Surrendered:

The Prisoner-of-War Condition in the American Civil War

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

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Abstract

**Surrendered:**

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During the American Civil War, more than 409,000 Union and Confederate soldiers surrendered to the enemy and spent time in captivity as prisoners of war. Including soldiers who surrendered and were paroled in short order by their captors on the field of battle, the number rises to nearly 675,000. With just over three million combatants over the course of the war, that means more than one in seven Civil War soldiers served time in prison camps as prisoners of war, and almost one in five soldiers surrendered to the enemy at some point. For those captured on the battlefield, a degrading life in prison lay in store, with only the hope of being paroled on their honor not to engage in hostilities again until exchanged for an enemy soldier.

Given the number of soldiers who experienced captivity, scholars have done comparatively little historical analysis on this important aspect of the war. This fact is highlighted by the work of William B. Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (1930) and Lonnie R. Speer, *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (1997). Separated by more than six decades, these two works formed the basis of analysis of Civil War prisoners until recently when scholars began to study particular prisons or diverse aspects of the prisoner-of-war system during the Civil War in detail. Sometimes lost in these analyses,
however, is the prisoner himself. I seek to correct that loss of focus in this dissertation, where I argue that soldiers’ surrender to the enemy entailed a complete subjugation of self to the will of the captor, deprived them of their identity as soldiers, and embarked them on a harrowing journey of physical and emotional trauma, often lacking the most basic necessities for health and life. My focus on the prisoners and the prisoners’ experience brings renewed attention to the prisoner condition, to what it meant to Civil War soldiers to surrender to their enemy, and to the trials they faced as they endured captivity.

In the course of this study, I examine how prisoners reacted when captured and how they related their experiences traversing the enemy’s country to prison and what letters and diaries prisoners wrote while they awaited release can tell us about their prison experiences. I also explore prisoners’ principal hopes for release through a system of prisoner parole and exchange the belligerents established and the less well-known route to freedom that the vast majority of prisoners refused: taking the oath of allegiance to their enemy. In the closing chapters, I discuss the darkest aspects of the prisoner condition: death at the hands of their captors and the grueling conditions that existed in Civil War prison, which too often deprived prisoners of adequate food, shelter, sanitation, and the most rudimentary necessities for health, which resulted in the deaths of at least 56,000 Union and Confederate prisoners through starvation and disease.
I dedicate this dissertation with love to my wife Helen. Without her unwavering support and assistance, this would never have been possible.
Acknowledgments

If there is one truism in writing a dissertation it is that, however much it represents the work of an individual scholar, it is an impossible task to complete without the assistance and support of many others, both within the academic community and outside of it. I would first like to thank the faculty at the University of Nevada Reno. My dissertation advisor, Scott Casper, provided continual feedback and helpful comments throughout my doctoral studies that greatly helped me complete the program and this dissertation. He was also extremely helpful in my transition from a Master’s degree in Medieval History to a Ph.D. in Nineteenth-century American History. I am very grateful that he continued to plow through the extremely rough drafts that ultimately became this dissertation, providing plenty of constructive criticism throughout, and especially appreciate that he was able to do so even after taking on a new position as Dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, which he started at about the same time that I began work on this dissertation. Committee members Elizabeth Raymond, Martha Hildreth, Mike Branch, and Carolyn White were constantly supportive and helpful, offering especially good advice when I first presented my proposal at the Prospectus Colloquium and again at my Dissertation Defense. After completing my Master’s in History in two years, Elizabeth once reminded me that a Ph.D. program is not a sprint, but takes a continued, steady approach. Completing this degree in five years was certainly not a sprint, but I think it was done in good time nonetheless.
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collection after another. I would like to thank my former supervisor as well. Ed Russell allowed me the flexibility in my work schedule that I needed in order to make the time to complete my coursework, which would not have been possible otherwise. I also owe a word of thanks to a colleague at my day job, Alex Mikuliak, who reviewed an early draft of this manuscript and offered some good advice (such as the illogic of referring to a future event with a word like “reminiscent”).

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that precipitated the cross-country move, but she was game for the adventure
and we both knew that it would help in the completion of this manuscript as well.
This has been an adventure and I am very grateful she was here to share it with
me all the way.
“When time shall have softened passion and prejudice, when Reason shall have stripped the mask from misrepresentation, then Justice, holding evenly her scales, will require much of past censure and praise to change places.”

—Jefferson Davis

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INTRODUCTION

“The very manner in which the right to kill our enemies is proved, points out the limits of that right. On an enemy’s submitting and laying down his arms, we cannot with justice take away his life. Thus, in a battle, quarter is to be given to those who lay down their arms; and, in a siege, a garrison offering to capitulate are never to be refused their lives.”

—Emer de Vattel

During the American Civil War, more than 409,000 Union and Confederate soldiers surrendered to the enemy and spent time in captivity as prisoners of war. Including soldiers who surrendered and were paroled in short order by their captors on the field of battle, the number rises to nearly 675,000. With just over three million combatants over the course of the war, that means more than one in


2 Holland Thompson, editor, The Photographic History of the Civil War: Complete and Unabridged, Two Volumes in One. Vol. 4: Soldier Life and Secret Service / Prisons and Hospitals. 5 vols., first published by the Review of Reviews Company in 1911 (New York: The Blue & Gray Press, 1987), 50. The full passage reads, “The number of prisoners held during the war can, perhaps, never be accurately known. General F. C. Ainsworth, when chief of the United States Record and Pension Office, is quoted by Rhodes as follows: ‘According to the best information now obtainable from both Union and Confederate records, it appears that 211,411 Union soldiers were captured during the Civil War, of which number 16,668 were paroled on the field and 30,218 died while in captivity; and that 462,634 Confederate soldiers were captured during that war, of which number 247,769 were paroled on the field and 25,976 died while in captivity.’ A letter under date of March 9, 1911, says that he has no further information justifying a change in these figures. Of course, this large number of Confederates captured includes the armies of Lee, Johnston, Taylor, and Kirby Smith surrendered during the months of April and May, 1865.”
seven Civil War soldiers served time in prison camps as prisoners of war, and almost one in five soldiers surrendered to the enemy at some point (this figure includes the mass surrenders of several Confederate field armies in the closing weeks of the war). The commonly accepted figure for the number of soldiers who died during the war is approximately 620,000, although J. David Hacker has effectively argued that the actual figure is most likely closer to 752,000, or 1 in 4 service men.\(^3\) Deaths in battle amounted to at least 214,938 (1 in 15) while the number of non-mortally wounded soldiers was approximately 415,000, (1 in 8) some of whom were also prisoners of war.\(^4\) Taken together, these grim statistics describe a war of horrific magnitude and bloodletting.

For those captured on the battlefield, a degrading life in prison lay in store, with only the hope of being paroled on their honor not to engage in hostilities again until exchanged for an enemy soldier. Some historians, such as Gerald J. Prokopowicz, have concluded that, from the beginning of the war through the latter part of 1863 when the exchange system broke down, a pre-modern conception of how to treat prisoners of war prevailed, largely free of the horrors prisoners later suffered: “soldiers of both sides who surrendered any time in the


\(^4\) U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. This source indicates 281,881 Union non-mortally wounded soldiers with an unknown number of Confederate non-mortally wounded. With 140,414 Union battle deaths out of 2,213,363 soldiers and 74,524 Confederate battle deaths out of 1,050,000 soldiers (based on incomplete records), this indicates a consistent ratio of about 1:15 battle deaths. This has been extrapolated to arrive at a figure of Confederate wounded of approximately 133,000.
last year of the war could look forward to nothing but indefinite confinement under inhuman conditions."\(^5\) Unfortunately, Prokopowicz overlooks the trials and horrors that prisoners suffered long before the collapse of the exchange system and, in many respects, seeks to gloss over the brutal treatment prisoners frequently suffered, even during the early years of the war. More recently, José O. Díaz has argued that “prison life, in despite of its trauma and suffering, included the rudiments of an American community.”\(^6\) He further argues that “prison life, in spite of its obvious and undeniable hardships, affected some positive changes among those men ensnared in its clutches . . . [and] challenges the assumption that only the adversities of captivity merit scholarly attention.”\(^7\) While innovative in its own right, Díaz’s argument overlooks many of the most critical aspects of the prisoner-of-war experience, which were specifically defined by “trauma and suffering.” Without denying that communities formed within the confines of the prison camps, I argue that soldiers’ surrender to the enemy entailed a complete subjugation of self to the will of the captor, deprived them of their identity as soldiers, and embarked them on a harrowing journey of physical and emotional trauma, often lacking the basic necessities for health and life.

Prisoners of war during the American Civil War faced a wide gamut of


\(^6\) José O. Díaz, “To Make the Best of Our Hard Lot: Prisoners, Captivity, and The Civil War” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2009), ii.

\(^7\) Díaz, “To Make the Best of Our Hard Lot,” 6.
experiences, from the most humane and civilized treatment according to the then-accepted laws of war to the most brutal of conditions imaginable. Yet all prisoners shared one key fact: the loss of liberty and humanity to the mercy of an enemy often driven by the war psychosis described by William B. Hesseltine. 8 This utter subjugation deprived prisoners of their sense of self and their place in the world, leaving them to cling desperately to thoughts of home, faith, and loyalty to their nation, even when its abandonment would bring freedom.

The trials faced by prisoners of war began at the moment of surrender and continued long after their release. The degradation and humiliation prisoners were forced to internalize mentally scarred many of them for life, suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder at a time when “battle fatigue” was perhaps the closest approximation of the condition as understood today. 9 Eric Dean, in a study of post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans of several wars, and Vietnam and the Civil War in particular, describes similar psychological issues affecting the mental and physical health of Civil War prisoners of war. As he notes, forty-six to ninety percent of American prisoners during World War II


9 For current historical, medical research on the topic of postwar mental and physical disabilities among Civil War veterans, see Judith Pizarro, Roxane Cohen Silver, and JoAnne Prause, "Physical and Mental Health Costs of Traumatic War," Archives of General Psychiatry 63 (February 2006). In addition, the Department of Veterans Affairs considers numerous mental and physical disabilities, such as all nervous disorders as well as heart and intestinal conditions, to be presumptively service connected for a former prisoner of war, regardless of how much time has passed between military service and the onset of these conditions. For specifics, see Title 38, Code of Federal Regulations, Chapter 1, Part III, Subpart A, Section 3.309(c).
suffered from postwar post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of their confinement, with higher rates depending largely on the level of famine and abuse the prisoners endured, and this higher rate equates roughly to prison conditions in the Civil War, particularly toward the last years of the war.\footnote{10} Dean points out that some former prisoners had to be confined to mental hospitals after the war because of the extreme psychological stress they suffered while in captivity, which included feelings of despair and hopelessness, as well as boredom.\footnote{11}

Given the number of soldiers who experienced captivity, scholars have done comparatively little historical analysis on this important aspect of the war. Hesseltine's \textit{Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology} was the only major, scholarly work to treat the issue of Civil War prisoners until 1997, when Lonnie R. Speer published \textit{Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War}.\footnote{12} In the interim, scholars wrote little on the subject, until the 1990s when they began to publish solid monographs and articles on individual prisons, concentrating notably on Andersonville\footnote{13} in the South and Elmira\footnote{14} in the North, two of the most notorious

\begin{flushright}
\footnote{11}{Dean, \textit{Shook Over Hell}, 83-85.}
\footnote{12}{Lonnie R. Speer, \textit{Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War} (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).}
\end{flushright}
for prisoner treatment and mortality. Compared to the volume of research
published annually on nearly every other facet of the war, this is indicative of a
historiographic field in its infancy.

This gap started to fill following the advent of cultural history as historians
began to look beyond the established military policies, prison-camp records, and
archaeological evidence. As a result, the last fifteen years have seen a
demonstrable increase in research into the prisoner-of-war experience: articles in
scholarly and popular journals encompassed the treatment of black soldiers and
women prisoners, among others. The approaches followed by these monographs
and articles tend to fall into three broad categories. First, some scholars, such as
Ann Fabian, Reid Mitchell, and Glenn Robins, situate the prisoner-of-war issue
within broader contexts of national narrative and modern understandings of
“Total War.”

Histories of America's Deadliest Prison (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 2006); Robert Scott
Davis, "Near Andersonville: An Historical Note on Civil War Legend and Reality" Journal of
African American History 92, no. 1 (2007): 96-105; Robert Scott Davis, Andersonville Civil
War Prison (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010); Jesse Waggoner, "The Role of the
Physician: Eugene Sanger and a Standard of Care at the Elmira Prison Camp," Journal of
the History of Medicine & Allied Sciences 63, no. 1 (January 2008): 1-22; Benjamin G. Cloyd,
Haunted by Atrocity: Civil War Prisons in American Memory (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana
State University Press, 2010).

14 See Michael P. Gray, The Business of Captivity: Elmira and Its Civil War Prison (Kent, OH:
Kent State University Press, 2001); Michael Horigan, Elmira: Death Camp of the North.
Mechanicsburg (PA: Stackpole Books, 2002); T. Watson Jernigan, Death at Elmira: George
W. Jernigan, William Hoffman, and the Union Prison System (Master's Thesis: East
Tennessee State University, 2005); James M. Gillispie, Andersonvilles of the North: The
Myths and Realities of Northern Treatment of Civil War Confederate Prisoners (Denton, TX:
University of North Texas Press, 2008).

15 Ann Fabian, "Prisoners of War," in The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in
Jesse Waggoner\textsuperscript{16} focus on issues and populations closely connected with specific prisons. Finally, others, such as Michèle Butts, Gerald Prokopowicz, and Gregory Urwin have researched aspects of the prisoner of war experience not directly related to a prison experience \textit{per se}; their work ranges from prisoner parole/exchange, and defection, to racial atrocities committed by Southern white soldiers against Northern black soldiers.\textsuperscript{17}

In any attempt to study the Civil War prisoner issue comprehensively, three problems become apparent. First, neither side initially expected to deal with large numbers of prisoners for extended periods, so neither side developed a standard policy when the war began. Second, as the two sides developed policies for the treatment of prisoners of war, individually or through cartel agreements, as part of a thought-out process or on an \textit{ad hoc} basis, these policies exhibited little coherence or uniformity. Third, due in no small measure to


the infamy of Andersonville prison in the South, most historical research has tended to focus on the Southern prison system. Thus, while there are a number of recent studies on Southern prisons, there are far fewer on Northern prisons, some of which are comparable with Andersonville for inhumane treatment. This scholarly bias makes any comprehensive treatment of this issue problematic because the extant research tends to focus more on Southern policy and actual treatment of prisoners rather than a more comprehensive perspective. Scholars are only now seriously examining the minority populations within prison camps (e.g., blacks and women), as well as the elements of the prisoner-of-war policy that do not neatly fit into modern assumptions and definitions of prisoners of war.

