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“A Very Brutal Man”: Lewis Horton, David Todd, and Prisoner Torture

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Abstract

In the late summer of 1861, just after the battle of Bull Run, Union seaman Lewis Horton was captured while serving on the U.S.S. Massachusetts and taken to Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia. In transport, Horton would recall being shackled to his comrades and marched through the streets for people to jeer at and being forced to spend a night in a building used for convict slaves. Hobnails, Horton remembered, had been hammered partly into the walls and floors of the building, making it too torturous to lie down or lean against the walls. Once he arrived in Richmond, Horton would meet the commandant of the prison, Lieutenant David Todd. Todd was none other than the half-brother of Mary Todd Lincoln, one of several of her siblings to swear loyalty to the Confederacy. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Lewis Augustine Horton, David Todd, USS Massachusetts, Libby Prison

Disciplines

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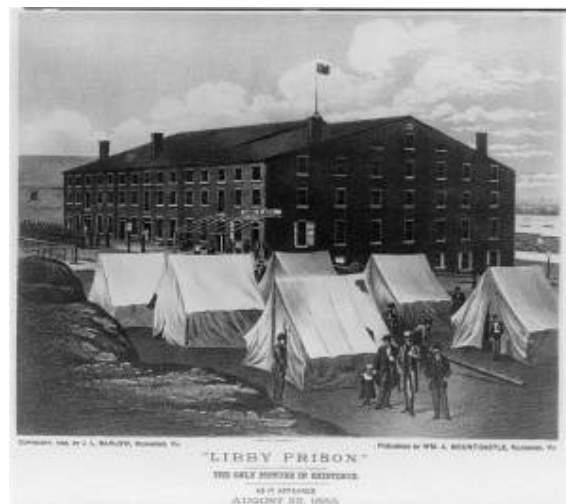
“A Very Brutal Man”: Lewis Horton, David Todd, and Prisoner Torture

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By Sarah Johnson, '15

In the late summer of 1861, just after the battle of Bull Run, Union seaman Lewis Horton was captured while serving on the U.S.S. Massachusetts and taken to Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia. In transport, Horton would recall being shackled to his comrades and marched through the streets for people to jeer at and being forced to spend a night in a building used for convict slaves. Hobnails, Horton remembered, had been hammered partly into the walls and floors of the building, making it too torturous to lie down or lean against the walls. Once he arrived in Richmond, Horton would meet the commandant of the prison, Lieutenant David Todd. Todd was none other than the half-brother of Mary Todd Lincoln, one of several of her siblings to swear loyalty to the Confederacy.

As commandant of Libby Prison, Todd would make a name for himself because of his shocking cruelty to prisoners. Prisoners were given rotten food, nearly no medical treatment, and lived in filth. In addition to this, Horton would recall he was “...a very brutal man. I saw him saber a poor fellow one day because the prisoner had a small bit of lighted candle in order to see to dress his wound. He cut him to the bone. On the least provocation Todd would inflict cruelties on the poor fellow.” Horton and others would also recall that Todd ordered several men to be executed just for trying to look out a window.



Todd's actions would bring shame on the Lincoln house. *Harper's Weekly* would go so far in November of 1862 as to describe in detail the sympathies of Mrs. Lincoln's siblings. Regarding David Todd, *Harper's* would comment on his brutality and remark that conditions had gotten so bad that Jefferson Davis was forced to remove him after two months. "It is probably this division of sentiment," *Harper's* remarked, "which has given rise to the gossip and scandal respecting the views of the lady who presides over the White House." Indeed, although later prisoners would acknowledge that some of the horror stories that came out of Libby Prison were exaggerated, they were adamant that the stories about Todd were not.

Often prisoner mistreatment like this is associated with the later war period of 1864-65. In 1861 there were still many generals holding on to notions of conciliation and the prisoner exchange system was still in effect. To find such horrible accounts of prisoner mistreatment so early in the war may be surprising. Nevertheless, when Horton was paroled and discharged in March 1862, he carried with him experiences of cruelty at the hands of Confederates. Perhaps this experience was a main factor in his immediate reenlistment on the U.S.S. Rhode Island, where his courage would be tested.

Sources:

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