are not allowed to receive any papers.”³⁸ Rumors of exchange were perhaps the most insidious and damaging to a prisoner’s mental health, as the eternal hope of a possible exchange inevitably gave way to the depressive reality that the cartel was still defunct. No sooner did one rumor of exchange die down than a new one made the rounds through the prison. Many captives grew disgusted and gave up hope altogether.

Following the transfer of all officers from the camp to Fort Delaware in the summer of 1864, large groups of enlisted men also were sent out of the prison and put aboard waiting steamships. Again, rumors of exchange filled the air, but those who were “exchanged” were sorely disappointed to discover their true destination – a new prison converted from a former Union training barracks in Elmira, New York.³⁹ Those who remained behind at Point Lookout likely could not have known how fortunate they were

³⁶ Haigh to wife, 24 May 1865.

³⁷ Robert Bingham Diary, 25 February 1864.

³⁸ Beitzell, “The Diary of Charles Warren Hutt,” 73.

³⁹ *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:424.

not to have been transferred, for with a 24 percent mortality rate, “Helmira” prison gained notoriety as the deadliest camp in the North.⁴⁰ The transfers produced the desired effect, however. By August, two months after Surgeon Thompson issued his statement against holding any more captives at the Point, the population slowly reached manageable limits. In July 1864, over 14,000 prisoners milled about in the stockade. By September, that number had been reduced by nearly half – just over 8,000 men remained. For the next six months, until April 1865, the population remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 10,000 and 12,000 captives.⁴¹ Crowded conditions prevailed, but the numbers fell reasonably close to the designated maximum capacity of the stockade.

Signs of a possible exchange emerged at the end of September 1864. By order of Colonel Hoffman, Brigadier-General James Barnes, the fourth and last commander of Point Lookout, instructed his surgeons to assemble 500 of the most disabled men in camp for transport to City Point, Virginia from where they would be sent to their own lines. In order to qualify for release, the prisoners, in the opinion of the selecting board of surgeons, were those men “able for transportation and who will not be able for active duty for thirty or more days...”⁴² Those in charge apparently did not do a thorough job of screening applicants for exchange. As a letter from General Benjamin Butler to Colonel Hoffman just days later suggested, the effects of transportation on weakened prisoners were potentially lethal. “Nearly 30 died out of the 500 in the last load. Instruct

⁴⁰ Michael P. Gray. *The Business of Captivity: Elmira and Its Civil War Prison*. (Kent and London: The Kent State University Press, 2001), 153.

⁴¹ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:991-1002.

⁴² *OR*, Ser. 2, 7:858-860.

the surgeons to send none who are in that condition," he warned. "The occurrence does not speak well either for the Government or its officials."⁴³

The September transfer was typical of the mercy exchanges that had occurred throughout the war. Healthy captives would have to wait until February 1865 for the exchange process to begin in earnest once again. After a year of dispute and bickering that left tens of thousands of prisoners of war stranded throughout the torn country, both sides finally agreed on terms for the resumption of the exchange cartel. On February 16, Jonathan Mulford, the Federal Assistant Agent for Exchange, wrote to Robert Ould, his Confederate counterpart, informing him of General Grant's acceptance of the rebel terms, and to expect the delivery of Confederate captives at a rate of between 3,000 and 5,000 weekly.⁴⁴ At Point Lookout, administrators shipped out for exchange over 4,000 prisoners as soon as the cartel resumed, and 3,000 more followed in March 1865, leaving the population at just over 11,000 men.⁴⁵ Even before officials signed the cartel agreement, Hoffman had already arranged for all prisoners from the western states (Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana) held in captivity throughout the North to be collected at Point Lookout for a pending exchange.⁴⁶ Men from these states at the prison were released first, followed by those captured at Gettysburg in July 1863. Officials released captives by order of their incarceration, and continued to do so until April, after which exchanges slowed considerably.⁴⁷

⁴³ *Ibid*, 872.

⁴⁴ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:238.

⁴⁵ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:1000-1001.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 173.

⁴⁷ Bartlett Yancey Malone, 4, 17 February 1865, Bartlett Yancey Malone Diary, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The defeat and surrender of General Lee at Appomattox on April 9, 1865 led to a new policy concerning the exchange of prisoners. All captives who had registered to take the oath before Lee's surrender would be exchanged immediately, as well as prisoners arriving from western states. Those who waited until afterwards or were recently captured would not be given consideration for exchange until the early parolees had been shipped out.⁴⁸ Consequently, a majority of prisoners in the camp remained until June. To make matters worse, after the defeat of the Confederacy in April, thousands more prisoners poured into the stockade once again, sending the number of captives skyrocketing from 11,332 in March, to over 20,000 by the end of April, the largest number ever held at one time by any prison in the North.⁴⁹ While the populations of other prisons dropped markedly toward the end of the war, Point Lookout, because of its size and proximity to the Confederacy, served in a dual capacity as prison and exchange depot, a fact that caused its number to double *after* the conflict ended.

For many prisoners captured in the last months of the conflict, the outcome of the war was a foregone conclusion. It seemed only a question of when the rebel government would falter. Homesick and weary of war, prisoner patriotism quickly gave way to apathy in the confines of the stockade. The month of April 1865 was particularly tumultuous for the Point Lookout captives. Throughout the beginning of the month, prisoners listened intently to rumors concerning the status of Lee's army until finally, on April 10, prison officials confirmed the Confederacy had fallen. At the Point, Federal soldiers fired a two hundred gun salute to celebrate the event, while bands played and troops rejoiced. Even some of the prisoners joined in the jubilee. James Meade recorded

⁴⁸ Meade, 20-21.