**Current Historiography**

While some historians have done important research in the field of Civil War prisoners, especially in the form of journal articles, no books treat the totality of the prisoner-of-war experience. The modern historiography of Civil War prisoners of war began with Hesseltine’s book of 1930. As his title suggests, Hesseltine is interested in the psychology of warfare more than the issue of prisoners of war *per se*, although his research points to the inseparable connection between the two. Indeed, fundamental to his research is the idea that the release of prisoners at the end of the war “did not mark the end of the psychosis which had been engendered in the minds of the people during the
conflict.”\textsuperscript{18} Hesseltine argues that the entire issue of prisoner exchange during the Civil War was politically motivated and charged. Specifically, Hesseltine argues that the Confederate government desired a formalized prisoner exchange system because that would be a \textit{de facto} acknowledgment by the United States of its status as a free and independent nation.\textsuperscript{19}

More recently, in \textit{Portals to Hell}, Lonnie Speer surveys more than 150 prison camps throughout the North and South, the vast majority of permanent and semi-permanent holding facilities. Practically an encyclopedia, Speer’s book describes the camps’ environment and conditions, noting the principal causes of prisoner privation in each case, which varied widely. While acknowledging that prisoners were abused by their captors at many if not all of these camps, and that prisoners were frequently the target of retaliation, he attributes most of the general privations to lack of resources and planning combined with a surfeit of neglect. For both sides, “developing strategy and keeping the force equipped and supplied remain[ed] the prime concern of the authorities, while the welfare of POWs remain[ed] a low priority.”\textsuperscript{20} By contrast, Charles W. Sanders, Jr., in \textit{While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War}, argues “that although difficulties such as organizational incompetence, inexperience, and chronic shortages of essential resources certainly contributed to the horrors in

\textsuperscript{18} Hesseltine, \textit{Civil War Prisons}, 233.

\textsuperscript{19} Hesseltine, 7.

\textsuperscript{20} Speer, \textit{Portals to Hell}, xvii.
the camps, these factors pale to insignificance when compared to the
devastation wrought by Union and Confederate leaders who knew full well the
horrific toll of misery and death their decisions and actions would exact in the
camps." 21 In simpler and more contemporary terms, Sanders compares Civil War
prison camps with concentration camps, albeit of a different variety. More
focused on the prison system than individual prisons, Sanders explores the
developments in prisoner policy throughout the war, in the North and South,
including detailed information on prison conditions and the controversial subject
of prisoner exchange.

Other scholars have studied individual prisons in depth and identified
specific examples of abuse within that camp, without necessarily providing any
direct link to institutional or systemic abuse. For example, Jesse Waggoner’s
discussion of Dr. Eugene Sanger at Elmira prison in New York conveys the clear
impression of an intentional program of maltreatment that denied proper rations
and care to Confederate prisoners, even when such care was available. 22 While
there is evidence that Sanger worked to reduce the unsanitary conditions related
to a stagnant pond in the camp, this could be attributed as much to the era’s
prevalent idea that this caused “bad air, which could affect the guards as well as
the prisoners.” Sanger did not bother to vaccinate prisoners against smallpox

21 Charles W Sanders, Jr., While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War

even as an epidemic began among the prisoners of war, and may even have
“deliberately left a source of a deadly infection in an overcrowded barrack.”
Such allegations of deliberate maltreatment are harder to identify at
Andersonville but, according to Waggoner, were essentially institutional at
Elmira.

Other historians have studied individual prisons as case studies of broader
issues of prison policy and its effects on prisoners; these studies comprise the
largest portion of scholarship on Civil War prisoners of war. In his examination of
Camp Douglas near Chicago, Illinois, George Levy concludes that the obduracy
of the military officials and the willful withholding of resources by the federal
government led directly to the suffering and deaths of thousands of Confederate
prisoners confined there. In his study of Andersonville Prison in Georgia,
William Marvel argues that Union prisoners endured some of the most deplorable
conditions due to a chronic shortage of food, medical supplies, and other
necessities beyond the Confederacy’s ability to control or alleviate. Roger
Pickenpaugh examined the Union prison at Camp Chase near Columbus, Ohio,
to discern elements of change in Union prison policy as the camp transitioned
from a training camp for Union soldiers to a prison for captured Confederates to
concurrent facility for holding detained Union soldiers released from the

24 George Levy, To Die in Chicago: Confederate Prisoners at Camp Douglas 1862-65
Confederates on parole and through the collapse of the exchange cartel to the end of the war. In *Captives in Gray* and *Captives in Blue*, Pickenpaugh examined the treatment of prisoners in the North and South and these two books, combined with Sanders’s *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, provide a solid, if incomplete, perspective on the respective prison systems. While Andersonville has historically received much notoriety as the worst prison established by either side, James M. Gillispie argues convincingly that numerous prisons in the North were at least as bad as Andersonville, even when they had access to an abundance of potential supplies to support their prisoners.

Before the establishment of the Geneva Conventions (the first Geneva Convention resulted in a treaty signed August 22, 1864; the United States was not a signatory), how governments should treat prisoners of war they had captured was merely a developing theory. During the Civil War, there was no official code until Francis Lieber, at the behest of Union Commander-in-Chief General Henry Halleck, developed the code that defined how the Union army should treat its captives. In *Lincoln’s Code: The Laws of War in American History*, one of the most recent scholarly works on the legal issues of how


28 Gillispie, *Andersonvilles of the North*. 
prisoners should be treated, John Fabian Witt has examined the development of
Union policy on this subject. Witt argues that, even as it codified certain
protections for prisoners of war, the code Lieber drafted and Lincoln approved
“was not merely a constraint on the tactics of the Union . . . [but] also a weapon
for the achievement of Union war aims. . . . It [was] not just a humanitarian shield
. . . it was also a sword of justice, a way of advancing the Emancipation
Proclamation and of arming the 200,000 black soldiers who would help to end
slavery.”29 The treatment of prisoners was so politically and culturally charged
that accusations of mistreatment were common during the Civil War and
continued after the war, along with justifications by each side for its own
treatment of prisoners. Part of a recent trend toward the study of cultural
memory, Benjamin G. Cloyd, in Haunted by Atrocity: Civil War Prisons in
American Memory, studies the persistent controversies that surrounded, and still
surround, how Americans treated Americans captured on the battlefield.30 Cloyd
also examines the contentious nature of memory as individuals on both sides,
whether for personal or political purposes, tried to find meaning in the prisoner-
of-war experience through examinations of the political and humanitarian
deficiencies that served as a warning “to be on guard against mankind’s inherent

29 John Fabian Witt, Lincoln’s Code: The Laws of War in American History (New York: Free

30 Benjamin G. Cloyd, Haunted by Atrocity: Civil War Prisons in American Memory (Baton
Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).
potential for evil,“31 and even came to memorialize the camps where so much suffering occurred.

The issue of the treatment of black prisoners of war by the South was to have signal importance toward Union policy regarding Confederate prisoners of war. Officially, the South decreed that black soldiers and their white officers would be subject to summary execution as being in servile rebellion or of inciting servile rebellion. While the Confederacy never actually put this decree into practice through any legal means, some scholars have explored examples of atrocities committed by white Southern soldiers against black soldiers on the battlefield. Gregory Urwin examines this directly in an essay on racial atrocities and reprisals in Arkansas. Separate treatment for black prisoners of war held by the Confederacy was the rule during the Civil War. Scholars such as Urwin have reviewed instances of murder on the battlefield, and black soldiers’ treatment as slaves in prison camps and the refusal of the South to allow their inclusion in the exchange cartel.32 Scholars have not yet studied these disparate circumstances comprehensively to achieve a better understanding of black soldiers’ experiences in captivity during the Civil War.

31 Cloyd, Haunted by Atrocity, 181.

32 See Urwin, "'We Cannot Treat Negroes...as Prisoners of War,'" 193-210; Gregory J. Urwin, editor, Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 2004); Robins, "Race, Repatriation, and Galvanized Rebels," 117-140; George S. Burkhardt, Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 2007).
In my study of the prisoner-of-war condition during the American Civil War, my findings contrast starkly with those of Prokopowicz, who argued that the process of prisoner parole and exchange during the war served to satisfy needs of honor and practicality, providing for a means of handling large numbers of prisoners without having to confine them for lengthy periods of time, and that this process ameliorated the suffering of thousands of prisoners while it was functional. However, Prokopowicz ignores completely the trauma of surrender and glosses quickly over the issues associated with captivity while awaiting parole and exchange. He notes that “it was generally expected that once they gave their word of honor, or parole, prisoners taken in battle could safely be released,” but does not discuss what happened between capture and parole. Nor does he adequately address prisoners’ suffering while awaiting parole, writing simply that Northern politicians felt “mounting pressure . . . to bring home the men who were languishing in Southern prisons.”33 As this dissertation will show, the prisoners’ suffering did not begin with the collapse of agreements to exchange prisoners. Rather, their suffering began at the moment of capture. Even for those exchanged in relatively short order during the early years of the war, conditions in the prison camps where they were held were frequently horrendous and led to the deaths of thousands of prisoners while they waited for their respective governments to agree on terms of exchange. Based primarily on official sources related to the process of paroling and exchanging prisoners,

Prokopowicz’s work ignores or discounts how traumatic and deadly captivity could be for Civil War prisoners, even when both sides were willing to exchange their prisoners.

In a similar vein, this dissertation differs markedly from Díaz’s dissertation, which focuses on the communities that prisoners formed within prison and contends that prisons “became undisciplined and unmanageable facilities nominally controlled by prison authorities, but effectively in the hands of the prisoners themselves.” While acknowledging that prison life was difficult and deadly for many prisoners, Díaz intentionally bypasses much of that misery to focus on ways in which prisoners exercised their own agency in controlling the environment in which they were kept. Employing much the same kind of evidence that I have used here, Díaz concludes that prisoners exercised a great deal of control over their prison environment, including maintenance of internal order and engaging in mercantile activities with sutlers, guards, and other prisoners, using cash, barter, and tobacco as currency. For Díaz, these activities represent means by which prisoners endured captivity and transformed their experiences into a positive expression of their humanity. He emphasizes that “for the outnumbered . . . guards, maintaining order in the prison was not possible.

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34 Díaz, “To Make the Best of Our Hard Lot,” 15.

35 Sutlers were civilian merchants who supplied provisions to soldiers at military camps; they were also frequently permitted to operate at military prisons, providing food, paper, pencils, and other items of interest to prisoners and guards alike.
The bulk of their energies were concentrated on preventing escapes.36 While there is some truth to this statement, it is equally true that keeping the prisoners confined and preventing escapes was all the guards needed to do, and on the whole prison guards on both sides of the conflict succeeded very well in this duty. In addition, there is little evidence that the prisoners succeeded in establishing sufficient internal order to carry out the most basic needs of many of the camps: sanitation and clean water. There is also truth to Díaz’s contention that prisoners were able to exercise a degree of agency through the rudimentary mercantile system they established within prison. The meager means at most prisoners’ disposal severely limited their ability to improve their lot in any significant manner, although the exchange and purchase of goods did permit many prisoners with opportunities to enhance their diet and physical comforts selectively at times.

**Extant Primary Sources**

Even though the subject of this dissertation has received relatively little attention, considerable extant primary sources lend themselves to a thorough and comprehensive study. These sources include official, archival sources detailing the treatment of prisoners of war; the published and unpublished personal narratives of soldiers captured during the war concerning their experiences and memories of being a prisoner of war; and print media reports of

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36 Díaz, “To Make the Best of Our Hard Lot,” 77.
the treatment of prisoners of war that both informed and reflected prevailing perspectives of how prisoners were being treated and, at least as important, how prisoners ought to be treated.

Because I have focused primarily on the letters, diaries, and journals of Civil War prisoners, I have not made extensive use of more official sources that greatly inform examinations of Civil War prisons from a case study or institutional basis. Nonetheless, some official records have proved useful in this study. First are the official reports drafted during and after the Civil War, especially the report of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, *Narrative of Privations and Sufferings of United States Officers and Soldiers while in the Hands of the Rebel Authorities*; and records of the U.S. War Department such as *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*; and *Exchange of Prisoners*. In addition, records of the general orders and directives issued by Union and Confederate field commanders, as well as some of their personal letters, speak directly to official and unofficial policies regarding how the combatants should treat prisoners of war, both on and off the battlefield.\(^{37}\)

Civil War prisoners wrote a plethora of published and unpublished works (journals, books, and articles) both during the war and afterward as veteran

narratives became a particularly popular genre by the 1880s. More important, however, is the large volume of unpublished diaries, letters, memoirs, and other correspondences of prisoners and former prisoners available in various archives, which shed important light on the attitudes of prisoners during captivity and their families at home. These sources provide an important research base for Civil War scholars in general, and I have relied heavily on them in this dissertation. Letters and diaries are examined here in particular detail to understand better why prisoners wrote what they did, and why they were at the same time silent on other matters. Memoirs are likewise a useful resource, regardless of whether or not they have been published, but their context is important, especially those that were published long after the war ended. Former prisoners also wrote memoirs during the war, or shortly thereafter, that are more immediate in context than those written much later. In nearly every case, whether private letter, diary, or widely published memoir, prisoners intended their writings for an audience, small or large, and this is an important contextual element.

In this dissertation, I have surveyed approximately 1,500 letters, diaries, and journals from numerous collections in several archives. I have occasionally augmented these with official records or accounts, but as my focus is on the conditions of captivity as the prisoners perceived them, these official sources held less intrinsic value for my research. Many of the historians noted above have also drawn heavily from the same types of sources, but their focus on policy or a particular institution has frequently led them to other records that speak more particularly to those aspects of Civil War prisons. While it can be argued
that such a relatively tight focus on the words of the prisoners carries with it an inherent bias because it does not provide a similar perspective from the guards or administrators of the prisons, it is the surest way to understand the prisoners and how they perceived the conditions of their captivity.

Chapter One of this dissertation examines the moment of captivity and prisoners' initial experiences after their capture and during transit to prison. Even under the most humane conditions, the very act of surrender was traumatic, degrading, and fraught with perils to health and life. Chapter Two explores the letters and diaries that prisoners wrote during their captivity and attempts to shed light on the specific value of these documents historically, as well as what they meant to those who wrote them and their intended audiences. It also provides an understanding of why and how prisoners wrote as well as what they left out of their letters and diaries. Chapter Three examines how the practice of parole and prisoner exchange affected prisoners' perspectives and hopes for a brief captivity and imminent return to their own lines. It also reveals how, even in the early years of the war, prisoners frequently despaired of being paroled for exchange, yet still grasped at every hint or rumor regarding their possible release. Chapter Four examines two interrelated issues regarding the use of deadly force on prisoners. First, captors at times refused to allow their prisoners to surrender and killed them instead. This most typically characterized Southern soldiers fueled by race hatred when confronted with black prisoners. Second, this chapter examines the prisoners' perceptions of the use of deadly force against them, even when safely held in prison. Finally, Chapter Five expands on this latter
theme to explain how the daily aspects of degradation by their captors, the prevalence of disease, and the deprivation of adequate food, shelter, and water reduced countless prisoners to a state of abject destitution. This in turn often fueled depression that diminished prisoners’ ability to endure the terrible conditions of prison.

