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## A Reasonable Captivity: Soldier Experiences in Camp Chase

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# A Reasonable Captivity: Soldier Experiences in Camp Chase

## **Abstract**

Even compared to Libby Prison and Andersonville, one can recognize that conditions in Northern prisons like Camp Chase and Elmira Prison Camp were not ideal. Indeed, disease, death, and starvation were abundant in both Camp Chase and Elmira. However, they contrast greatly to the even more appalling conditions later in Libby and Andersonville. [*excerpt*]

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## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### A Reasonable Captivity: Soldier Experiences in Camp Chase

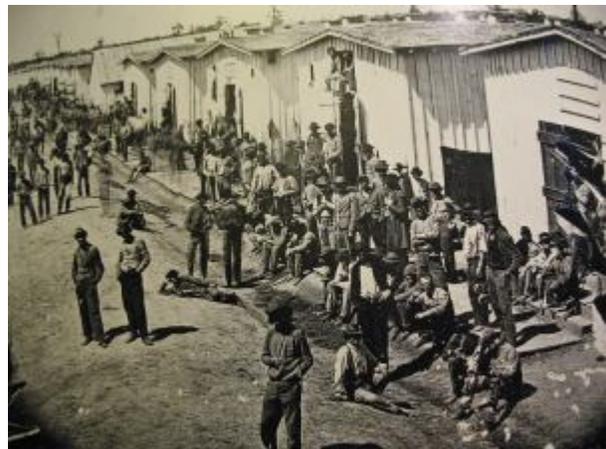
May 22, 2014

By: Meg Sutter, '16

Even compared to Libby Prison and Andersonville, one can recognize that conditions in Northern prisons like Camp Chase and Elmira Prison Camp were not ideal. Indeed, disease, death, and starvation were abundant in both Camp Chase and Elmira. However, they contrast greatly to the even more appalling conditions later in Libby and Andersonville.

While Camp Chase, with an average of 8,000 Confederate prisoners, was not the largest prison camp in the North during the war, it represents the typical conditions in Northern prisons. Initially a training camp for Union soldiers, Camp Chase was built four miles outside Columbus, Ohio, and by 1861 it was already holding many Confederate “political prisoners.” It was meant to be a temporary prison, as the North was unprepared for the amount of prisoners that flooded their makeshift prisons. With the end of the cartel, Camp Chase was forced to become a permanent prison. The prison was divided into three prisons, though they all shared one wall separated by partitions. Prison 1 was the smallest, prison 2 was larger, but prison 3 was larger than 1 and 2 combined, measuring, as Private James Anderson described, about four acres. The prison consisted of barracks with bunks three tiers high and one stove each. Three memoirs of Confederate prisoners in Camp Chase give historians a good understanding of the general conditions and life they experienced while captive.

When prisoners first arrived at Camp Chase they were stripped of all their valuables and money. Private James Anderson described the guards searching them while many



prisoners grumbled about their money, weapons, and valuables being taken. Anderson said, “common sense ought to have taught them that it was but reasonable to expect [it] under the circumstances.” Any money that was found on the prisoners was exchanged for a receipt to the sutler, which was the general store in the prison where men could buy extra rations or other supplies at inflated prices. John H. King described the sutler as robbery. Camp Chase was one of the few prisons that even had a store which meant that conditions in the camp were marginally better than its Southern counterparts.

For rations, the prisoners received two meals a day: breakfast around nine in the morning and dinner around four in the afternoon. Anderson described prisoner rations as consisting of “fresh beef, corn beef, salt pork, bacon, flour, light bread, sugar, coffee, tea, pepper, salt, vinegar (sic), etc., etc. all in the greatest abundance.” In W.H Duff’s memoir he said a kitchen was built in response to the prisoners’ poor way of cooking, and a cook was assigned for each mess. Prisoners who volunteered to work were paid in full rations. Duff’s company worked to strengthen the walls of the prison and dig ditches to drain the camp. Occasionally their rations were suspended for a few days; the guards claimed it was in retaliation for the way Andersonville prisoners were being treated. Some men spent time hunting rats for sport, but Anderson said he was repulsed by the thought and was not nearly hungry enough to pursue eating the rodents.

Duff and Anderson continued to have positive comments about their living situation at Camp Chase. Duff said they “were well supplied with good wood, plenty of soap, and an abundance of water, there were two wells in prison 2, barrack 12 being built over the one that supplied water for cooking and drinking.” Anderson and Duff both described the prisoners being supplied with blankets and clothing, though, in the winter they were denied warmer clothing and more blankets. Straw and “wheat traw” were brought in for their bunks, and there was plenty of wood to burn the stoves. Duff described one incident in which his company had used their wood for burning the stoves sparingly because they were fearful it would not be replenished, but:

[o]ne day Sergeant Jake was inspecting the barrack and saw where we had hidden the wood, he wanted to know what it meant, we frankly told him why we did it. With a sad voice he said, ‘men do not be uneasy about the wood, you may suffer from hunger but you shall not suffer from cold. I want you to keep the stoves hot day and night, take my word as a gentleman, I will see that you have plenty of wood, but you must burn what you have. Never fear when you have done away with what you have, there will be plenty more for you.

Sergeant Jake kept his word. For the most part, these prisoners’ living situations were very reasonable.

The winter of 1864-5 was particularly brutal to many of the Southerners who were not accustomed to Northern winters. While Anderson was very positive about Camp Chase, he did admit that they were very uncomfortable in the winter and prisoners did not have enough blankets or warm clothing. Duff and King agreed, and described the summer months as bearable, but that the winter “ended only in the death of many a helpless victim.” Disease broke out, as was normal amongst a group of people packed into close quarters. There was a devastating breakout of smallpox that killed quite a few. Smallpox, however, was the only disease Anderson, Duff, and King mentioned in Camp Chase.

Overall, the rations and living conditions were reasonable and prisoners like Anderson and Duff, writing in the post-war period, recalled their experiences as acceptable given the situation. King was a little more skeptical of the situation in his memoir, but he admitted in his introduction that his agenda was in support of the Lost Cause. Therefore, he described conditions in the North more harshly. The experiences of prisoners in Elmira Prison Camp were very similar to those from Camp Chase. While conditions may not have been ideal, Confederate prisoners in these camps fared better than the Union prisoners held captive in the South.

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#### Image:

“Camp Chase Confederate POWs.” Descendants of Thomas Sims Graves of Virginia, Fayette, and Nelson County Kentucky. <http://www.tsgraves.com/gods-acre/the-civil-war—military-records-of-benjamin-f-graves-csa—brother-of-james-e-graves>.