⁴⁹ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:986-1004.

the spectacle in his diary. "I am sorry to say that some of our men appeared as much rejoiced as the Yanks," he disparagingly wrote.⁵⁰ Predictably, a rush of prisoners applied to take the oath upon confirmation of Lee's capture, feeling the cause to be lost. Major A.G. Brady, the provost marshal, rode through the camp, informing the prisoners of their options. "The Rebellion is crushed, boys, and you need not mind taking the oath," he stated.⁵¹

With the war all but over, prisoners looked with eagerness to being exchanged and heading home to friends and family. Their enthusiasm turned to uncertainty several days later, however. "We have had many days of anxiety and unhappiness here," wrote William Haigh.

But those that succeeded the 14th of April the night of the horrible and infamous assassination of Lincoln were the most oppressively so. Adding to the gloom which then surrounded us as prisoners, came upon all reflecting minds the thought, even the assurance that the prisoners had lost their best friend. That we were to pass through new & to us unknown difficulties...and were at the mercy of a fanatical party goaded to madness by the daring & bloody murder of their heart's idol. We had assurances too of a speedy release under Mr. Lincoln, and his death dashed all hope, & spread a pall of gloom & despondency over the Camp.⁵²

Not all captives agreed with Haigh's assessment of the situation. One rebel captive, after being informed of the assassination by a guard, broke into laughter. According to James Meade, the guard quickly beat the untactful Confederate to his knees.⁵³ Regardless of their feelings toward Lincoln, most prisoners felt a general uneasiness about how the guards would react to them, and if any retaliatory measures would be taken. Prisoner William Day remembered a guard running into the stockade on April 15

⁵⁰ Meade, 7.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Haigh to wife, 27 May 1865.

⁵³ Meade, 10.

and placing a large broadside announcing Lincoln's death on the bulletin board. "The Federal soldiers were wild with excitement," he recalled, "and a great many of them being Negro soldiers, we did not know what they might do. There were 21 thousand prisoners in the camp, completely at the mercy of the bayonet...I could not help feeling uneasy for several days." The guards wore black mourning badges on their sleeves, marched out by regiments and fired volleys over the bay. The artillery at the Point fired at intervals for three days, and on the third day fired once every minute from sunrise to sunset.⁵⁴ To the prisoners' relief, no measures of vengeance were taken against them when the commotion died down.

For the next two months, 20,000 Confederate captives, remnants of an army and a cause that no longer existed, lingered in a stockade on the Maryland shoreline, waiting to return home. Hope for a Southern nation was gone, and all understood the fact. Among some captives, resentment grew against the people who caused the war. "Surely we prisoners have paid dearly for the Southern rights party," William Haigh wrote bitterly. "I think of many at home now, who were belligerent fire eaters before the war, but who encased their precious carcasses in some safe bomb proof position and only know the scent of gun powder from having used a gun in a squirrel hunt. These men urged *my* going – I'll remember them kindly hereafter."⁵⁵ While prisoners contemplated the fate of their country and what kind of life they would be returning to when released, they also had to deal with the immediate fact they were still prisoners of war. Scanty rations continued throughout the months of May and June, and almost 2,000 sick resided in the

⁵⁴ William Albertus Day, W.A. Day Papers and Scrapbook, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁵⁵ Haigh to wife, 1 June 1865.

hospitals.⁵⁶ Beef, pork, codfish, soup, bread, and coffee made up the daily fare, but often arrived spoiled and in insufficient amounts to combat perpetual hunger. “Getting weaker and poorer every day,” one captive wrote in his diary on June 13. “If they do not make haste and give us some pork, we will starve.”⁵⁷ It was during these last few months the most needless deaths occurred. The Confederacy stood defeated, its armies disbanded, yet at Point Lookout, prisoners continued to die: 203 in April, 324 in May, and 256 in June. The largest number of deaths in one month occurred after the end of the conflict.⁵⁸

Finally, in the beginning of June, the administration commenced paroling prisoners in alphabetical order. When news of the releases reached the general population, a cheer rolled through the camp, starting by the gates and slowly spreading throughout the stockade.⁵⁹ By the end of the month, over 18,000 captives were paroled and released back to their own lines after being administered the oath of allegiance.⁶⁰ On July 5, Brevet Brigadier General Hoffman wrote to General Grant informing him that except for a few sick left behind in the hospital, all prisoners had been cleared from Point Lookout.⁶¹ One month later, on August 2, Hoffman again wrote to his superiors, stating simply and to the point, “I have the honor to report that the following-named prison stations have been vacated and the buildings may now be disposed of as may best promote the interests of the service, viz: Depot at Elmira, N.Y.; depot on Hart’s Island, N.Y.; depot at Point Lookout...”⁶²

⁵⁶ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:1001-1002.

⁵⁷ Meade, 31.

⁵⁸ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:1002.

⁵⁹ Meade, 30.

⁶⁰ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:1002.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 700-701.

⁶² *Ibid*, 714.

Conclusion

Disease, Death, and Heartbreak

According to the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, 52,264 prisoners passed through the gates of Point Lookout by the time of its closure in July 1865. Of this number, only fifty successfully escaped, and the total number of dead stood at 2,950.¹ In reality, the true number may never be known, and is likely to be significantly higher than official documents suggest. A year after the war, in July 1866, the Federal government began dismantling the stockade, and in preparation for the establishment of a national cemetery, sent an agent of the Quartermaster Department to survey the various burial plots, determine the number of dead, and to separate the known from the unknown. The task proved difficult, as many of the identifying headboards had been buried by sand, obstructed by weeds, or simply blown away. After much work, the agent found sixty-three bodies buried around the smallpox hospital, and 2,704 more buried in two other Confederate graveyards near the site of the pen. Out of the total 2,767 counted, seventy were labeled as “unknown.”²

The figure changed again with the establishment of a national cemetery in 1910 just north of the original prison location. Besides holding the remains of at least 3,000 Confederates, the one-acre plot also contained two monuments, one from the state of Maryland honoring the Southern dead, and an 85-foot Federal monument. The figures inscribed on the sides of the monuments add to the confusion. The Maryland monument,

¹ *OR*, Ser. 2, 8:991-1002.