The trauma of being a prisoner of war during this period is not initially perceptible in contemporary images, and one must look closely to discern prisoners’ attitudes, particularly in the moments immediately following capture. One example is a photograph (figure 1) showing Captain George Armstrong Custer of the 5th U.S. Cavalry seated next to his friend, Confederate Lieutenant J. B. Washington, and a young boy enslaved to Washington. Friends since West Point, the two officers served on opposite sides, and Custer captured Washington during the Battle of Fair Oaks around May 31, 1862. Although apparently cordial, it is clear on a closer inspection that Custer’s attitude reveals the confidence and certainty of a soldier, while Washington gazes uncertainly at Custer, his fate completely out of his control. Perhaps in response to the new, captive, status of his master, Washington’s slave looks down at his unshod feet in apparent and utter abjection. Even under the most humane and civilized conditions, the act of surrender entailed a humiliation that is evident in the faces of prisoners captured throughout the war, regardless of the circumstances. The reality of captivity during the Civil War revealed a dark side to the war that underlay contemporary ideas of civilized warfare and caused the deaths of tens of thousands of prisoners. In this dissertation, I hope to shed light on one of the
Figure 1: Lieut. Washington, a Confederate prisoner, and Capt. Custer, U.S.A. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Lot 10430, Item 428)

darkest aspects of the war and help remove it from the footnote of Civil War history to which it has too often been relegated.
I. “We Were Surrendered”

“It is impossible to describe the anguish of the troops when it was known that the surrender of the army was inevitable. Of all their trials, this was the greatest and hardest to endure.”¹

—Brigadier General Armistead Lindsay Long, Army of Northern Virginia

On January 3, 1910, Horace Harmon Lurton took the oath of office as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, even though President Taft had “been criticized for having appointed a man as old as Justice Lurton, who is now 66.”² However, the fact that he was then the oldest Supreme Court Justice at the time of appointment was not the most unusual aspect of his appointment. Rather, the events of his early adulthood set him apart from his peers. As he took the oath of office, vowing to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, Justice Lurton must surely have given some thought to another time in his life, many years before, and to a different cause and country he had sworn to defend. Early in 1861, following the establishment of the Confederate States of America and the firing on the United States garrison at Fort Sumter, Lurton left Douglas University in Chicago and travelled south with his parents. Sending them on to


their home in Clarksville, Tennessee, Lurton enlisted in the 5th Tennessee Infantry Regiment, then forming in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and he served the Confederacy unwaveringly for the remainder of the Civil War.

Lurton quickly rose to the rank of sergeant major but was given a medical discharge in February 1862 due to “a lung infection, and perhaps a case of battle fatigue as well.” He recuperated in Clarksville with his parents for less than three weeks before joining the 2nd Kentucky Infantry Regiment after learning of Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant’s advance up the Cumberland River not far away. Now a lieutenant, Lurton arrived with the 2nd Kentucky in time to take part in the Battle of Fort Donelson in mid-February 1862. Trapped at Fort Donelson by Grant’s army, the Confederates attempted to break out of their untenable position on February 15, launching a massive, early-morning attack on the Union right flank. Held in reserve for most of the morning, the 2nd Kentucky finally entered the battle around noon, just as the Union army began to weaken. Marching into withering Union musket fire, the regiment finally halted at point-blank range and fired into the enemy with devastating effect: “the once solid Union firing position melted into the brush,” chased down by Confederate infantry and the cavalry brigade commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Bedford.

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Forrest. Already a seasoned soldier, Lurton led his men across that field and risked his life for the cause he believed in, receiving only “a slight graze on my leg not at all painful.”

However bravely Lurton and his fellow Confederates fought, the arrival of Union reinforcements and Grant’s personal leadership changed the course of the battle that day, and the Confederates were forced to withdraw back behind their defensive earthworks. In a controversial war counsel held later that night, the Confederate commanders determined to surrender the fort the following day. Cementing a legend and a promotion for himself, Grant had won the battle and earned the sobriquet “Unconditional Surrender” because of his response to the Confederate request for terms: “no terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works.”

Lurton, along with an estimated 12,000 fellow Confederates, became a prisoner of war. After days under siege, probing attacks by Grant’s army, and a vicious, even hand-to-hand battle, Lurton found himself suddenly cast as a non-combatant.

More specifically, Lurton became a prisoner of war, completely subservient to the orders and treatment of his captors. This distinction is important. As a soldier, Lurton had always been subject to the orders of his

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5 Horace H. Lurton to Sarah Ann Harmon, February 17, 1862, Lurton Papers.

superiors, but those orders aligned with his purpose: the defeat of the enemy. Soldiers could also question their orders through proper channels and use of the chain-of-command if time and circumstance permitted. This was not so for the prisoner of war. For prisoners, captivity fundamentally removed their essential purpose, and their captors often had little or no inclination to heed complaints from their charges. Sergeant Major Robert H. Kellogg of the 16th Connecticut Infantry Regiment wrote of his thoughts the morning after his garrison surrendered to the Confederates at the Battle of Plymouth, North Carolina, in 1864, “Instead of the calls to which we had been wont to listen, and the labor we had been accustomed to perform, we were but passive beings, subject to the will of a conqueror.”\(^7\) For many soldiers, this fundamental change in condition was an important aspect in the experience of a prisoner of war, as was how they learned to internalize and handle their new circumstances. For prisoners of war, the moment of capture, and the realization that they no longer had an active role to play in support of their cause, was fraught with mental anguish, contradictions, internalized categorizations of experience, and denial. In some ways harder to bear than the rigors of combat, surrender to the enemy proved difficult for soldiers precisely because it relegated them to the sidelines and placed them under the direct control of the enemy they had fought and, sometimes, abhorred.

Being captured elicited deeply emotional responses from the prisoners, whose initial experiences also confronted them with a complete loss of active will.

\(^7\) Robert H. Kellogg, *Life and Death in Rebel Prisons* (Hartford, CT: L. Stebbins, 1865), 34.
and a separation from the world they had known, replacing it with an utter subordination to their guards and exposing them to their enemy’s culture and perspectives in a way many had never previously conceived. The shock of the sudden change in their circumstances also prompted prisoners to deflect, whenever possible, their role or responsibility in their captivity. For example, the day after his capture, Lurton wrote from Dover, Kentucky: “Dear Mother, After fighting bravely for 48 hours we were surrendered by Gen Pillow. I am well and not wounded except a slight graze on my leg not at all painful. I will write when ever opportunity occurs. We will probably be sent to Illinois.”

Most significant is the complete abnegation of personal responsibility indicated by the phrase: “we were surrendered.” Similar language appears in other letters as well, such as that of Captain L. Mauney, commanding Company F of the 11th Arkansas Infantry Regiment in a letter to his wife, “I drop you these lines to let you no that I am a prisoner of ware. We war surrendered at Island No 10 on the 8 ins arrived hear on 13 We ar tollerable well treated.”

James Sanders, captured in the same battle, also wrote his wife, “I this morning Seat my Self to Write you a few lines to Let you know that I am a prisner of War. We was Surrendered on the 8th Inst. at Island 10 and Brought to this place on 15th.”

After his capture, Lurton travelled

8 Horace H. Lurton to Sarah Ann Harmon, February 17, 1862, Lurton Papers.
9 L.F. Mauney to N.A.E. Mauney, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
10 James M. Sanders to his wife, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
north to Cairo, Illinois under guard, and from there to the prison camp at Camp Chase, Ohio. While he complained of a lack of money and clothes, Lurton described his greatest problem, that he “can not be happy when the mind is not free.”\(^{11}\) As evidence that Lurton did not consider himself permanently out of the fight, he escaped from Camp Chase within a few weeks and joined a Confederate cavalry regiment commanded by General John Hunt Morgan. After raiding throughout Kentucky, Lurton and Morgan’s Cavalry engaged in the deepest Confederate incursion into Union territory during the summer of 1863, where Union forces captured Lurton again during operations along the upper Ohio River. Ironically, had Lurton not escaped from Camp Chase the first time, he would have been exchanged with the rest of his regiment, which was soon reconstituted and took part in the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862.

**Surrendering to the Enemy**

Prisoners struggled to cope with their new captivity, often in a state of shock, depression, and anger resembling the five stages of grief and loss developed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.\(^{12}\) While it is not possible at this remove in time to determine how closely prisoners’ experiences matched her model, the surviving evidence from their letters, diaries and memoirs, both published and unpublished, reveals very

\(^{11}\) Horace H. Lurton to A. W. B. Allen, March 7, 1862, Lurton Papers.

similar emotional states and strongly implies that sudden captivity affected
prisoners as deeply and personally as the death of family, friends, or comrades.
While the particular experiences of any soldier, officer or enlisted, Union or
Confederate, who became a prisoner of war varied, they shared feelings of
depression and shock over the event itself, and a strong sense of loss for their
previous freedom, which often manifested in expressions of regret at the loss of
personal possessions. They frequently revealed a strong need to defend their
actions or the circumstances that led to their captivity. Diaries and letters of
prisoners of war, North and South, attest to the deep-felt humiliation associated
with capture. Like Lurton’s account, Civil War diaries and letters frequently only
allude to personal feelings and emotional status, but nonetheless reveal how
deeply their new status affected them.

Depression and shock were the natural reaction of most prisoners,
particularly at the moment of their capture and for the first days or weeks of
captivity as they internalized and assimilated their new situation. At times,
soldiers expressed their feelings of depression to family and friends. Following his
capture at the Battle of Shiloh, Private Seth J. Crowhurst of the 12th Iowa Infantry
Regiment wrote his father, “the white flag was finally raised and we were
prisoners, we were forced to ‘lay down’ the arms we had ‘taken up in the defense
of our country. And suffer ourselves to be marched to a southern prison.’”

Seth J. Crowhurst to his father, October 24, 1862, Crowhurst Family Papers, Civil War
Document Collection, U.S. Army Military History Institute. Crowhurst received several
his personal reflections and feelings about the surrender, he wrote, “as we started away I saw officers high in rank shedding tears, I shed no tears but that nights walk was a lonely and sad one to me, I was thinking of home wondering if I would ever get back thinking it was disgraceful to be a prisoner of war and wondering how we would be treated.”

Crowhurst later described how “officers wept as they waved their handkerchiefs in token of surrender.”

Prisoners’ feelings of shock rendered them almost incapable of accepting what was happening to them and resulted in expressions of stupefaction and numbness. Union cavalry captured Captain Robert Bingham, commanding Company G of the 44th North Carolina Infantry Regiment, on June 26, 1863 at Hanover Junction, Virginia during the Gettysburg campaign. Of his surrender, Bingham wrote, "- I was stupefied at the time we were captured - not stunned, for

promotions during his military service and mustered out of the military as Fourth Sergeant on January 20, 1866.
I had my wits about me - but I cared for nothing - felt nothing." Private Henry Harrison Eby of the 7th Illinois Cavalry Regiment, a mounted orderly on the staff of Major General John M. Palmer, was captured in the early evening of the second day of the Battle of Chickamauga and later wrote: "I cannot describe the state of my mind just then, but guess I felt some like the boy, after getting a good whipping which he did not deserve, very despondent." Later, as he tried to get some rest and contemplated his condition, he recalled thinking that he "felt like a criminal under death sentence on the night previous to execution, as considered confinement in southern military prisons equivalent to a death sentence." Eby’s feelings of helplessness and hopelessness matched Bingham’s explicit references to emotional numbness. Eby also evinced depression when he wrote, “I feared that I could send no letters to the folks at home, and if ever a person had the blues I had them that night of Sept. 20, 1863." Like most soldiers, Eby was mentally ready and prepared to be wounded or even killed in service, but never expected to become a prisoner of war. On this point, Eby admitted, "being made a prisoner of war was something that I had never thought to experience." 

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16 Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

17 Henry Harrison Eby, Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons-1861 to 1865 (Mendota, IL: Henry Harrison Eby, 1910), 126.

18 Eby, Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons, 128.

19 Eby, Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons, 128.

20 Eby, Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons, 128.
The sense of numbness continued long after the initial shock of being captured. As he traveled by steamer to Norfolk, Virginia, Bingham remembered, “during the sail down the Pamunky & York I was in a sort of comatose state, numbed. I did not admire the beauties of the river scenery. I cared nothing for it. I never felt so before.”21 His diary recorded a complete state of shock, denial, and disbelief: on reaching the Union Prison at Norfolk on June 29, 1863, Bingham wrote, “I felt stolid - and even the sight of the prison, the iron grating & heavy iron door made no impression - caused no shudder. I wondered that it did not.”22 Captain W. A. Wash of Company I, 60th Tennessee Infantry Regiment was captured by the Union at the Battle of Big Black River Bridge in Mississippi on May 17, 1863 and transported to the prison at Johnson’s Island, Ohio. In his memoir, he encapsulated similar feelings of shock and and lack of will: “I and many others shed tears for a few moments. . . . powerless now. We are prisoners of war, subject to the will and mandates of those into whose hands we have fallen.”23

Anger and grief intertwined in prisoners’ reactions to the necessity of their surrender. Thomas Dabney Wier, a corporal in company B, 14th Mississippi Infantry Regiment, poignantly described the anger fueled by shock that he and

21 Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
22 Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
23 W. A. Wash, Camp, Field and Prison Life: Containing Sketches of Service in the South, and the Experience, Incidents and Observations Connected with Almost Two Years Imprisonment at Johnson’s Island, Ohio, Where 3,000 Confederate Officers were Confined (Saint Louis, MO: Southwestern Book and Publishing Co., 1870), 48-50.
other Confederates felt when they learned their commanders surrendered Fort Donelson to General Grant and they were now prisoners of war: “morning at last came – The feelings of the Soldiers Cannot be described. When they beheld the flag floating from our works as a Sign we had been Surrendered – Some broke their guns others threw them in the river & many raved & cursed I gave vent to a Small oath for which ‘I hope’ the recording angel drooped a tear upon it as he wrote it down & blotted it out forever against me’ twas the prompting of a heart which beat only for the South.” After venting his anger and describing that of his fellow soldiers, Wier wrote of the sense of grief and resignation felt by the garrison: “all regret having to Surrender.” He ended this entry almost plaintively, describing the exhaustion of the Confederate prisoners, as much mental as physical: “night comes on we lie down to sleeps. it rains in the boys faces but they Sleep too Sound to know it until morning when they wake to find themselves & Blankets perfectly wet.”

