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Soldier Experiences in Elmira Prison Camp: A Common Captivity

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Soldier Experiences in Elmira Prison Camp: A Common Captivity

Abstract

Elmira's history is very similar to that of Camp Chase. Before it was a prison camp, Elmira had been a military depot for training. The Elmira Depot in Elmira, New York, was a great place for a military training camp because of the railroad junctions running in and out of the town. These railroads would be necessary for transporting prisoners to Elmira later in the war. Like Camp Chase, Elmira became an overflow prison camp after the cartel failed in 1863. Many of the prisoners came from Point Lookout along the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. Elmira was made up of barracks with the Chemung River running behind the prison. There was a pool of water in the middle of the camp three to six feet deep and forty feet wide. At one point there were approximately 10,000 prisoners at Elmira. There was only one successful escape made by ten prisoners, including Berry Benson, on October 6, 1864. There are fewer memoirs and diaries from Elmira than from Southern prisons, but many Confederate ex-prisoners published their experiences in the *Confederate Veteran* and other newspapers and journals. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Civil War Prison, POW, Prisoner of War, Camp Chase, Elmira Prison

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Soldier Experiences in Elmira Prison Camp: A Common Captivity

May 29, 2014

By: Meg Sutter, '16

Elmira's history is very similar to that of Camp Chase. Before it was a prison camp, Elmira had been a military depot for training. The Elmira Depot in Elmira, New York, was a great place for a military training camp because of the railroad junctions running in and out of the town. These railroads would be necessary for transporting prisoners to Elmira later in the war. Like Camp Chase, Elmira became an overflow prison camp after the cartel failed in 1863. Many of the prisoners came from Point Lookout along the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. Elmira was made up of barracks with the Chemung River running behind the prison. There was a pool of water in the middle of the camp three to six feet deep and forty feet wide. At one point there were approximately 10,000 prisoners at Elmira. There was only one successful escape made by ten prisoners, including Berry Benson, on October 6, 1864. There are fewer memoirs and diaries from Elmira than from Southern prisons, but many Confederate ex-prisoners published their experiences in the *Confederate Veteran* and other newspapers and journals.

Rations at Elmira were similar to those at Camp Chase. There was a regular routine with two meals a day; "so many days we had pork, so many days we had beef, so many days bean soup for dinner, so many days vegetable soup." Sometimes there was even extra soup in the kitchen and the officers would tell the men to fall in line for extras. They also received bread in the morning and at dinner. While these rations were initially good, they soon decreased in quality. Bread was replaced with crackers in the winter, and King said the crackers caused diarrhea. While the rations were not ideal, compared with prisons in the South, the men at Elmira were well-off and had two meals cooked for them each day.



Boredom was the prisoners' common companion. Many prisoners, like Berry Benson, spent their time planning escapes; however, only Benson and nine other men were successful. There was a trading market at Elmira and the currency was tobacco. As well, King described the men passing time making "trinkets" such as toothpicks, watch chains, and fans. J. B. Stamp elaborated on this pastime by saying that men were "manufacturing jewelry, shoe repairing, tailoring, shaving and haircutting . . . With many [prisoners], letter writing was the chief employment, corresponding with northern friends, or relatives . . . "

John R. King described Elmira as looking "much cleaner and healthier than Point Lookout, and the water was good." There were three-tiered bunk beds in the barracks. Benson claimed there were no blankets on the pine board bunks, but King said they were supplied with oilcloth and two blankets. Like in Camp Chase, each barrack had a stove, though this was not enough to keep the Confederate prisoners warm during the harsh New York winters. In late January, the government supplied them with coats with the tails mysteriously cut off. These coats were not adequate to keep many from dying from pneumonia. Diarrhea, smallpox, and measles also assaulted the prisoners. Stamp did claim that the "medical and hospital departments of Elmira prison are worthy of commendation." There were surgeons for each of the multiple hospitals and one for each of the five sections of the camp. The medical stores were also always full and accessible at all hours of the day. When smallpox broke out "every effort was made to arrest the progress of the disease."

Camp Chase and Elmira, while not the largest or worst, are accurate representations of average Northern prisons. Reading the diaries and memoirs from ex-prisoners against the grain tells historians that these prisons were not as horrific as some ex-prisoners and historians portrayed them after the war. Prisoners were, for the most part, provided with adequate rations to keep them from starving unlike Union prisoners in the South. They were given beds and furniture in the barracks and a stove with a sufficient amount of fuel. The camps were kept clean and, while not all disease was checked, it was not as rampant as was seen in Southern prisons. The conditions in Camp Chase and Elmira can hardly compare to the horrific atrocities in Libby and especially Andersonville.

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Image:

"[Elmira Prison, Elmira, New York]." Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Online. Digital ID: ppmsca 33993. Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-ppmsca-33993.