² Edwin Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates*, (Leonardtown, MD: St. Mary's Historical Society, 1983), 115.

originally erected in 1876 at a different location and moved to the national cemetery later, records the total number of dead as 3,004, but only lists those soldiers who died from March 1, 1864 to June 30, 1865. Prior to March, 580 captives perished, and the addition of this omitted figure brings the total to 3,584 dead. The Federal monument poses a slightly varied figure. On a series of plaques around its base are listed the names of 3,384 soldiers, a number that increases by nine when the “unknowns” listed on the monument are taken into account. The total number of unknown dead, either buried in the national cemetery or in other locations throughout the area, is a mystery. The quartermaster agent sent to inventory the graveyards reported the number at seventy, and it is unclear whether these were ever identified or added to the final tally of dead.³

A final factor to take into consideration is the number of dead not listed on the monuments. As Edwin Beitzell pointed out in his study of the mortality rates, names of soldiers who died at the Point frequently do not even appear on the Federal monument. After checking the names on the plaques with prisoner rolls in the National Archives, he found dozens of names omitted from the structure. Some prisoner diaries, as well, list names of friends of who died in the camp, yet those names are nowhere to be found in the cemetery listings. While it is probable that some accounts were fabricated, it is also likely that poor record keeping by administrators simply resulted in names being lost or omitted. With the enormous number of prisoners incarcerated at Point Lookout during its two years of operation, the number of dead not added to the official roster, whether through administrative errors, or because of unknown identities or burial locations, is likely to be significant. After taking these variables into account, the actual number of

³ Ibid, 120.

Confederate prisoners lying in mass graves on the peninsula is probably closer to 4,000 men.⁴

Compared with the numbers of dead from other prisons throughout the North, Point Lookout falls within the average range – the number of dead at most other major camps varied between 2,000 and 4,000 captives. Because of its vast population, however, the prison's average *per capita* mortality rate – just over 7.5 percent - fell far below that of almost every other prison. The figure is even more pronounced when compared with the overall rate in the North of 12.5 percent, and with that of other camps – twenty-four percent at Elmira, New York, fifteen percent at Rock Island in Illinois, thirteen percent at Camp Chase in Ohio, and nine percent at Fort Delaware. The only camp to have a lower rate than Point Lookout was Johnson's Island on Lake Erie - three percent - a camp made specifically for Confederate officers.⁵ That the Point Lookout population almost doubled that of its closest rival – Rock Island – yet suffered a mortality rate of less than half of the Illinois prison, is quite an anomaly.

The relatively low mortality rates can be attributed to several factors. Located close to Confederates lines, and in an area overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Southern cause, captives at Point Lookout initially benefited from local benevolent organizations that donated food and other supplies for their use. Colonel Hoffman stopped the practice early on, however, after camp administrators discovered small digging implements concealed within a number of hams delivered by local Jesuit priests.⁶ Afterwards, even though regulations prohibited the delivery of gifts and food, locals sympathetic to the

⁴ Ibid, 121-122.

⁵ OR, Ser. 2, 8:986-1002.

⁶ Beitzell, 11.

plight of prisoners were all too happy to provide shelter, protection, and food to escapees who managed to make it outside of the prison walls and into the surrounding country.

Despite frequent changes in administration at the Point, prison officials still remained relatively responsive to prisoners needs, and unless ordered differently by their superiors – Hoffman and Stanton – they did much to improve conditions when possible. The first transports of prisoners sent to the camp from Fort Delaware carried several captives infected with smallpox, a disease known to have a thirty percent mortality rate among its victims. The danger of an epidemic among the confined Confederates in close contact with one another was very real, and Hoffman, after being alerted to the situation by General Marston, quickly wrote to the commander of Fort Delaware and ordered him to cease transport of infected prisoners. As a further precaution, administrators established a separate smallpox hospital outside the confines and well to the north of the stockade. Likewise, when Marston learned of the presence of scurvy among the prison population in early November 1863, he did not hesitate to alert Hoffman to the situation. “I have thought it might be advisable to purchase a schooner load of beets, carrots, turnips, cabbages, and the like,” he wrote, and showing an astuteness to the Commissary-General’s primary concern, reassured Hoffman that the purchase “would probably not add to the actual cost of their food.”⁷ The Colonel conceded to Marston’s request.⁸

Camp officials responded in other ways, as well. After Surgeon Thompson’s complaint about the possible ill effects of overcrowding in the summer of 1864, Hoffman took steps to remedy the situation. He ordered the transfer of all rebel officers to Fort Delaware, sent large groups of enlisted men to Elmira and other prisons, and the stockade

⁷ *OR*, Ser. 2, 6:473.

⁸ *Ibid*, 489.

was expanded by roughly ten acres after the wall between the enlisted and officer camps was torn down. The administration had mixed results dealing with camp guards and the shooting of prisoners. Most shootings resulted in some form of inquiry, but occasionally no actions appear to have been taken at all in some of the incidents. Officials were understandably concerned about the unnecessary killing of captives, and Commandant Draper issued a general order reiterating the limited circumstances under which guards could use deadly force against their charges. Still, even up to the last months of the prison's existence captives reported seemingly random shootings by sentries, indicating that camp officials had yet to create a workable system to reign in guards who tended to be trigger-happy.

Early on, camp sanitation came under scrutiny, but after the release of a critical report of camp conditions in November 1863 by W.F. Swalm, a Sanitary Commission inspector, conditions apparently improved markedly. The poor condition of the hospital, the lack of adequate sewage management, and the want of adequate clothing for prisoners were just a few of the problems singled out by the report. Inspector Swalm graphically described the condition of the men, making known his belief that the primary culprits for the poor condition of the camp were the prisoners, themselves:

Men of all ages and classes, description and hues, with various colored clothing, all huddled together, forming a motley crew, which to be a appreciated must be seen...They are ragged and dirty and very thinly clad; that is, the very great majority...The great mass are in a pitiable condition, destitute of nearly everything, which with their filthy condition, makes them really objects of commiseration...The interior of the tents are in keeping with the inmates, filthy; pieces of cracker, meat, ashes, &c., strewn around the tent, and in which they will lie. In preference to sitting on a stool they will sit upon the ground, and I have even heard their own men say that they never saw such a dirty set in their lives, fully convincing me that it is their element, and they roll into it as a hog will wallow in the mire.