Wier’s experiences and descriptions encapsulated the situation experienced by Lurton as well, as they served in the same brigade on the same part on the battlefield. John R. King of the 25th Virginia Infantry

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24 Note the verb construction and disassociation implicit in this phrasing, which is similar to many other references prisoners make to their capture by the enemy, both distancing themselves from the act of surrender and simultaneously repudiating any personal responsibility for it.

25 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 16, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

26 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 16, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

27 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 16, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
Regiment was captured during the vicious fighting at the Bloody Angle at the Battle of Spotsylvania. Although having thrown down his gun, King also described his refusal to accept his new circumstances as he "and others of our Company enraged because we were taken did rash things. With a big sharp knife in hand I cut and slashed around in a disorderly way, until a very young Yankee boy appeared who looked up into my face so kindly and lovingly and spoke so gentle to me that my foolish anger vanished."28

Prisoners frequently expressed a resignation to their fate as they tried to accept their new status. Bingham’s captors first took him to Norfolk, Virginia, where he began a private diary meant for his wife, Della Worth Bingham. Of his capture, he wrote, “well, we did our duty, and no action of our own could have altered the result. It was simply inevitable and as the will of God we submit, tho’ humanly it is painful - humiliating.”29 Bingham revealed in these few words how hard it was to accept his new situation; he could only fathom it as the will of God, to which there was no appeal. Some prisoners used diaristic therapy to cope with their captivity, as Captain William D. Wilkins of the 46th Pennsylvania Infantry, captured during the Battle of Cedar Mountain, admitted when he wrote, “I may as well to divert my mind from constantly dwelling on my sad fate and on the

28 John R. King, My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons Written from Memory (Clarksburg, WV: Stonewall Jackson Chapter No. 1333 United Daughters of the Confederacy), 25-26.

29 Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
hardships which surround me, commence a record of my life of captivity.”

Wilkins’ despair is evident, as is his hope that the experience may cause future trials to pale in comparison. It is worthwhile to note here that this entry was written on August 12, 1862, just three days after his capture and at a time in the war when many soldiers expected a relatively speedy exchange and return to duty.

Prisoners’ loss of freedom was painfully clear to them from the moment of their capture. Not only were they suddenly under guard, their status changed from soldiers to prisoners, but also their captors immediately stripped them of their weapons, as well as other items of personal property in many cases. Prisoners often expressed personal connections to their weapons and other items of uniform issue or steeds taken from them, some of which became personified in the minds of the soldier, whether animate or inanimate.

Immediately after his capture, Bingham recalled his captors disarming him as they took him prisoner, “I hated to give up my sword, but it was a common one, & being my associate only since the war & not connected with my life before the war, I let it go with comparative composure – tho’ I did want to hang it up in my study after the war & show it to my children.” The sidearm he surrendered, however, evoked far deeper feelings because of its connection with his life before the war. Of its loss, he wrote, “but my pistol. I had had it so long. It had afforded

30 William D. Wilkins, diary, August 12, 1862, William D. Wilkins Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
me so much amusement. I had practiced with it with so many friends—girls . . . but the loss of my pistol . . . I felt it most keenly. But I had to submit not only to the loss but to a sort of a cursing from Col. Spears for my tardiness about giving up my arms."31 When his mount was taken from him, Eby wrote that he “bade good-bye to my faithful horse, rubbing my hand down over her honest face as we parted. But now at our final separation came over me a more piercing sense of the loss of my honest four-footed friend, that was always so willing and ready to do her duty.”32 At the risk of being caught as a spy, and in a bold attempt to escape capture, B. T. Holliday of Chew’s Battery in Stuarts Horse Artillery obtained civilian clothes from a slave at a nearby farm and later wrote that he “took off my grey uniform, which with my cadet cap, I left in a pile in the patch of corn. On the discarded jacket was a half dozen Virginia Staff buttons that I had recently paid forty dollars for in Staunton. I was loath to leave them behind, but I could not risk having them found on my person.”33

As part of their efforts to accept captivity, prisoners did more than deflect responsibility for their surrender onto their commanders. They also strove to defend the actions of their unit prior to its surrender and place it within the context of an unavoidable result after they had expended every shred of possible resistance to the enemy. Their efforts to explain and defend themselves to family

31 Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

32 Eby, Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons, 128.

and friends frequently revealed this need. For instance, Henry Brown, a private in Company F, 27th Virginia Infantry Regiment, wrote a friend, Ann Bolton of Roseland, Virginia, to explain that his capture by the Union was only occasioned because of his wounds: "fell in the hands of the yankees on the 5th day of last July being severely wounded." The night before his surrender, Wier recorded the resolution felt by the Confederates, "night Comes on We Stand on our Arms. Evry one expects bloody work with comeing morn – Stearn determination to do or die Sits ion evry brow – the Boys have worked & fought hard with out Sleep & but little food for 5 days. But not a murmer escapes their lips.” However, the next day Wier defended his garrison’s capitulation: “it was folly to have held out longer. for our forces were out numbered 5 to one & then were worn out with hard work, Exposure, cold & want of Sleep. And the enemy was reinforced during the night by 20,000 fresh troops." Regardless of the military merits of the surrender of the Confederate garrison, the juxtaposition of these two diary entries, one written before the surrender and one immediately afterwards, shows Wier’s changed perception of his circumstances and the situation, as well as his need to make clear the garrison had only surrendered because further resistance was futile.

34 Henry Brown to Ann Bolton, April 24, 1864, Bolton Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
35 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 15-16, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
Often, soldiers focused not merely on the futility of resistance, but on the fierceness of the fighting and the certainty of death had the battle continued. Assigned to guard railroad bridges that secured the Army of Northern Virginia’s communication lines, Bingham and his small Confederate force of about eighty men were assaulted by the Union 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry, two companies of cavalry from California, and artillery numbering nearly 1,500 men. Forced to surrender “after a most desperate and hand-to-hand conflict with pistol, sabre and bayonet.” Bingham described in detail his men’s desperate fighting, while at the same time partly ascribing their surrender to fatigue: “my men fired badly. They were very unsteady from their rapid march from Taylorsville; but with this disadvantage we repulsed them handsomely. . . . Then [they] bro[ugh]t a much larger force across the river at a ford. . . . I watched . . . being certain that we would all be captured or slain unless our cavalry came to our relief, & this I did not at [all] expect. . . . It was useless.” Of his surrender, Seth Crowhurst wrote, “we were entirely surrounded. There was no way of escape. To attempt it would be death.”

Even in the middle of battle on some of the bloodiest battlefields and amid some of the fiercest fighting of the war, soldiers’ basic humanity and


37 Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

consideration towards the less fortunate often remained. Virginian John R. King described acts of mercy in the midst of the carnage he witnessed when captured during the vicious fighting at the Bloody Angle at the Battle of Spotsylvania, even as he proffered his explanation for how he became a prisoner through no fault of his own. King described how, while defending a line of breastworks against a strong Union attack, his regiment was suddenly attacked from the rear. In surprise, he looked and saw "a long line of Yankee soldiers with bayonets pointing at us, saying: 'Boys, Surrender!' They never fired again, but stood looking at us good naturedly. Of course we had to throw down our guns." Although they could have easily killed most or all of the Confederates, the Union soldiers chose to take them prisoner, an act of mercy for which at least one Union soldier paid with his life as King reported a Confederate killing a Yankee before throwing down his gun and another Confederate shot in the chest as he raised his gun to fire.39

More than a means of learning to accept how and why they became prisoners, defending the circumstances that resulted in their captivity served a practical purpose as well: it helped them fend off criticisms from other soldiers who had never experienced the humiliation of defeat and who often sharply criticized those who surrendered. Many of these soldiers felt that those who became prisoners had not fought hard and long enough. For instance, Colonel

39 John R. King, My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons, 24-25. This soldier, named John Keener, survived the shot because a case over his heart, in which he had kept a picture of his daughter, stopped the bullet.
Launcelot Maury of the 24th Virginia Infantry wrote in his diary on February 5, 1864 that even though he had been “most terribly wounded in action at the head of my Regiment was forced to go on duty,” and continued “yet I do this and will do anything else for the welfare of my country most cheerfully. I cannot be conquered. No! Not by the whole Yankee nation.” Of those who surrendered, he wrote a few weeks later, “as a general rule men who are taken prisoner are good for nothing - else finding themselves in a tight place they would fight their way out instead of surrendering to the enemy.” After the fall of Petersburg on April 2, 1865, Maury was captured at the Battle of Sailor’s Creek on April 6, 1865 along with most of the survivors of his regiment. The remnants of the 24th Virginia, numbering 22 men and no officers, surrendered to the Union with Lee at Appomattox Courthouse.

As shown above, despair and a tremendous sense of loss accompanied surrender, whether in the face of insurmountable odds or due to error amidst the fog of battle. Soldiers experienced surrender under a wide variety of circumstances but, seemingly regardless of how they fell into the hands of the enemy, prisoners expressed the need to defend themselves, their actions, and their unit, as well as ascribe blame for their surrender to their fatigue, lack of supplies, or the numerical superiority of the enemy. Although the particular circumstances of soldiers captured during battle varied considerably, their

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experiences, as related through letters and memoirs, share common traits of anger, disbelief, sorrow, helplessness, and acceptance: all traits associated with human emotional states following a great loss. In this case, the loss was nothing less than their freedom. From predominantly volunteer soldiers, prisoners came suddenly and completely under the absolute control of another, who could treat them with kindness, cruelty, or indifference depending on circumstance, mood, and proclivities.

**Treatment on the Battlefield and After**

The journey to prison was often rough. It consisted of long, hard marches, little or no rations provided by the enemy, cramped conditions in rail cars, and the ever-present danger of the prisoners' guards shooting them as they made their way inexorably to the prison that would serve as their home until they were paroled or exchanged, or the end of the war came. The guards treated prisoners kindly at times, but quite harshly at other times. At all times prisoners were under the complete control of their enemy and subject to their enemy's need to secure them and transport them to prison quickly. Whether surrendered *en masse* or taken on the battlefield, the process was much the same, chiefly differing in the speed with which the enemy handled them. Immediate disarming, as noted previously, was also a normal procedure that prisoners often recorded: “After being searched for pocket Knives, Bowies, Pistols, & etc We were crowded on the
upper & lower deck of the Stemr Stephen Decatur." Guards removed their prisoners from the battlefield as quickly as possible, usually taking them to a holding area nearby before beginning their journey to prison. After their capture, King and his comrades “were . . . taken through the Yankee lines . . . through at least two more lines of battle. . . . Those near were disorderly. It seemed as if every fellow thought he should assist in taking the prisoners, 3000 of us to the rear.” Afterwards, they “were conducted into an old field where we remained during the night. Here we found the greater number of our Regiment who had been made prisoners on the 5th of May in the wilderness.”

Prisoners captured in the midst of battle experienced rapidly changing circumstances that placed them in the hands of the enemy, often under dangerous and confusing circumstances. Their enemy conducted a rapid process of securing them, stripping them of their weapons, and sending them to the rear as quickly as possible. After Confederates captured Captain Wilkins at the Battle of Cedar Mountain, he wrote: "fell into the hands of the 14th Tenn. I was immediately seized dismounted, stripped of all except my . . . pocket book & hurried to the rear. Passing over the battle ground strewn with dead & wounded.” Wounded soldiers frequently became prisoners as the vicissitudes of battle brought the area where they fell or sought refuge under enemy control.

41 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 17, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
42 John R. King, My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons, 25-26.
43 William D. Wilkins, diary, August 12, 1862, William D. Wilkins Papers.
Corporal W. H. Merrell of the 27th New York State Volunteers, who was wounded in the chest at the Battle of First Manassas, related just such an instance. Merrell sought refuge in a stone house along with other wounded Union soldiers when “a body of troops halted at the stone building, entered with bayonets, and demanded a surrender! They were to all appearances as much intimidated as though they had anticipated a successful resistance. None was made, however.”

Although the situation readily lent itself to a tragic end for the wounded Union soldiers, Merrell reported, “no violence was offered to the prisoners, and in this connection, I may state that I saw no "bayoneting" whatever committed by the enemy at Bull Run. Our arms were delivered up, and a few moments afterward I was led and half-carried away to the quarters of Gen. Beauregard, situate at a distance of perhaps half a mile.”

A sense of reciprocity on the part of captors sometimes underlay acts of kindness. As Captain Sumner Upham Shearman of the 4th Rhode Island Volunteers related after his capture at the Battle of the Crater in July 1864,

44 W. H. Merrell, Five Months in Rebeldom, or Notes from the Diary of a Bull Run Prisoner, at Richmond (Rochester, NY: Abner & Dabney, 1862), 12. Merrell originally published this account in the Rochester Evening Express, to which he had sent regular "diary" entries of his war experiences from the time of his enlistment to the time of his release from captivity, a period covering roughly nine months. Merrell's reference to "bayoneting" is a specific refutation of pictorial accounts printed in the Northern Press, such as the image in Harper's Weekly, shown later in this dissertation. His refutation is particularly telling in the context of its original and subsequent publication, both of which occurred during the early years of the war. While his later account of captivity is not lacking in instances of neglect or ill treatment on the part of his captors, Merrell's account appears to be an attempt to describe objectively his experiences on the battlefield and as a prisoner.

45 Merrell, Five Months in Rebeldom, 12.
immediately after being told, in a successful attempt to cause him distress, the harrowing reality of Andersonville prison to which he was headed, another Confederate guard told him that "he did not believe in insulting a prisoner; that he had made up his mind never to insult a prisoner, because he had the feeling that he might some time be in the same position," clearly evincing a regard for his charges in hopes of receiving like treatment if he became a prisoner. Likewise, following his capture, Wier wrote, “they Said they would treat us well for they did not know when they would be in a like fix, and they said they never wanted to meet us in battle again.” While directly speaking to the combat toughness of the Confederates, the Union treatment of their enemies and their remarks also implied a desire to receive similar treatment should the situation be reversed in the future. Conversely, Roger Pickenpaugh, in Captives in Gray wrote, "the majority [of prisoners] recorded generally kind treatment from their original captors in the field. As they traveled farther from the front lines, the prisoners encountered guards who were much less compassionate. The captives attributed the change to the fact that the men at the front respected their enemies and could sympathize with their situation."  

46 Sumner Upham Shearman, Battle of the Crater and Experiences of Prison Life (Providence, RI: Rhode Island Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society, 1898), 17-18.

