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Prisoner Experiences: Memoirs of Libby Prison

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Abstract

Numerous books have been written on the contested topic of Civil War prisons and prisoners of war. Scholars struggle with who to blame for the outrageous and horrible conditions of the prisons. Some speculate that the Southerners were crueler to their captives while others say the opposite. As well, scholars question whether the conditions of the Southern prisons were better or worse than the prisons in the North. [*excerpt*]

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Prisoner Experiences: Memoirs of Libby Prison

March 28, 2014

By: Meg Sutter, '16

Numerous books have been written on the contested topic of Civil War prisons and prisoners of war. Scholars struggle with who to blame for the outrageous and horrible conditions of the prisons. Some speculate that the Southerners were crueller to their captives while others say the opposite. As well, scholars question whether the conditions of the Southern prisons were better or worse than the prisons in the North.

Once released, prisoners from both sides began to publish hundreds of memoirs describing their experiences. Some prisoners used these memoirs to vilify their captors. Therefore, historians must be careful when reading into the biases of these various memoirs. Some prisons have become better known than others, and therefore certain assumptions about the average prisons during the war have arisen. While Andersonville may be the most infamous of the Civil War prisons, it perhaps does not depict the average prison conditions during the war. There are many other prisons both North and South that could give the historian a better understanding of the lives of Civil War prisoners. This is the first segment in a series of Civil War prison posts and seeks to portray Confederate camp Libby Prison as various prisoners in their memoirs described it.

My first reaction upon reading some of the memoirs from Libby Prison was that the conditions were not as terrible as one might assume. Of course being captive and having limited rations and space to move is not ideal. However, as I began to read more about Libby Prison, I realized that the few memoirs I had read do not even begin to describe the ratched conditions there. There were many different types of prisons with varying conditions including old buildings or warehouses like Libby, stockades like Andersonville, enclosed barracks like Camp Chase, and fortifications like Fort Delaware. Libby Prison had been a tobacco warehouse located on the James River in Richmond before the war. It consisted of six rooms, 100 x 45 feet each with a kitchen in the middle. There were three stories in the front part of the building and four stories in the back. Because this prison was

enclosed, some might claim it at least protected the men from the elements that brutally antagonized those prisoners kept in stockades without shelter. But Libby and other prisons in forts or warehouses had little to no ventilation. Also, Libby had no furniture. The men were packed together in an enclosed space without ventilation or anything to lie on except the vermin and flea-infested floor. Only Union officers were imprisoned here, implying that conditions might have been nicer in Libby than other prisons where privates were held. However, further study into these differences is needed to come to a concrete conclusion.



There are many memoirs left behind by Libby Prison veterans including those of Colonel William B. McCreery of the 21st Michigan Volunteer Infantry, Colonel Louis Palma di Cesnola of the 4th New York Cavalry, and Colonel Frederick Bartleson of the 100th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. Colonel William McCreery recounted his experience in Libby Prison from September 1863 to February 1864. He was wounded and then captured at Chickamauga on September 20, 1863, and taken to Richmond where the

prisoners were split up based on the severity of their wounds. McCreery was taken to the Pemberton building, which served as the overflow hospital. He became very fond of his surgeon who allowed him to stay in the hospital where conditions were better. Eventually, though, he was transferred to Libby Prison. He claimed that the prisoners were treated as well as could be expected given the circumstances. They were allowed to send two letters each week containing only six lines so that prison officials could monitor any remarks about the treatment of prisoners. For a time the prison also allowed the US Christian Commission and friends and family from the North to send boxes with food and clothing to the prisoners. McCreery's account notes that the guards could be bribed to let prisoners escape. He helped two prisoners escape with the money he had sewn into his coat to bribe the guards. While McCreery did not accompany these men, he escaped later with 109 men who fled through an underground tunnel. McCreery recounts the events of this escape and how he reached the safety of the Federal lines.

Louis Palma di Cesnola was captured at the battle of Aldie on June 17, 1863, and arrived at Libby Prison on June 25 where he remained until his release on March 24, 1864. During his time at Libby, Cesnola became the Commissary of Distribution. He went to Belle Isle every morning and counted the number of boxes and their contents. He then distributed the goods as quickly as possible. He was greatly disturbed by the lack of care and conditions of the prison and was very suspicious of Confederate soldiers stealing boxes of blankets and

clothes from the Libby warehouse. He unfortunately lost his job as Commissary of Distribution in November of 1863 because he upset the overseer of the slaves who scrubbed the floors. His release was delayed until March 1864, possibly due to the incident with the overseer.

Bartleson by far provides the most detail on the treatment of prisoners of war and the conditions of Libby Prison. He also wrote about the details of the tunnel escape on February 9, 1864. He wrote a letter each day from January 28, 1864, to March 14, 1864, describing the daily events at Libby. Like McCreery, Bartleson noted how seemingly easy it was to escape. Many prisoners escaped by bribing the guards and even walking nonchalantly passed them. These tricks were very amusing to the prisoners because the guards were very confused when they later called roll and men were missing. Bartleson said this amusement broke up the monotony of their days. Also, like Cesnola, Bartleson was suspicious of the prisoners' boxes being pilfered by the Confederate guards. When the 109 officers escaped through the tunnel, Bartleson did not go because he had an amputated arm. After this escape the guards were on edge and for many days they tightened their guard. Bartleson was released on March 7, 1864.

If nothing else Libby Prison is known for the massive tunnel escape that occurred on February 9, 1864. 109 officers attempted to escape; 51 made it to Union lines while the rest either died or were recaptured. Colonel Thomas E. Rose is credited as the main officer who engineered the escape. Bricks from the fireplace in the kitchen were removed to gain access to the basement. For thirty days the men took turns digging a tunnel from the basement and under the street outside the prison. Finally on the night of February 9th they made their escape. Their destination was Fort Monroe in Williamsburg; McCreery was one of the successful prisoners to reach the Union lines around Williamsburg.

Based on these few selected memoirs, scholars, students, and Civil War enthusiasts can learn a lot about Libby Prison. However, these three men may not be a large or general enough sample to make assumptions about the prison. In later posts, readers can compare other prisons to Libby and make his or her own assumptions about which ones were truly the most trying of POW prisons.

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Image:

“Views of Libby Prison, Richmond, Va., April, 1865.” Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online. Digital ID: ppmsca 34904. Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-ppmsca-34904.