As for the latrines, Swalm continued,

The sinks...are entirely neglected, and it is a perfect mystery that there is not more sickness than they have, and God knows they have enough, for they live, eat, and sleep in

their own filth. Sinks have been prepared for them, but little or no attention is paid to them, unless they should be in close proximity when they desire to answer the calls of nature...Others, again, have no particular place, but will void their excrement anywhere on the surface that is most convenient to them, heedless of the convenience of others...The men themselves complain and hope that some severe punishment, even shooting, will be the penalty to any one who will so outrage decency and lose respect due themselves...Ditches were dug [for drainage], but they are worse than useless, constantly filled with water, and afford another place to throw filth.

Swalm likened the scenario to an owner looking after his pet. The animal could not be blamed, for it instinctively wallowed in filth, which left the owner responsible for its well being. "After stating the above facts," Swalm concluded, "some might say that it is not our fault that they are in this condition...But it is our fault when they [prison administrators] neglect to enforce those sanitary rules which keep camps and inmates in a cleanly condition..." Finally, he closed his report with a scathing indictment of General Marston's administrative capability, blaming him for failing to place in charge "some one of good executive ability...who will have the camp regularly policed and severely punish any offender of the sanitary rules."⁹

The report was forwarded to Hoffman, who brought the information to the attention of General Marston.¹⁰ The Commandant fiercely denied the allegations, his pen dripping acid in a heated response. "Of the report I have to remark that one more disingenuous and false could not well have been made. It is surprising that the commission should employ agents so stupid or dishonest as the author of this report." He informed Hoffman that rations fell within the specified limits, clothing was issued as needed, that the sinks were placed over the Chesapeake Bay eliminating much of the sanitation problem, and only at night were boxes and tubs used for latrines. "The drainage," he continued sarcastically, "is not good, and will not be until some genius equally as brilliant as the

⁹ Ibid, 575-581.

¹⁰ Ibid, 585.

author of this report in question discovers a method of causing water to flow as readily from a level surface not much elevated above the surrounding seas.” Marston adamantly asserted that the captives were being treated as fairly and humanely as could be expected by a civilized people, and received adequate supplies. “That they are a dirty, lousy set is true enough, but having afforded them every facility for cleanliness the duty of the Government in this regard as respects the well men is accomplished.” The feisty general closed with a challenge to Hoffman. “Now, colonel, come and inspect the camp yourself or send some one...who knows what camp life is and who has sufficient ability to apprehend the facts and integrity enough to state them.”¹¹

Who authorized the report, and if any personal animosity existed between Swalm and Marston prior to its release is unclear, but if conditions were as bad as the commission insisted, they improved dramatically shortly after. “The police regulations here are excellent,” remarked William Haigh. “But for them I know not what would become of us.”¹² Continual access to a clean water source undoubtedly played the greatest part in reducing prison deaths. Unlike Elmira and Andersonville, Point Lookout’s proximity to the ocean allowed latrines to be constructed over the bay, preventing the formation of stagnant cesspools that acted as breeding grounds for disease. The ocean also allowed prisoners to bathe on a daily basis, another luxury denied at most other camps. While prisoners could not be ordered to clean themselves, the opportunity to do so was there, and captives overwhelmingly took advantage of the circumstances, which in turn helped prevent disease and sickness.

¹¹ Ibid, 644-645.

¹² William Haigh to wife, Kate, 24 May 1865, William Haigh Letters, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of Point Lookout, however, was not its proximity to the ocean, but its nearness to Washington and the offices of Hoffman, Stanton, Butler, and other officials. On numerous occasions, Secretary Stanton visited the stockade, and was actually accompanied by Lincoln on at least one of these visits.¹³ Likewise, Hoffman could keep close tabs on his subordinates, personally inspecting the prison so near his headquarters on a more frequent basis than some of the more remote camps. General William Butler, who acted as the official agent of prisoner exchange, and Hoffman's immediate superior, also was headquartered in the district. It was he who reprimanded the Colonel when board of inquiries dismissed shooting charges against guards a bit too quickly, and warned against sending weakened men for exchange who could not stand up to the journey. With so many high-ranking officials constantly reviewing the camp, it is likely problems that arose were remedied faster than they otherwise would have been.

Yet despite the fact conditions at Point Lookout were better than most other camps, life there was far from idyllic, as the 4,000 dead indicate. For many of the deaths, blame can be attributed directly to Colonel Hoffman and Edwin Stanton, their retaliatory policies, and an unwillingness to dispense money from the prison fund – all areas outside the control of the prison administration. Stanton's refusal to authorize the construction of barracks at the Point, forcing the captives to take shelter in flimsy canvas tents, virtually guaranteed a higher rate of disease from exposure to the elements. No other major camp in the North relied solely on tents to house inmates. Further, Hoffman's policy of limiting the amount of clothing available to prisoners – issuing only one blanket per

¹³ Joseph Kern, *Joseph Kern Diary*, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

captive and grudgingly dispensing uniforms only when the inmates were completely destitute – also compounded the problems. Of all orders and directives over which camp administrators had no control, the mandatory ration cuts harmed prisoners the most, as they did in other camps throughout the North. Again, however, prisoners at Point Lookout possessed a distinct advantage over captives in other prisons in this regard, for they could supplement their diet with whatever they might catch in the bay – fish, oysters, and crabs – even after the cuts were in effect.