47 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 17, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

What Pickenpaugh does not mention, however, is that practical considerations of reciprocal treatment accounted for as much compassion on the field as respect, especially as many Union and Confederate armies consistently faced the same opponents in both the Eastern and Western theaters of the war. Even so, there is considerable evidence to show that captors exhibited as much hatred and animosity as respect toward their prisoners resulting from hatred of the enemy and the passions of the battlefield. There is no simple answer to why prisoners received kind treatment at times on the battlefield. After his capture at the Battle of First Bull Run, Merrell noted that, while he received kind treatment and care for his wounds on the battlefield after his capture, this "may have been exceptional, for I was afterwards subjected to frequent insults from private soldiers, though kindly treated, in general, by the 'Confederate' officers."49 That some captors were considerate of their charges is certain, however, as William Tillson of the 84th Illinois, captured at the Battle of Chickamauga, confirmed when he wrote, "some of the rebels are very kind give part of their rations to some of our hungry boys."50 In a similar vein, Bingham wrote, "all the fighting men treated us well, as well as could be."51

Hunger and lack of food in the immediate aftermath of their capture, which Union and Confederate soldiers alike frequently reported, had two basic causes.

49 Merrell, *Five Months in Rebeldom*, 12.


51 Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
First, the rapid movement and orderly chaos of Civil War armies as they maneuvered before, during, and after a battle largely precluded their ability to provide food for prisoners from their commissary stores. In fact, it was common practice in both armies to provide their soldiers with only three days’ worth of rations before any major movement or engagement to keep the commissary and the bulk of the supply wagons out of the army's way. Second, the captors’ principal concern when taking prisoners was to provide for their security and transport to the rear as quickly as possible; supplying the prisoners with provisions fell much lower among the army's priorities. Virginian John R. King wrote that others of his regiment whom he rejoined after his capture “were very hungry having had little to eat for four or five days and here is where Mr. Flat Cake came in advantageously. I divided it among old comrades and it appeased their hunger to some extent.”\textsuperscript{52} William Wilkins recounted scant food and treatment bordering on neglect as well following his capture: "marched through the night until 8 am - a repetition of insults from citizens and troops . . . then recd the first meal since our captivity 24 hours before, being raw rancid bacon & hard crackers. Then we were loaded together into a cattle car, covered with manure, & kept herein until the train arrived to take us to Richmond.”\textsuperscript{53} Colonel Carlton of

\textsuperscript{52} John R. King, My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons, 26. King was captured on May 12, a week after his comrades from the 25\textsuperscript{th} Virginia were captured during the Battle of the Wilderness. From his statement, these soldiers received some food during the first couple of days of captivity, but none during the intervening time, which was when the Union army maneuvered from the Wilderness to Spotsylvania.

\textsuperscript{53} William D. Wilkins, diary, August 12, 1862, William D. Wilkins Papers.
the 89th Ohio Infantry, captured on September 20, 1863, at the Battle of Chickamauga, wrote his wife, “We arrived here last night, pretty well used up. I received a couple of pretty smart raps from . . . bullets, which in addition to I was of sleep, poor food and general disgust renders me sore cross and very much dissatisfied with my situation.”

In addition to suffering from hunger and hardship as they travelled to prison, prisoners were also at risk of the guards shooting them. Tillson reported that “our boys are too independant set of fellows for prisoners. One was shot because he would not get off the beat of the guard when ordered to do three times.”

Captured at the Battle of Allatoona Pass in Georgia on October 4, 1864, Lieutenant Edward E. Dickerson of the 44th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment described a personal incident: “I got one of the guards to go to a house near by with me to see what we could find to eat. I bought a few potatoes. They had nothing else to eat themselves. The Reb Officer came after me and ordered me back to camp. Said he would have me shot. I told him ‘Alright’, but just wait until I get these potatoes, there is no use shooting a man on an empty stomach, and I am so thin your men could not hit me now, anyway.’ He made awful threats but I got the potatoes.”

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54 Caleb Henry Carlton to Sadie Carlton, October 1, 1863, Caleb Henry Carlton Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.


56 Edward E. Dickerson, diary, October 11, 1864, Edward E. Dickerson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. As a note of interest, the 44th Wisconsin Infantry was not part of the battle. Dickerson had been assigned to the 18th Wisconsin Infantry, but had just
Meeting the Enemy on the Home Front

Soldiers’ first real encounters with the civilian population of the enemy often occurred soon after their capture. This was particularly true of Southern soldiers, many of whom had never been North before the war nor during the war, with certain notable exceptions such as the those serving in the Army of Northern Virginia during the Maryland and Pennsylvania Campaigns of 1862 and 1863, and Morgan’s Raid into Indiana and Ohio concurrent with Lee’s Pennsylvania Campaign. By contrast, tens of thousands of Union soldiers gained at least some experience with Southern society and culture because Northern armies operated in the South throughout the war. Many Southern and, especially, Northern civilians encountered the enemy close up for the first time as prisoners of war were transported far from the front lines of the war. Many prisoners’ diaries describe these encounters and record their impressions of enemy civilians and, in many cases, the reactions of the civilian population to their first sight of the enemy, at close range and in no position to cause harm. Thomas Wier boarded the steamer *Stephen Decatur* for his journey to prison following his capture at Fort Donelson. Near St. Louis, Missouri, the steamer stopped to refuel with coal and he described the positive reactions of local Northerners in this border state to their first sight of Southern soldiers: “the citizens Show a decided preference for

received his promotion and orders to report to the 44th Wisconsin. He was captured during the Battle of Allatoona Pass, however, while he was still waiting for transportation to his new regiment.
the South. . . . the Ladies who were more oppen in their Simpathies – bought fruit & Tobacco and threw on board the boat.”

The prisoners discovered that many civilians had a keen interest in obtaining souvenirs from them whenever opportunity presented and in seeing what the enemy looked like. Wier wrote that at St. Louis, they were approached by large numbers of civilians who “were all very anxious to get any thing of rememberances from ‘Seceshee’ or Dixie – Mississippi buttons Seemed to set them all on fire – and in their eagerness to get to get them would run the risk of falling into the river.” Corporal Merrell also mentioned the curiosity of collecting souvenirs, especially buttons, and described the exchange of a small secession flag for buttons from his coat sleeve. Practically mirroring Merrell’s remarks, Tillson remarked wryly, “one woman in Georgia it is said came fifteen miles to see us. Said she had herd that Yankees had horns finally acknowledged us to be fine fellows and fed it is said several of the boys.” Humorously, Wier described another encounter with Northerners as the Confederate prisoners were taken from the cattle cars that carried them the last major leg of the journey and marched through Chicago, Illinois. As they “marched through the Streets to the Barracks at Camp Douglas – Crowds pressed round to ‘See the Secesh’ and

57 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 21, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
58 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 21, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
59 Merrell, Five Months in Rebeldom, 15-16.
60 William H. Tillson, diary, September 27, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.
looked Surprised at not finding them with claws & a tail – We Whistled Dixie as we passed through the Streets to Camp Douglas.”

Civilians frequently turned out to watch prisoners march by. Of his experience, Kellogg wrote, “crowds of women and children lined the roadside, apparently eager to get even a glimpse of the 'yankees,' of whom they had heard such fearful things, but we marked what seemed to us a look of surprise, as they surveyed what was unquestionably a set of decent, respectable looking fellows.”

Not all interactions between civilians and prisoners were as harmonious and prisoners often endured taunts and other verbal abuses. After his capture at the Battle of the Crater, Captain Shearman of the 4th Rhode Island Volunteers was marched through the streets of Petersburg as Confederate soldiers took the prisoners to the rear. Of this experience, he later wrote, “In the morning the Confederates took the officers and the negroes who had been captured in battle and arranged us in an order like this: four officers, four negroes, four officers, four negroes, and so on, until all the officers and negroes were formed into a line of that character. Then they marched us all over the town of Petersburg, through the streets, to show us up to the inhabitants. The idea they had in view, I suppose, was to humiliate the officers,” by intermingling them with black soldiers. As the Confederates paraded the captives through the streets, many of the local civilians taunted them: “we passed one house, in the doorway of which stood a

61 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 23, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
62 Kellogg, Life and Death in Rebel Prisons, 36.
white woman, with a colored woman on either side of her, and as We passed I heard her say, ‘That is the way to treat the Yankees; mix them up with the niggers, they are so fond of them, mix them up.’” Her jibe may not have quite succeeded, at least for Shearman who “thought to myself that she was very much in the same position that we were,” as she was surrounded by blacks herself. More heatedly, “Another woman whom we passed, called out, saying that if she had her way she would put all those Yanks in front of a battery and mow them all down.”63 Tillson reported, “one woman in South Carolina threw rocks at us while passing. Also did a little boy in Georgia while passing a plantation.”64

Southern soldiers and civilians alike relished taunting Union prisoners with the fact that the South remained defiant after years of warfare and frequently described their fight as a struggle for independence. For instance, Tillson wrote that after reaching Atlanta “as well as other places it was threwed up that Seward said that we would whip them in three months and had not done it in two years and could never whip them.” In a similar vein, a Confederate officer told him, “we are a free people fighting for our independence.” Here, Tillson added ironically, “little did I think when I passed through Ringold the first time with the Union Army that it would be my fate soon afterwards to pass over the same road as a

63 Shearman, *Battle of the Crater and Experiences of Prison Life*, 16-17.

64 William H. Tillson, diary, September 27, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.
prisoner of war.”\textsuperscript{65} Julius Ramsdell of the 39\textsuperscript{th} Massachusetts Infantry Regiment also described taunting from civilians as he was marched through the streets of Petersburg after his capture on August 19, 1864, at the Second Battle of Weldon Road south of Petersburg: “while we were marching through the town, men and women and children came out to the gates of the houses and doors of the few shops there to see the ‘Yanks’ as they called us. At the same time singing out ‘You’ve got Petersburg now a’int you?’ ‘What youins come down here to fight weins for?’” Unchastened, Ramsdell wrote, “we answered by inquiring the price of flour etc, and told them we should soon come into the city in a way they would not rejoice over so much.”\textsuperscript{66}

What they saw of the enemy’s countryside often surprised prisoners, especially Union soldiers who were frequently astonished by the relative poverty of many of the rural areas they passed through. Lieutenant Edward Dickerson of the 44\textsuperscript{th} Wisconsin Infantry recorded a remarkably complete and perceptive description of Georgian civilians in his diary as he marched through that state following his capture at Allatoona Pass. His first such entry was, “the country is so very poor and rough and the people are so very poor, what we call the “Poor Whites.”\textsuperscript{67} Two days later he expanded on this, writing, “the country we have

\textsuperscript{65} William H. Tillson, diary, September 27, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary. Tillson was referring to United States Secretary of State William H. Seward.

\textsuperscript{66} Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 20, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

\textsuperscript{67} Edward E. Dickerson, diary, October 10, 1864, Edward E. Dickerson Papers.
been marching through is very poor and inhabited by the poorest, most shiftless set of Whites I have ever seen. They have nothing to eat and do not know how they are going to live this Winter.” Other surprises for Dickerson included the lack of men in the communities he saw due to the large number of Southerners serving in the Confederate army and the living conditions of those left behind: “there were none but women and children at home or in sight, and such homes! It is hard to describe to anyone that has not been in the country – no floors, no windows, no doors, hardly any roof and that of bark, no furniture of any kind, no clothing to speak of, a fire out of doors to cook by when they have anything to cook.” Amazed at the utter destitution of the local population, Dickerson marveled that “ninety per cent of their clothing for the women is just a single cotton shift, very much like the old style of underwear called a chemise. It comes just below the knee. The women are bare headed, bare armed, bare legs and bare feet, and they all chew the snuff stick or tobacco. The children are nearer naked, if possible, than the women.”

Dickerson was shocked by the impoverished standard of living, the famished condition of the citizenry and the threadbare condition of their clothing. He also remarked on women’s habit of chewing snuff sticks or tobacco, clearly using that as a distinctive point of contrast with his own, perceived cultural norms.

68 Edward E. Dickerson, diary, October 12, 1864, Edward E. Dickerson Papers.
69 For a perspective on Northern nationalism that excluded the South as culturally backward and economically stymied by slavery, see Susan-Mary Grant, North Over South: Northern
Other prisoners had much different impressions of the South and described urban centers that, if not rich and bustling at present because of the war, nonetheless reflected a more affluent and urbanized population than Dickerson experienced in rural Georgia. For example, Julius Ramsdell described Petersburg following his capture, giving a much different picture of the South, even after many months of a grueling siege: “in many places we saw where the houses and stores had been pierced and torn by the iron messengers sent from the ‘Petersburg Express’ Nothing seemed to be going on in the city. There were many large and handsome stores but were mostly closed. Fruit and bread seemed to be the principle articles of trade. Some of the boys who had money got the guard to buy them apples, and bread, three of the former for a dollar and a loaf of bread for two dollars.”

Others noted rich agricultural countryside, such as Chaplain Charles A. Humphreys of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry Regiment who, after his capture on July 6, 1864, in a cavalry skirmish against Mosby’s Raiders at Mt. Zion Church near Aldie, Virginia, was transported through the south to his prison. Passing through South Carolina, he wrote, “our oppressors had not the justification of poverty,-in their supplies of corn at least, for as we travelled through their country we could see that the fields, which before the war had yielded their rich tribute to King Cotton, now waved with abundant corn. But

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70 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 20, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
they were planted for other mouths than ours, and their tasselled tops only waved in mockery as we passed.”

While on their way to prison, prisoners frequently found themselves engaged in political discussions with guards and civilians alike. Following his capture at the First Battle of Manassas, Corporal Merrell of the 27th New York related that “at some villages the women thronged about the cars, offering refreshments to the wounded, both Union and Confederate, but more particularly to the former, whom they seemed to regard with mingled curiosity and favor. I suspected that the sympathies of some were even more deeply enlisted than they dared to avow.” He also reported, “we were invariably addressed as ‘Yankees,’ and there were frequent inquiries respecting ‘Old Scott, the traitor,’ and ‘Old Lincoln, the tyrant.’ The ladies generally expressed a benevolent desire to ‘get hold’ of the hero of Lundy's Lane, in order to string him up.”