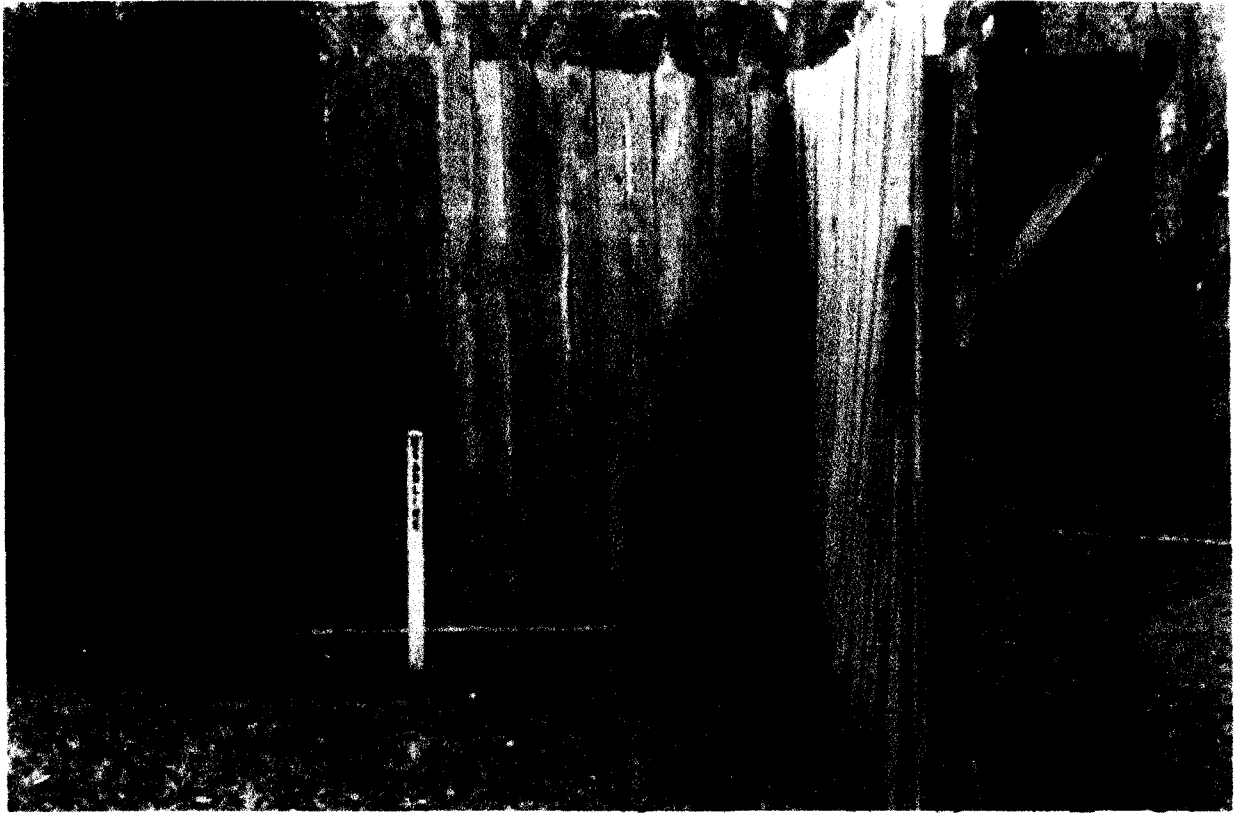
Camp administrators also deserved their share of blame. Firewood was always in short supply, predominantly because officials limited the number of work details outside the prison for fear of escapes. After the discovery of the canoes among the general population in February 1864, the administration also denied prisoners the use of cracker boxes, which many used to fortify their tents and cook their meals. Camp officials did take steps to alleviate the predominant cause of death among the captives – chronic diarrhea – but the disease, and its cause, apparently proved to be more than the bureaucracy could handle. The well water inside the stockade contained a high amount of some mineral, either copper or iron, that wreaked havoc on the drinker's intestines. It did not take inmates long to discover this, and fights commonly broke out over the usage of the few good wells in the camp. Camp surgeons also documented the harmful effects of the water, and despite the efforts of administrators to bring in thousands of barrels of fresh water by transport ship, demands could never be met, and men continued to die. In the end, Point Lookout, as with all Civil War prisons, left behind a legacy of disease, death, and heartbreak.

After the war, the Point remained deserted for several years. Tourists were understandably hesitant to use the area as a resort, while others could no longer afford to vacation there because of losses sustained in the war. After the government razed the camp and consolidated the graveyards, a William Smith reopened the Point Lookout hotel, staying in business until the facility burned down in 1878. Again, in the 1920's, another proprietor opened a new hotel at the extreme end of the Point, and an attempt was made to start a housing development. Both ventures failed, as they encountered many of the same problems that plagued the area during its prison camp days: low, sandy soil, hordes of mosquitoes, and frequent flooding and road washouts. Though the Coast Guard maintained a station at the Point beginning in 1878, not until the state of Maryland purchased 495 acres of the Point for the establishment of a park in 1962 did activity increase once again.¹⁴

Of all the original buildings, including the stockade and the giant Hammond General Hospital, only the small photographic gallery at which so many prisoners, guards, and administrators had their likenesses taken still exists. Trees fill the area where the stockade stood, preventing observers from gaining a perspective on the size of the camp, and blocking the ceaseless bay wind that tortured Confederate captives on so many winter days and nights. A partial reconstruction of the southwest corner of the stockade wall, complete with a measured dead line and plank walkway from where the guards patrolled their beat, offers the only evidence that anything of significance happened in the area. The national cemetery, containing the remains of at least 3,000 captives, is located several miles to the north. Within the gates of the acre lot, two flags – the American stars

¹⁴ Beitzell, 184-185.

and stripes and the Confederate battle flag – flank monuments dedicated by the Federal government and the state of Maryland. There are no markers, headstones, or other indicators to identify or locate individual men in the mass grave. A simple eulogy inscribed on the Maryland monument honors the dead: “At the call of Patriotism and duty they encountered the perils of the field, endured the trials of a Prison, and were faithful even unto death.”