Merrell related another, similar conversation with the daughter of a Confederate major who, he said, “came up to the window from which I leaned, and asked if she could do anything for me; and then added, ‘What did you come down here for?’” Merrell wrote that this question had become stereotyped already, implying that he and other prisoners had been asked this question numerous times, as they

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72 Merrell, *Five Months in Rebeldom*, 15. Brevet Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, in command of the Union army at the opening of the Civil War served as a Brigadier General commanding a Brigade of Infantry at the Battle of Lundy, fought during the War of 1812 on July 25, 1814 near Niagara Falls, Ontario.
journeyed from the battlefield as prisoners. He then added that he replied, "to protect the Stars and Stripes and preserve the Union." My questioner then proceeded, after the uniform custom, to berate Gen. Scott. 'That miserable Old Scott—a Virginian by birth—a traitor to his own State—we all hate him!' And the heightened color, the vindictive glance and the emphatic tones of the excited maiden, furnished assurance that her anger was unfeigned. But it quickly subsided, and after some further conversation, she took from her bonnet a miniature silken secession flag, which she handed to me, remarking that she thought I could fight as well for the 'Stars and Bars,' as for the Stars and Stripes. I playfully reminded her that she had just denounced Gen. Scott as a traitor to his own State, and if I should fight for the 'Stars and Bars,' I should be a traitor to the State of New York! This trivial argument was evidently a poser. Oh!. responded she, I had not thought of that!"73 Although perhaps embellished, Merrell's description of these conversations is representative of other interactions between civilians and prisoners as they passed by, especially early in the war. Another example comes from Captain Wash described a rather free political interchange between captors and captives shortly after the surrender: "the Yankee boys soon mixed all among us, and were anxious to know why we rebels were fighting so ardently against 'the best government the world ever saw.' Some would argue the subject matter like philosophers, others would get mad and fly off. There was an entire freedom of intercourse, and the Federal officers came in, too, and,  

73 Merrell, Five Months in Rebeldom, 15.
when they could distinguish them from the privates, talked with our ‘big officers’ about things in general.”74

Confederate guards also debated the issue of slavery, especially the North’s decision to enlist black soldiers into its regiments in May 1863. William Tillson described one such debate between Union prisoners and their Confederate guards, some of whom played cards with the prisoners: “his name the rebel is Smith and one of our boys Jones. So Smith & Jones to our dislike keep up a continual disturbance. Smith said he would feel mighty cheap to have a nigger to fight beside him. Throwing up the arming of the nigger. The racket caused much cursing.” He also wrote that same day about a conversation with a Georgian woman that “at one place quite an Aristocratic elderly lady came down to the train and conversed with us. Said you Noble men of the North West ought not to be under the Lincolns rule that we ought to be with them we were not Yankees but Western men Similar to Southerners. That only those of New England and Middle States to be Yankees. Said the Lincoln to be a monster and she hated him worse than a snail. She use to like to visit Washington but not since Abe Lincoln had been there.” This lady also berated Yankees for inciting slave insurrection, “Horrible to try to turn their slaves against them. Believed God to be upon their side.” This particular conversation appears to have angered Tillson; it certainly caught his attention as he devoted considerable space in his diary to it. He continued, “while talking with us she put on a dignified and

74 W. A. Wash, Camp, Field and Prison Life, 50.
contemptible air and sometimes was very sarcastic. Also said she was not exalting over a fallen foe, that was not their way. Her way made some of the boys angry, and some unpleasant things were said.”

The experience of being captured, transported far into enemy territory, and encountering the enemy’s civilian population was hectic, often confusing as prisoners had little idea what to expect, frequently surprising, and often surreal for many soldiers. Even before their arrival at prison, soldiers experienced hardships, trials, and dangers as they travelled from the battlefield to the prison. Aside from the ever-present danger of being shot, prisoners frequently suffered from hunger and exposure to the elements, largely due to the enemy’s inability to provide for them on or near the battlefield, or while they were in transit to their prison destinations. Even when prisoners were able to purchase food and other provisions with their own money, this only barely staved off what otherwise amounted to near-starvation rations before they reached the prisons. The very act of surrender left an indelible impression, leaving many prisoners shocked and emotionally overwhelmed. The transition from a free man to a prisoner, at the disposal and mercy of their captors, was a humiliating, troubling, and deeply disturbing experience.

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75 William H. Tillson, diary, September 27, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.
II. “I Will Now Try And Improve Some Leisure Moments”

“One valuable lesson I have learned. I have murmured at the separation from my wife as too painful - & when writing to her or reading her letters especially have I murmured – sinfully I know - at so lifeless, soulless a communion - & now I am punished & justly for it. & now if I could write freely to her & receive her letters so full of tenderness & love I would deem it a great blessing - & I think I will not murmur again while God separates us, if he allows us to correspond freely.”¹

— Robert Bingham

Once incarcerated, prisoners often turned their attention to writing letters to family and friends to maintain correspondences, let people know they were alive, and inform people where they were, and to keeping diaries in which they recorded their experiences and impressions of life in captivity. In I Fear I Shall Never Leave This Island: Life in a Civil War Prison, David R. Bush focuses on two singular aspects of prisoners’ letters: the process of delivery and the importance of letters as the prisoners’ sole connection with home. Bush writes, “the importance of communicating with family, especially a prisoner’s wife and children, is readily apparent. . . . Letters from home were the only source of comfort prisoners had to assure them all was well. The same was true for those

¹ Robert Bingham, diary, July 27, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.
waiting at home.”² Bush examines a select group of prisoners, Confederate officers held at Johnson’s Island, Ohio. An anthropologist, he uses letters as merely one example of material culture that survives from prison life at that camp. Deeper analysis of the content of prisoners’ letters and the circumstances in which they were written could answer several significant questions regarding prisoners’ experiences. For instance, what were the central concerns prisoners conveyed through their letters? In what ways did these concerns differ from those described in letters written by soldiers not in captivity? How much of what prisoners wrote can be attributed to their circumstances, rather than to prevailing epistolary practices, and is there any significance to the maintenance of standard practices? What are the limits to understanding the prisoner-of-war experience through letters as opposed to diaries, and do letters have any particular advantage over diaristic evidence in understanding the reactions of prisoners to their confinement? What purpose or salve, if any, did letters and diaries provide their authors?

Civil War soldiers derived their writing habits and expectations from the broader contexts of personal correspondence in the nineteenth century. Popular, widespread personal correspondence was slow to develop in the United States, due in part to a postal policy that kept the postage rates of private correspondence relatively high and was geared more towards the inexpensive

delivery and dissemination of newspapers and other “bulk” mail. This did not change until the late 1840s and early 1850s. As Richard John points out in *Spreading the News*, “prior to the passage of the Post Office Acts of 1845 and 1851, few Americans ever sent or received a letter through the mail.”³ As a result of the reduction in postal rates occasioned by these legislative acts, popular participation in letter writing dramatically increased, rising from 14 million letters mailed annually in 1830 to 130 million by 1856 with a related increase in the participation of people of all strata and demographics of society, including poor freemen as well as enslaved blacks who could now afford the price of postage.⁴ The generation that fought the Civil War was thus the first in American history to participate in a popularized mail experience where it became commonplace for average people to write letters, either to maintain a relationship with someone living far away or to keep in touch with a loved one temporarily absent from home. In addition, the soldiers who fought in the Civil War were “the most literate in history to that time. More than 90 percent of white Union soldiers and more than 80 percent of Confederate soldiers were literate, and most of them wrote


⁴ John, *Spreading the News*, 157. The cost of postage decreased from 25 – 75 cents or more depending on distance and the number of enclosures to a flat rate of 3 cents per ounce (see 159 and 162). Regarding slaves as postal patrons, see 158-159. John notes that slaves maintained correspondences with their masters, but does not delve into the reasons or mention if they used the mail for other purposes. While beyond the scope of this dissertation, this topic is worthy of further research on its own merits.
frequent letters to families and friends.”⁵ As broad sections of society who had never done so before began to compose letters, they also learned habits of writing (including certain formulaic compositional practices) and gained expectations of an efficient and speedy mail system that delivered mail every day of the week.⁶

In an examination of epistolic practice as genre in the nineteenth century, William Decker writes about a consistent practice among many correspondents of referring to the physical distance that separates them, the temporal distance since their last meeting, and how their correspondence would likely be conveyed.⁷ He further notes, “in letter after letter closure is made with reference to the writer’s abiding memory of the addressee, the hope that they will be reunited, and the transcendental principle of presence that upholds them and that renders their physical separation a transitory or illusory state.”⁸ While acknowledging that many new correspondents in the nineteenth century availed themselves of manuals and guidebooks intended to teach the art of letter writing, Decker argues that the stock phrases, which were frequently virtually identical between widely separated and disparate authors, result more from familiarity with

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⁶ Sunday mail delivery did not end until 1912.


the prose used in letters they received and read themselves. As this chapter will demonstrate, Decker’s contention that letter writers frequently employed common themes and “stock” phrases during the Civil War era is substantial and well supported. In a similar vein, David Henkin, in *The Postal Age*, refines Decker’s point, arguing that “the formulaic expressions at the start of personal letters appear to have been particularly common among postal users for whom written correspondence was most unfamiliar” and were resorted to most frequently by “enslaved African-Americans, recent immigrants from Europe, female mill workers just off the farm, Civil War soldiers from small towns, and rural migrants heading westward.”9 However, Henkin also speculates, “by the time of the Civil War, formulaic openings may also have begun to seem old-fashioned” and that, by the time of the Civil War, while “formulaic expressions were recognizable icons of personal correspondence . . . many letter writers took pride in avoiding them.”10 How then to account for their frequent presence in the letters of prisoners?

Before turning directly to that question, it is worth noting the contrast between prisoners’ writings and the letters and diaries of soldiers who were never prisoners or, at least up to the time of writing, had not become prisoners. This contrast becomes most visible among those who wrote letters or kept


diaries prior to becoming prisoners. For example, Thomas Wier’s diary, begun on
July 1, 1861, well before his surrender at Fort Donelson on February 16, 1862, is
written very conversationally before his capture. He incorporates tidbits of his
daily life including when he is on picket duty or expecting combat, the visits of
generals and even a furlough home he received to escort the body of a relative in
his regiment who had died. This tone would change after his capture.11

Many historians have used soldiers’ letters to foster understanding of the
war and the people who fought it. These historians draw from a wide range of
letters to explore soldiers’ motivations for fighting, political views, concern for
comrades, perspectives on personal and national patriotism, and pride in their
units. Soldiers often included specific references to the quality of their
commanders. James M. McPherson and Gary W. Gallagher highlight one of the
most important distinctions in the content of letters written by soldiers in the field:
their length and freedom of content allowed the writers to discuss a wide-ranging
variety of topics.12 By contrast, the brevity and censorship enforced on prisoners'
writing and the constraints of prison life tended strongly to engender myopic
perspectives of the world and current events, largely restricted to the prison and

11 Thomas D. Wier, diary, July 1, 1862 – February 15, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers, Albert
and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

12 James M. McPherson, For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War (Oxford:
Oxford University Press, 1997), 11-13; Gary Gallagher, The Confederate War: How Popular
Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could not Stave off Defeat (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 1997).
hopes for release. In addition, the added stress of captivity caused prisoners’ writing style to devolve to formulaic patterns.

**Anatomy of a Letter**

Letters comprised an important connection with home and family. This link was often fragile and tenuous, however, as numerous letters written by prisoners throughout the war clearly reveal. Several common formulaic expressions and themes are evident in many of these letters. The letters of Elias Winans Price of the 5th New York Heavy Artillery are an excellent example of the use of such formulas. Even though he was a Union soldier, Price was imprisoned in the North in a Union, parolee prisoner camp following his capture by Confederates and his subsequent release on parole. On September 9, 1862, he began a letter to his mother and sister, “I will improve the opportunity, while off Sentinel Duty, to write a few lines.” On December 22, 1862, he wrote to his sister, “I will now try and improve some leisure moments in writing to you.” In very similar language, Isaac McIntosh of the 28th North Carolina Infantry wrote his brother on the same day, “I tak the present opertuniy of writing you a few lines to let you know That I am well at present hoping those few line may find you all enjoying the same

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blessing.” On April 20, 1862, Charles B. Carter of the 52nd Virginia Infantry wrote his brother, James Carter, beginning his letter, “I seate myself this morning to Rite to you a few lines hoping they may find you and family all well.” He also wrote a letter to his wife the same day, saying, “it is With mutch Plesure that I seate my Self this morning to Rite you a few lines hoping that they may find you and the too litel Children All well.”

While the use of this formula is evident in many prisoners’ letters, the usage was not universal, but rather, it often indicated depression or stress. If the use of the opening formula were a matter of personal habit or a conscious attempt to achieve the desired formality, then one would expect its usage to be universal. However, letters written by the same correspondent to the same recipient during the same period do not necessarily reveal the same formula. For instance, Price opened a letter to his sister on November 11, 1862, “I must write to you, But, I must catch a few moments in the morning before I go to work, and at noon,” and somewhat later, on February 22, 1864, again in a letter to his sister, he began, “I rec’d both of your Letters, but I have not been so as to

15 Isaac McIntosh to Alexander McIntosh, December 22, 1862, Harriet R. McIntosh Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

16 Charles B. Carter to Eliza Carter, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

17 Elias Winans Price to Henrietta McDowell Price, November 11, 1862, Elias Winans Price Papers.
answer the last one.”¹⁸ More than just a distinction in the phraseology of his opening lines, Price appears to resort to formulaic opening passages when his letters are about particularly troubling issues and concerns that he needs to relate. For example, in his first letter of September 9, 1862, he was writing to describe the harrowing and humiliating experience of his first battle and his capture by Confederates, as well as the deplorable manner that the Union authorities treated him and the other parolees as they transferred to a parole camp. In his letter of December 22, 1862, he is clearly depressed and, after telling his sister that his regiment has finally been issued their muskets again, he admitted, “my heart is not with it. Could I be convinced, and know, that the Officers and Men were full of that ardent Patriotism that once stimulated American Hearts I might, and in fact I know I would feel different.”¹⁹

By contrast, the letters where the formula is missing reveal far less depression, as in Price’s letter of November 11, 1862, wherein he tried to explain the circumstances he found himself in as a paroled prisoner who, while not supposed to perform military duties under the terms of his parole, was pressured to do so by the Union military. On February 22, 1864, he wrote optimistically about the Union war effort, “last evening, Telegraphic News was received here of the Capture of 12,000 Rebels under Genl Polk. They were captured by Genl


Sherman one of our Best Generals. Our Grand Army still sweeping on.”

There is more reliance on formulaic expression in an attempt to place the most difficult and depressing events and feelings into a comforting context. In these instances, the formulaic opening may well serve as a kind of epistolary “deep breath” as the author worked his way into what he knew would be a troubling letter to write and, perhaps more importantly, for the recipient to read.

Although the formula noted above was common, other variants served the same purposes, as the letters of John Hampden “Ham” Chamberlayne reveal. A prospective lawyer who had passed the bar in 1860, Chamberlayne enlisted as a private in the 21st Virginia Infantry in the spring of 1861. Promoted to lieutenant, Chamberlayne served on the staff of Confederate General A.P. Hill throughout most of the campaign season, from the Seven Days through the Maryland Campaign. He was captured on June 28, 1863, during the Gettysburg Campaign, after which Chamberlayne wrote his mother to assure her that he had received a letter from her and to assure her that he was in good condition.

Chamberlayne’s letters home demonstrate a clear distinction between those he wrote while imprisoned and those he wrote both before his capture and after his release and exchange. While in prison, his letters usually began with some


variant of “your infinitely welcome message”\textsuperscript{22} or an example of his own diligence in writing, such as “I write every week to you & Mother.”\textsuperscript{23} However, the letters he wrote while not imprisoned rarely began in this manner, but tended more to jump immediately into his current circumstances and activities, with little connection to the “formulaic expressions” discussed above. Indeed, his letters written outside prisoner-of-war camps tended to be very much conversational, as his letter to his mother dated May 7, 1864 demonstrated by beginning simply: “here we are in a mile of where we struck their rear a year ago i.e. on plank road above Wilderness Church.”\textsuperscript{24} This is not to suggest that there were no “formulaic” passages in his non-prisoner letters, but that their instances were rarer and, again, tended more to accompany times of particular stress and difficulty. By contrast, opening passages written as a prisoner tended to rely on formulas and emphasize the point that captivity imposed a mental stress on prisoners that, in many respects, required them to resort more forcefully to set formulas and practices in order to construct their missives, particularly when writing to family and close friends.

Authors' uses of formulas to begin a letter that is difficult to write, and potentially for the reader to read, lead into some of the key themes that, while commonly present in nineteenth-century letters generally, occur frequently in

\textsuperscript{22} John Hampden Chamberlayne to Martha Burwell Chamberlayne, August 6, 1863, Chamberlayne Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{23} John Hampden Chamberlayne to Lucy Parke Bagby, August 12, 1863, Chamberlayne Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{24} John Hampden Chamberlayne to Martha Burwell Chamberlayne, May 7, 1864, 219, Chamberlayne Family Papers.
those written by prisoners of war. In particular, assurances of well-being, hopes for release, appeals to a benevolent deity, urgent requests for letters from loved ones, and, repeatedly, expressions of loneliness verging on despair are most prevalent. In an attempt to alleviate the concerns of his family regarding premature news of his demise, Confederate officer John Philip Thompson from Kentucky, captured on May 17, 1863, during Grant’s Vicksburg Campaign, wrote from the prison camp at Fort Delaware to Katy Cornelia about his capture and his concerns that she may not have received his last letter to her: “since I became a prisoner I wrote you a long letter, giving you good many of the details &c connected with my capture & imprisonment. I hope the letter may have reached you so as to have relieved your mind of any fears in the event the news of my imprisonment may have reached your ears.” He also revealed that he had read unsettling news in a newspaper that “teemed with ... misrepresentations of my capture and predicted for me all the tortures which a malicious heart could invent.” He further told her that he “just learned that the ‘Richmond Dispatch’ of the 22 contained an item from Jackson via mobile that I had been taken from the Jail in Louisville & hung. I fear this item may have met your observation and my letter alluded to failed to reach you.” Finally, Thompson used this occasion of writing to correct the misinformation regarding his circumstances that people may have previously read, and assured Katy that he was “most unequivocally the liveliest and most loyal Rebel you ever saw. I am in fine health & considering my surroundings in as good spirits as could be expected. Impatiently await the
adjustment of the difficulties that cause my detention here and will hail with Joy
unbounded the Cry of ‘All aboard for City Point.’”

In many cases, prisoners filled their letters with anxiety over whether
previous letters had been received and why people had not replied. While often
an element in soldier’s letters generally, this was compounded by the fact that
letters had to transit through Confederate and Union postal systems. Later
transferred to Johnson’s Island Prison near Sandusky, Ohio, where the Union
held all captured Confederate officers, Thompson encapsulated the frustrations
of waiting on letters from home and the frequent uncertainty about whether his
family received his letters at all. In a letter written to Katy on October 20, 1863,
Thompson began by expressing his relief and happiness at finally receiving a
letter from her, even as he pointed to the scarcity of her correspondence: “my
own dear Katy – You cannot concieve the very great joy I realized upon the recpt
on yesterday of your charming and most welcome letter of the 14th inst. being
the first time I have heard from you since you arrived at ‘Bellewood’ and with the
exception of one letter written by you about the first of August last, is the only
letter I have rec’d from you since I came to ‘Johnson's Island.’” He went on to
report his own diligence in attempting to maintain a steady correspondence,
writing, “I have written to you frequently and about the middle of Aug wrote you a
long letter to . . . in reply to the one alluded to above, which as you make no

25 John Philip Thompson to Katy Cornelia Cave Thompson, June 27, 1863, Cave Family
Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
mention of having rec'd I fear you are not get." He continued to complain at length that he had written many letters to her, but had received very few letters in reply. His closing statements clearly reveal his extreme anxiety as, with little else to do, he waited to hear from home: “Failing to recieve any answers to the letters I had written to either of you until I rec'd your letter on yesterday ackd'g the recp't of the two I wrote to you during the first of the month I began to fear something was going wrong, and my great uneasiness & continued disappointment in not hearing from you so annoyed me that I was disposed to be a little ill natured.” Thompson’s frustrations continued for nearly another two years, until he was able to write to Katy on June 8, 1865 that he had “signed the oath of allegiance and was given a pass to return to Kentucky.”26

The importance of mail to prisoners of war cannot be understated. With no military purpose left to them and little else to occupy their time except for the dreadful conditions associated with captivity, letters served as their only significant lifeline to their homes, families, and friends and often provided the only meaning and comfort in an otherwise dreary existence. In his first letter home since his capture at the Battle of Mill Springs on January 19, 1862, Confederate soldier Napoleon P. Blair wrote to his wife Nancy from Camp Chase, near Columbus, Ohio, that he was “in this place a prisoner” and reassured her that he “has my helth very well.” However, he urged that he had “bin studying about you

26 John Philip Thompson to Katy Cornelia Cave Thompson, October 20, 1863, Cave Family Papers.
if I could but hear from you I could bare my imprisonment mutch beter but I must content myself by thinking that you are in as good circumstances as if I was their.” He further implored her “to cher up and be in good cher,” and tried to assure her that “god will permit me to return sometime but I have no idea when that pleasure will be fulfilled.” On April 20, 1862, Charles Carter wrote his brother, describing his loneliness and hope to receive some word from home, “I have Ritin to you on ever Sunday since I have Bin In Prison and as it is Easter and I am Ionsom I will try an Rite to you as you all don't Rite to me and it would do me a good to have a leter from you to Read to any. But I have [none].” Here again, while reminding his family that he was writing to them faithfully every week, and describing the emotional relief that a letter from home would give him, he ended with a despairing comment that he had received no such letters to relieve his mind and his loneliness. W. C. Criner of the 27th Alabama Infantry was captured at Fort Donelson when Brigadier General Simon Bolivar Buckner surrendered the fort to General Grant on February 16, 1862. Two months later, Criner wrote to his wife, telling her how often he wrote her: “I write often hoping you will get some of my letters. Mcs Letter informed me you had got one. I hope you have received more ere this.” He also tried to provide a helpful hint about how she could send letters to him, saying, “it seems to me that you might get

27 Napoleon P. Blair to Nancy A. Blair, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

28 Charles B. Carter to Eliza Carter, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers.
letters to me by watching for a chance and send them through the lines or by a Flag of Truce. I am waiting patiently. Anxious to hear from you. I want a letter telling me of home and home things if I live to get home I expect to find things somewhat changed.” Perhaps in a further attempt to urge his wife to respond to him directly, he told her, “I get letters frequently from my brothers in laws and sisters in laws. They will send me almost any thing I want. I do not need much while in prison.” Likewise, writing from Camp Chase following his capture at Island No. 10 on April 9, 1862, A. G. Hammack concluded a letter to his brother with the blunt plea, “If you receive this for god sake write to me.”

Understanding that their captivity could be equally difficult emotionally for family and friends at home, prisoners' letters combined reassurances of their well-being with urgent pleas to receive any letters and news from home, and often explicitly noted their relief at receiving a letter from home and their assurances that their confinement would be more bearable as long as they continued to receive such letters. On February 7, 1864, John Overton Collins, a private in the 10th Virginia Cavalry, wrote his wife from Point Lookout, Maryland, at the confluence of Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River that he “received the first letter from you since a Prisoner the 3d of this month. I was greatly relieved for I had given out ever hearing from you at all. I was sure something

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29 Camp Chase Papers, letter from W.C. Criner to unknown (perhaps his wife), April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

30 A. G. Hammack to his brother, April 21, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
was the matter & thought you must have been dead or unable to write. I was much troubled but now I feel like a new man. I want to come home now more than ever I hope it will not be long before I can come home.”\textsuperscript{31} His yearning for contact with home and his relief at finally receiving some news are palpable, even if he does not clarify what news his wife conveyed. His relief, however, gradually turned into worry and anxiousness as he noted in a letter to her dated May 12, 1864: “I write you again though I have not heard from you for a great while, nearly four months now; I am afraid something is the matter . . . I had been getting a letter from you every week.” He continued to plead with his wife about the importance of news from home, though hoping that the news would be good: “I can stand my confinement if I know you are well but I am miserable when I think you are not well. You must try to write to me; don't think we will be home so soon.” He closed with an open plea that he is “so anxious to hear from home; my Dear wife if you will write to me soon.”\textsuperscript{32} Later, on June 6, 1864, he wrote Catherine, “I received your letters of the 7 and 18th of last month. I never was so overjoyed to receive a letter before. I had not heard from you for four or five months.” As many others did, he then assured her that she “must be of good cheer. I think we will meet again if we can live long enough. I will not be out of

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\textsuperscript{31} John Overton Collins Papers to Catherine E. Collins, February 7, 1864, John Overton Collins Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{32} John Overton Collins to Catherine E. Collins, May 12, 1864, John Overton Collins Papers.
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heart in ten years if possible we could live here that long.”

Finally, Collins wrote on September 23, 1864, that he “was glad to hear from you and was overjoyed to hear that you were in such good health. I do believe it preserves my health for my is always good when I hear yours is good. I am now getting mail regular thogh five months elapsed that I got none while the last several we have mail every week. Now you can write often.” Indeed, in hopes of ensuring that letters from home would come regularly and often, prisoners regularly lauded the comforting effect letters had on their own state of mind. Also assuring his mother of the importance of her letters, Chamberlayne wrote her, “your letter of 30th July reached me yesterday & will make me happy for many days. If you will only continue to think of perils escaped & of the thankfulness which behooves us I can be content to wait any length of time here.”

Photography also served as a vicarious connection with home, and prisoners mentioned pictures of family they had managed to retain and occasionally, had their own pictures taken to send home as well. Collins wrote his wife, “I send you my picture I hope you will get it you can then see me in prison.” This comment is particularly intriguing, not just as evidence that

33 John Overton Collins to Catherine E. Collins, June 6, 1864, John Overton Collins Papers.
34 John Overton Collins to Catherine E. Collins, September 23, 1864, John Overton Collins Papers.
36 John Overton Collins to Catherine E. Collins, June 6, 1864, John Overton Collins Papers.
prisoners could procure photographs of themselves to send home, but also that a prisoner would think it important enough to do so, given that their appearance likely reflected the hard conditions and the loneliness of confinement that comprised their daily existence. In an age where photography was relatively new and expensive, and most people chose to represent themselves in as dignified a manner as possible in photographs whenever they could be arranged, the fact that prisoners would choose to send photographs of themselves as prisoners is particularly telling. Specifically, it speaks to the desire and need to affirm their physical existence to their loved ones through a more tangible medium than even letters could provide. Certainly, photographs of loved ones provided much comfort to many prisoners, as Lieutenant Wilkins of the 46th Pennsylvania Infantry made clear in his diary a few days after his capture: “on the morning of the battle I took Lilla's daguerrostyle from . . . put it in pocket, that if I died, it might be buried with me. I have it now & it is such a comfort to study her face. But I have not my Bible she gave me, nor the sweet faces of my children. I wonder whether the Black Hole of Calcutta was much worse than this.”

Although this latter is a diary entry rather than a letter, it likewise confirms the importance of photographs to prisoners whenever they could retain or obtain them.

37 William D. Wilkins, diary, August 13, 1862, William D. Wilkins Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
Many letters home from Civil War prisoners of war assured readers that they were alive and generally in good health. The former is perhaps expected, while the latter appears straightforward on the surface. While the first example is largely self-explanatory given that the captive can write a letter, the latter must be considered carefully since prisoners attempted simultaneously to assure their families of their well-being, describe the realities of their lives in confinement, and, most importantly, write nothing that the censors would object to that would prevent their letters from being delivered. Often, prisoners’ attempts to notify loved ones of their current circumstances and assure them that they were well appear to be as much a personal affirmation as an attempt to ease the mind of the recipient. As Ham Chamberlayne wrote on August 15, 1863, simultaneously assuring his mother of his health and trying to offer advice to her to keep her spirits up, “I am well & cheerful all the time. As you love me & pray you hold to your patience, keep your health, visit people.” About a week later, he wrote his mother that he “received yours of the 3d with a delight I could express to you. . . . I am well and comfortable, my chief source, almost the only one, is lest you should disquiet yourself about me. I have good society of good friends in the room with me.” Clearly, Chamberlayne was not only concerned with assuring his family that he was well, but also that he was living amongst a “society of good friends.”