Reconstruction of the stockade walls and guard walkways. Notice the white post marking the deadline (photos by the author, January 2002).

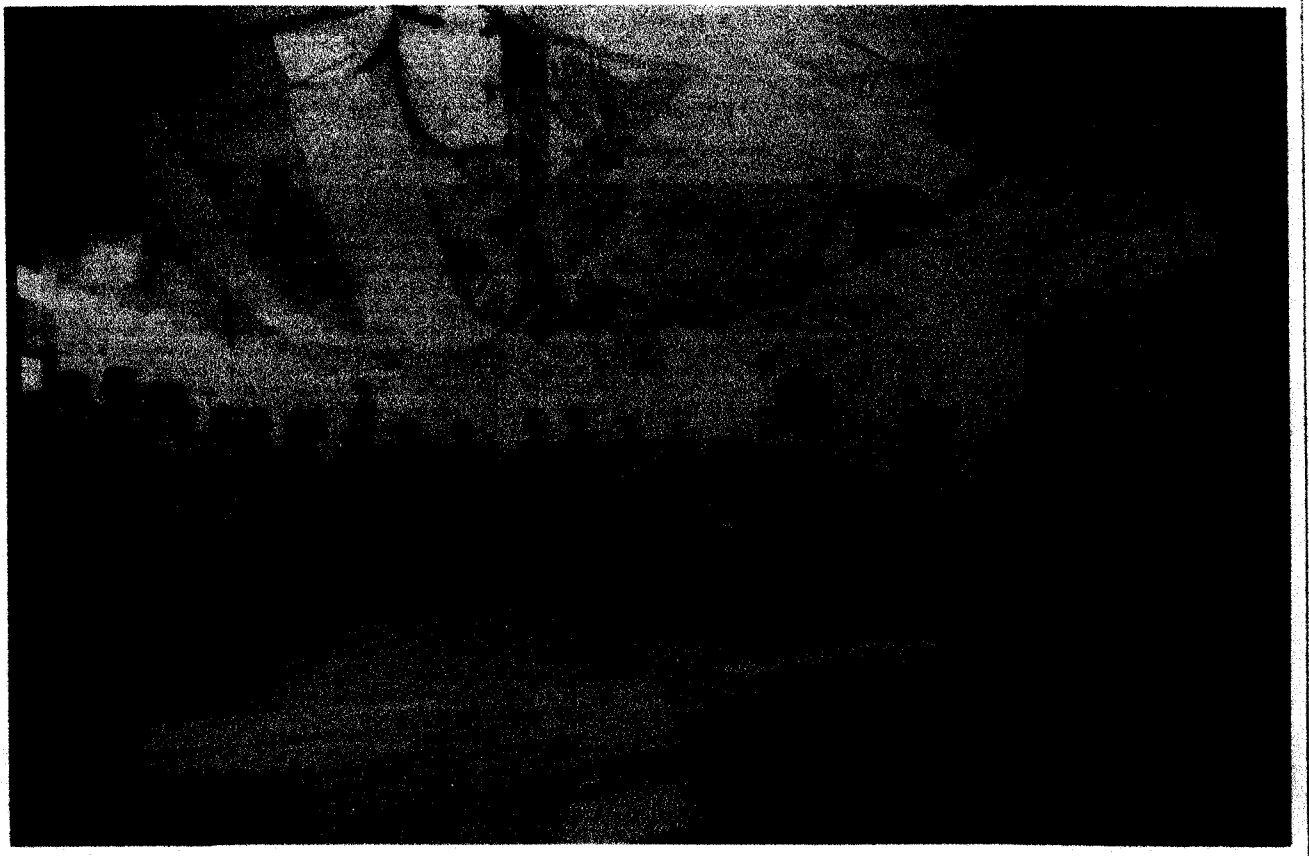




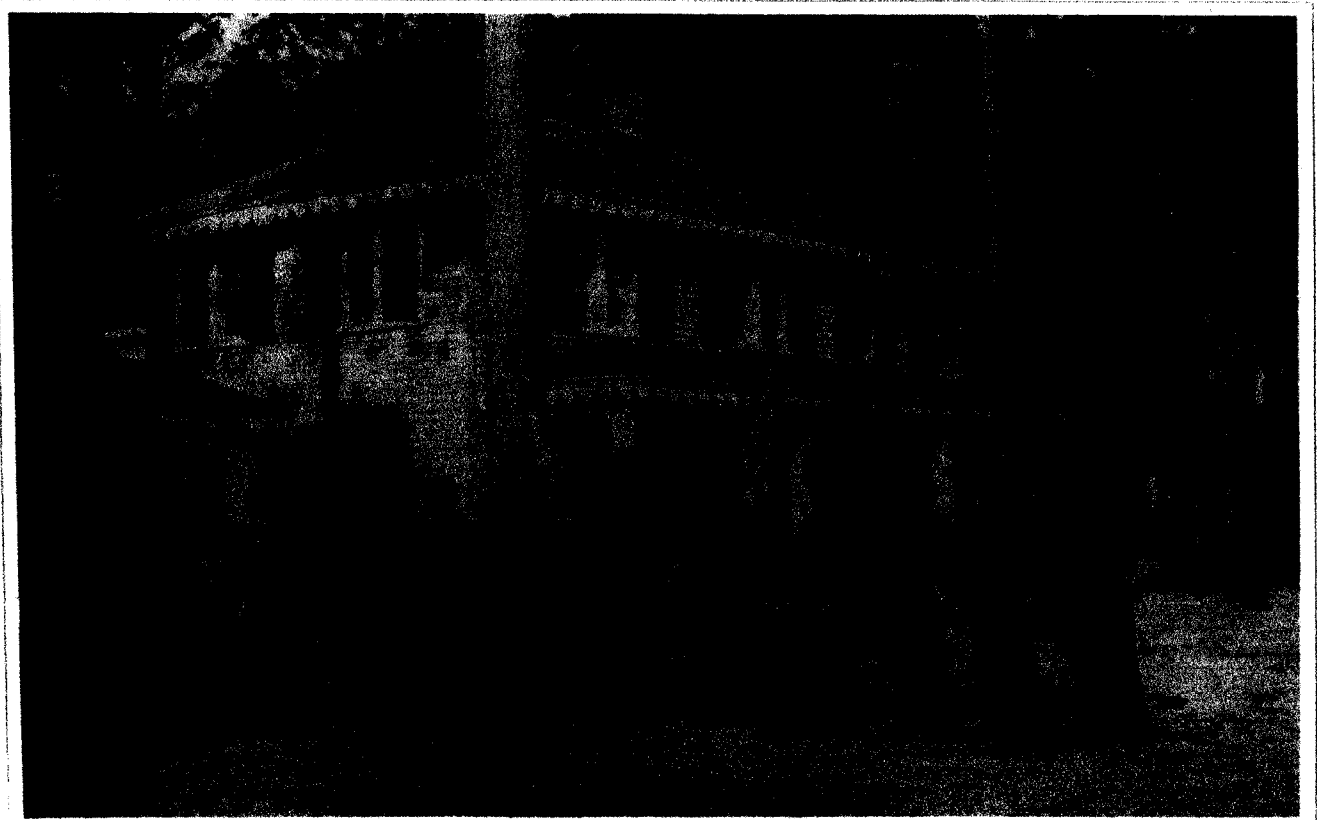
Above: Eastern shore of Point Lookout facing north. Prisoners bathed and fished in this area.

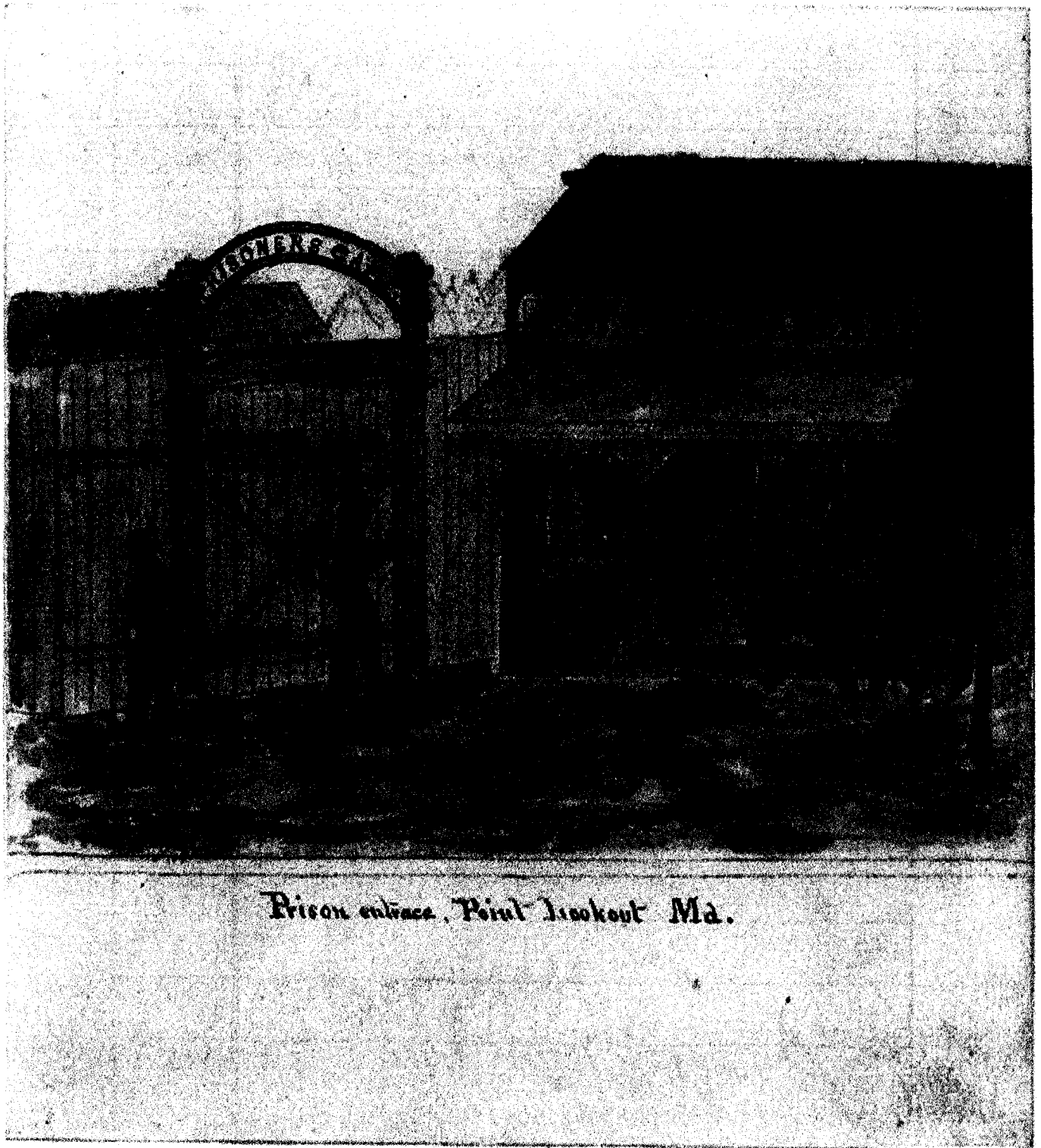
Below: White deadline posts mark where the southern wall of the stockade once stood. (photos by the author, January 2002).





Above: Rare photo of Point Lookout prisoners being administered the oath of allegiance.
Bottom: Commandant James Barnes and staff in front of Camp Headquarters.
(Reprinted courtesy of the New-York Historical Society)





Prison entrance, Point Lookout Md.

Depiction of the prison camp entrance, painted in watercolor by John T. Omenhausser, a former inmate.

(Reprinted courtesy of the New-York Historical Society)

Point Lookout Md.



Prison Cookhouse.

Prison Cookhouse

Dialogue:

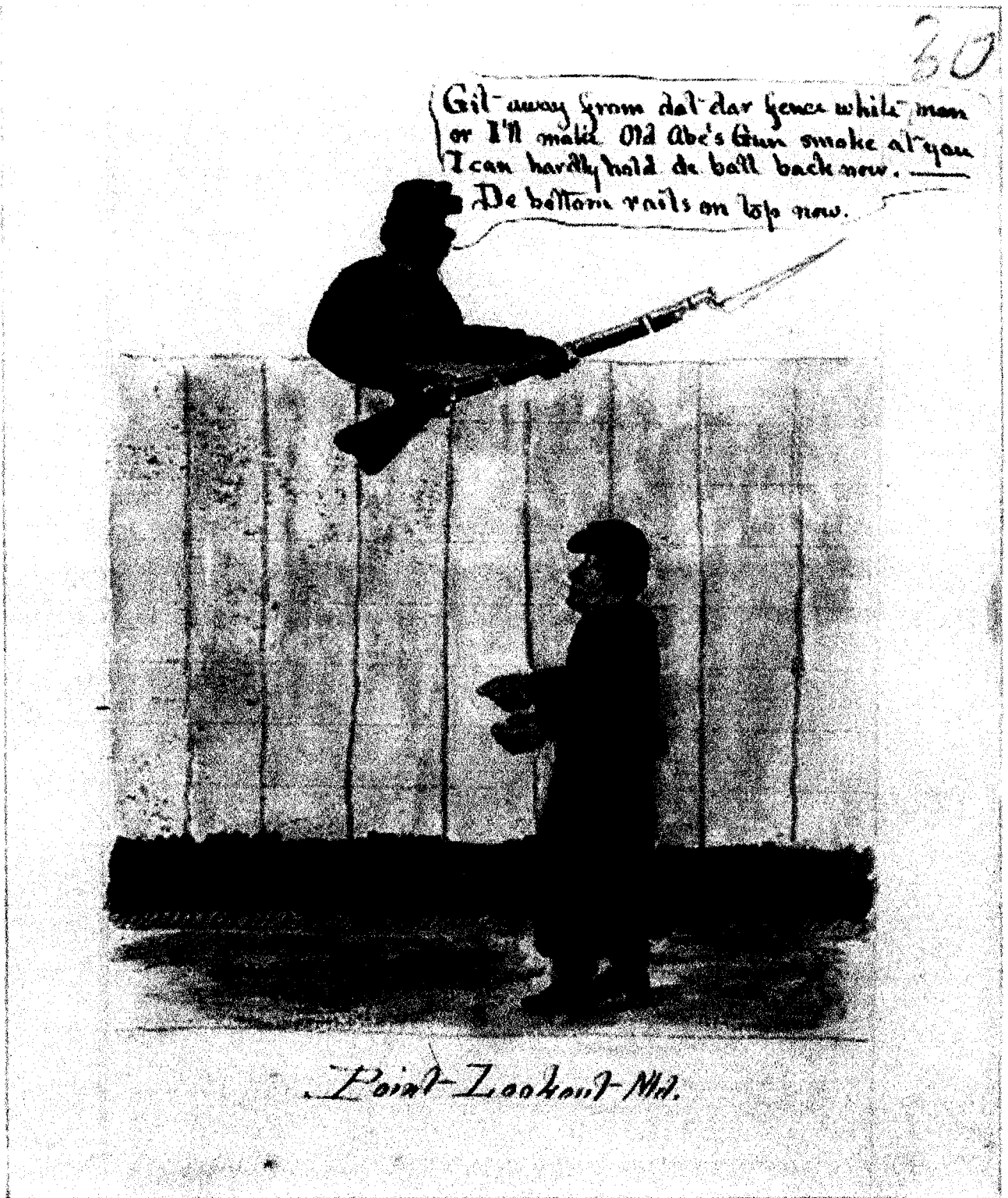
“Oh, my soup.”

“Is that a souphouse cup?”

“You threw soup in my face, take that.”

“Take him off.”

(Reprinted courtesy of the New-York Historical Society)



Depiction of a black guard stopping a prisoner

Dialogue:

“Git away from dat dar fence white man or I’ll make Old Abe’s Gun smoke at you. I can hardly hold the ball back now.— De bottom rails on top now.”

(Reprinted courtesy of the New-York Historical Society)



Guard accidentally shot by his comrade

Dialogue:

Guard: "Git up Abram and don't act possum, here comes Corp'ral Jim but I knows you don't believe me you think I se fooling you. Git up Abram and don't make a fool of yourself, don't you see de white folk's laughing at you – for the Lord I believe's the nigger dead for sartain."

Prisoner one: "What's the matter?"

Prisoner two: "Who killed him?"

(Reprinted courtesy of the New-York Historical Society)

Keeno or Lotto.



Point-Isobout Sports.

Gambling in prison (Keeno)

Dialogue:

Prisoner one: "I've lost all my tobacco and have not won a single pot."

Prisoner two: "Keeno on the top line."

Dealer: "35."

Prisoner three: "Why didn't you call out 36 I had two chances."

(Reprinted courtesy of the New-York Historical Society)



Spoon and Ring Peddlers

Dialogue:

Prisoner one: "Here's your spoons to eat your soup! Only five crackers a peice."

Prisoner two: "Here's your pretty rings only fifty cents a peice."

(Reprinted courtesy of the New-York Historical Society)

Point Lookout Md.



Scene on the beach.

Beach scene depicting daily prisoner activities – bathing and fishing

(Reprinted courtesy of the New-York Historical Society)

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