Even when seriously wounded, prisoners affirmed they were still alive and tried to assure the recipient that they were well treated and recovering as well as could be expected. In a poignant attempt to inform his family about his capture, circumstances, and current situation, William Henry Fitzhugh Payne, of the 4th Virginia Cavalry, wrote his father, Arthur Alexander Morson Payne, “I am now a wounded captive of the Federals & fear I shall remain so for some time. . . . On the 4th I had the bad luck to have my horse shot, & on the 5th to be shot myself. The wound was very severe & painful.” Next Payne described his wound in gruesome detail: “the ball entered a little below my right eye, chipped a piece from my upper jaw tore out five jaw teeth, cut my tongue in half, fractured my left lower jaw & came out at the neck over carotid artery,” and remarked that he had been “left for dead in Williamsburg & fell into McLellans hands.” However, he assured his father, “thus far I have been exceedingly fortunate, having met with unforeseen kindness & courtesy from my captors & especially the Medical Staff. My wounds have improved very much, but I fear my jaw will never work & my tongue gives me great trouble.” Payne also noted that his wife, Mary Elizabeth Winston Payne, had received a pass from Union authorities to visit him and tend for him: “I have had one great comfort in my [recovery] Molly has been with me. As soon as she heard I was wounded she determined to join me & after several attempts, & difficulties which could have subdued anybody else, she finally succeeded in reaching me. I am now here in a hospital hoping to be exchanged. I
have heard nothing from any of you since the war began.”\textsuperscript{39} In this brief missive, Payne encapsulated the essence of what many prisoners of war tried to convey regarding the circumstances of their capture and current situation, including a plea for news from home in his closing sentence. Likewise, J.Q. Durham wrote his wife, “I again make the effort to let you hear from me as I know I have no chance to hear from you,” and explained that his current situation “leaves me in bad health tho I hope not danger but I have ben sick so long I can tell I have never seen a well day since I left Ft. Donelson.”\textsuperscript{40} James Griffin wrote his parents that he had “been desirous of writing to you for some time & now avail myself of the first opportunity offered since I was taken prisoner at Fort Donelson,” and assured them that his “health is remarkably good and I am very pleasantly situated taking into consideration that I am a prisoner.”\textsuperscript{41} Charles Carter wrote his wife Eliza that “hear leaves me enjoying good health and a doing the same. I git a Plenty of Evrything to Eate and well even. I am treated well.”\textsuperscript{42}

In no small part to maintain their mental connections with what was happening at home, prisoners’ letters, especially from early in their captivity, frequently convey an interest in the regular business of home, as well as words

\textsuperscript{39} William H. Payne to Arthur Alexander Morson Payne, June 18, 1862, Hunton Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{40} J.Q. Durham to Anna J. Durham, April 22, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{41} James Griffin to Amos Leatherman and Daphne Leatherman, April 21, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{42} Charles B. Carter to Eliza Carter, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers.
of advice for those who were now handling their affairs. As prisoners had little “purpose” in their life, they applied some of their epistolary efforts towards dispensing advice regarding affairs at home, even if their knowledge of current circumstances at home was dated. On April 21, 1862, W.R. Marshall wrote a friend that “we was all taken prisoner of war at no 10 & reached here a week ago our boys and us was seperated they are at Springfield or Chicago,” and went on to say “I want you to get the money from Trimble 240 dollars & buy stock young Cattle. Trimble owes me 25 dollars for money loaned him in January though I would like for you to send me a few dollars if posable. No money but that of northern states are good. If Trimble has not collected my pay account tell him to do so & pay him for the same. Write soon. Give my best to all friends. Write soon.”

43 John Lilly of the 14th Mississippi Infantry Regiment, captured at Fort Donelson, advised his wife, “in the attempt to make a crop, I beg you, to look to the preservation of your health. Use money as you need, and think best. I would learn who is living with you, tell Saluda to be a good girl. Tell Ma to keep in good spirits and not labor to hard.”

43 J.C. Hubbard to W.R. Marshall, April 21, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

44 John Lilly to Ida Lilly, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
Censorship and the Vicissitudes of Prisoners’ Correspondence

In For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War, James McPherson writes, “Civil War armies did not subject soldiers’ letters to censorship or discourage the keeping of diaries. Soldiers’ letters were therefore uniquely blunt and detailed about important matters that probably would not pass a censor: morale, relations between officers and men, details of marches and battles, politics and ideology and war aims, and other matters.” However, letters written by prisoners of war were subject to censorship by prison authorities, both North and South, who reviewed every letter entering or leaving a prison through official means. On July 7, 1862, Colonel William Hoffman, commander of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment and Commissary-General of Prisoners for the Union, signed a list of regulations to “be observed at all stations where prisoners of war are held.” The ninth rule stipulated that “prisoners will not be permitted to write letters of more than one page of common letter paper, the matter to be strictly of a private nature, or the letter must be destroyed.”

Likewise, under the authority of Brigadier General John Winder, the Confederacy’s regulations regarding prisoners prescribed that “no letters, packages, or parcels of any kind, can be passed into the prison or hospital,

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45 James M. McPherson, For Cause & Comrades, 12.
without first being examined by the officer commanding, or the Surgeon of the post."48 Although not as precisely stipulated, Confederate policy also restricted the length of the letters to one or two pages, in no small part to accommodate the censors’ ability to read everything going in or out of the prison. Prisoners tried their best to convey the required brevity of letters, but recipients did not always seem to understand. Captain John Whitehead of the 3rd Virginia Infantry wrote to his sister, “you hit at me for writing 'short' and you seem not to be aware of the fact that the space for prisoners is limited to one side of a half sheet. This is made necessary from the fact that all the letters have to be read before leaving and there are a great many written.” After such a lengthy defense of the brevity of his letters, he continued simply, “I am happy to say that I was but very slightly injured at the Battle of Gettysburg and now I am entirely well.”49

Numerous newspapers published the procedures for sending mail across the lines by flag of truce boats at City Point and Fortress Monroe, and these procedures specified a length of no more than one page. Further, senders were required to enclose their letters in two envelopes, the inner to contain the traditional delivery addresses and the outer used by military authorities on either side to stamp that the contents had been examined and approved prior to

48 “Rules and Regulations of the C.S. Military Prisons,” Record Group 249, National Archives, Washington D.C.

boarding the flag of truce boat.\textsuperscript{50} Not only were letters restricted to matters of a personal nature, but the very fact that the prisoners knew every one of their letters would be read by their captors, who would determine whether the letter ever left the prison camp, served not merely to restrict their content, but frequently to taint it through misrepresentations of conditions in the prison and the treatment of the prisoners. The blunt honesty found in prisoners' diaries mitigated this issue to some extent, both for their authors and for historians reading these diaries long after they were written. Prisoners' letters nonetheless contain a font of information on the personal concerns and experiences of the prisoners. While strictly avoiding anything that might raise the censors' eyebrows, the prisoners were free to discuss their general health and their hopes for freedom (and plead with the recipient to assist in their release), relate certain aspects of prison life, and even engage in family and business matters.

Prisoners sometimes pushed the limits of what the censors would allow, knowing that, if rejected, their letters would be destroyed. For example, Captain Johnathan Cantwell of the 3rd North Carolina Infantry wrote from Fort Pulaski, Georgia, “Believing that it is not contraband & that the Federal Authorities dont desire to conceal the facts, I write to you to State briefly the suffering & privation to which we are subjected & I challenge a denial.” He continued, “since the first day of January last our ration has been per day 10 ounces of corn meal about 4

\textsuperscript{50} Galen D. Harrison, *Prisoners’ Mail from the American Civil War* (Dexter, MI: Thompson – Shore Inc., 1997), 250.
[ounces of] wheat bread salt & more pickels! Than we can eat; & until very recently this too was the only diet for those of us who were sick. Three fourths of our number are in consequence sick with Scurvy, Diarrhea, & Coughs.”51 Captain Robert Bingham made frequent references in his diary to the problems prisoners experienced while trying to write home. On July 3, 1863, he wrote, “2 more prisoners, conscript cavalry privates. I have written a letter to send by them. I wrote by the truce boat today and it was the most painful thing that this captivity has brought upon me. To write to her whom my soul loves and not even say sweet wifie is too hard – and so much depressed was I that the blue of the sea & the green of the shore & the brightness of the cloud caused no joy, and I was only relieved by the arrival of the two privates by whom I can smuggle through real letters.”52 The next day, Bingham wrote, “some prisoners came in with papers bringing accounts from Gen. Lee - and by these prisoners I shall send letters to my wife - the only chance since I got here. It is too painful to write by the truce boats.”53 Again referring to his discomfort with sending letters via “regular” mail that the military censors would read, he wrote on July 12, “I finished my letter to Dell to-day. It was to go some days ago, but I could not get it off. I intended to send it by a chaplain, but he did not get off and was unwilling to take any other than a regular flag of truce letter. Such letters are too painful to

51 John Lucas Cantwell to Attorney General George Davis, CSA, February 6, 1865, John Lucas Cantwell Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

52 Robert Bingham, diary, July 3, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

53 Robert Bingham, diary, July 4, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
write them often - and there is not much certainty of their getting through.”⁵⁴

Again, on July 22, he entered into his diary, “I heard that there was a chance of writing South & got up by sunrise. I tho[ugh]t the letter was to go without being inspected - but before I got it half done I had to carry it up & I found that it must be inspected. But I could not write another - there was no time - & so I had to let it go.”⁵⁵

For all the ability to send regular mail, albeit censored and restricted, through official channels via flag-of-truce boats, prisoners were nonetheless willing to risk the chance that their letters would never reach their destination by trying to send them through less certain, but uncensored, means. As Bingham’s diary makes clear, many prisoners were troubled and extremely reticent about sending anything personal through the censorship process. Finding someone willing to smuggle mail out of the prison or otherwise bypass the censors was problematic as well. The Camp Chase Letters were ultimately never delivered to their destinations because of an intriguing set of circumstances that could attend non-official channels of mail. All of the Camp Chase Letters referred to in this dissertation are part of a collection, written by Confederate prisoners of war around April 20, 1862, mostly from the Confederate garrisons of Fort Donelson and Island No. 10, which had surrendered earlier that year. Many of the letters mention a Mrs. Clark, who was collecting letters from the prisoners that she

⁵⁴ Robert Bingham, diary, July 7, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

⁵⁵ Robert Bingham, diary, July 22, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
would personally convey to Richmond and that were written with the understanding that they would not have to pass through the censors. That these letters must have been intended to bypass the censors is clear because prisoner-of-war mail being sent through official channels was required to pass through control points where the contents were examined before being allowed to cross over to the enemy by way of flag-of-truce boats operating between Fortress Monroe on the Union side and Norfolk on the Confederate Side. In addition to the lack of censorship, these letters would not need U.S. postage in addition to Confederate postage. Since Mrs. Clark promised to take the letters all the way to Richmond, Confederate postage would only be needed in the event the letter needed to proceed further south.

The Mrs. Clark referred to in these letters has been identified as Charlotte Moon Clark. She is only briefly alluded to in the letters that she collected from the prisoners, which mentioned that “an opportunity for sending letters through to Richmond has at last presented itself consequently I write and am happy to be able to inform you that I am in good health. I only arrived here yesterday

56 Steven C. Walske and Scott R. Trepel, Special Mail Routes of the Civil War: A Guide to Across-the-Lines Postal History (Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2008), 63-65. The Confederate flag-of-truce transfer point changed to Petersburg following the Union’s capture of Norfolk on May 9, 1862. There was a complete hiatus of official mail exchange between September 1862 and June 1863, with multiple exchange points established by the North and South following the resumption of official postal exchange. The hiatus in the official transfer of prisoner-of-war mail was principally due to the success of the exchange cartel during this period. Likewise, the collapse of the exchange cartel in 1863 required the resumption of mail transfer protocols for incarcerated prisoners.
evening”\textsuperscript{57} and “an opportunity having afforded itself by which I can get a letter through the lines I willingly embrace it so drop you a few lines. As doubtless you are aware I am a prisoner of war, Camp Chase, we arrived here from Ft. Donelson on the 1st March.”\textsuperscript{58} Some few mentioned her by name, such as W. C. Criner who wrote, “I learn there will be an opportunity of Sending a letter through to Richmond by a Mrs. Clark”\textsuperscript{59} and John B. Stuart who wrote his wife Sarah, “I understand that there is a lady, Mrs. C. M. Clark who will probably have an opportunity to send a letter through.”\textsuperscript{60} There may have been some confusion among the prisoners as to whether their letters would be read by a military censor or not, as L. F. Mauney indicated in a letter to his wife that he “cannot wright much as we ar not alloud to do so & our letters has to be read by a fedderal officer.”\textsuperscript{61} Charlotte Moon Clark, although married to an Ohio judge, came from Virginia and had three brothers serving in the Confederate army. Gaining permission from Governor David Tod of Ohio to visit the Camp Chase prison, she informed numerous prisoners that she would convey their letters to Richmond. However, before she was able to collect and deliver the letters, a

\textsuperscript{57} Walter S. Ashby to his mother, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{58} William A. Coleman to J.C. Coleman, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{59} Camp Chase Papers, letter from W.C. Criner to unknown (perhaps his wife), April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers.

\textsuperscript{60} Camp Chase Papers, letter from John B. Stuart to his wife, Sarah Stuart, date unknown (probably April 19 – 22, 1862), Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{61} L.F. Mauney to N.A.E. Mauney, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
warrant was issued for her arrest as a spy and, learning of this, she fled to Canada.62

As with soldiers who tried to send letters from prison via paroled or exchanged prisoners, other opportunities occasionally arose, such as the example noted above. These frequently failed, however, with the letters ending up in the hands of the censors and destroyed if they failed to meet the standard or, in the case of the Camp Chase letters, becoming lost for many years. While it appears that Mrs. Clark received the letters from the prisoners, she left them behind at an unknown location as she made her escape to Canada. The letters were discovered in an out-of-the way room in the Ohio State House in 1904 and transferred to the Ohio State Library. From there they were given into the keeping of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (Ohio Division) and were donated to the Virginia Historical Society in 1948, where they presently reside.

As a primary source for understanding the prisoner-of-war experience, letters written during incarceration shed important light on several aspects of the prisoners’ lives and are key elements of cultural epistolary practice and, perhaps more importantly, show how prisoners used or ignored formulaic phraseology. While some of the main elements of prisoners’ letters followed particular, accepted norms within the genre, this should not necessarily be taken to mean that the authors included these merely to “follow form” as it were. Indeed, for

prisoners, perhaps more so than many other writers, this tenuous connection with home became a salve in a time of durance when their active role in the war was reduced to that of a bystander, forced to endure endless hours of monotony and denied basic access to proper food, shelter, and hygiene. These letters also frequently contained direct pleas for assistance in arranging their release and exchange, or apprised those at home of the latest information on paroles and exchanges they had learned, which was often of little value due to the limited information prisoners received. However, as parole or exchange was often their only means of release from prison, these concerns naturally occupied a considerable portion of the letters prisoners wrote.

**Writing to Remember**

Unlike letters, diaries were free from the restrictive influence of the military censors, and many prisoners recorded their true feelings and circumstances in diaries with a bluntness and directness that they could not match in a letter. Small, lightweight pocket diaries were widely sold to soldiers in the Civil War, particularly Union soldiers with readier access to markets where soldiers purchased them for their own use or sent them to family or friends. In *The Accidental Diarist: A History of the Daily Planner in America*, Molly McCarthy points out that “should they fail to return, they hoped to give their loved ones a keepsake that might offer a glimpse of their last days.” Certainly many prisoners
of war, such as Julius Ramsdell, Thomas Wier, and Creed Thomas Davis began their diaries long before they were captured.\textsuperscript{63} However, many prisoners did not begin their diaries until after they fell into the hands of the enemy, and sometimes purchased them from prison sutlers. Captain Wilkins of the 46\textsuperscript{th} Pennsylvania Infantry began his diary three days after his capture, writing, “If I live to be released its journal may enable me to bear future trials with patience.”\textsuperscript{64} William Tillson of the 84\textsuperscript{th} Illinois also began his diary while in prison, but admitted, “by commencing at the time of my capture, suffice to say that I did not write it until I had been in Richmond ten days and as it was not then so fresh in my mind consequently I have omitted many items of interest which I failed to recollect.”\textsuperscript{65}

Soldiers often kept diaries knowing, or even intending, that the diaries would be read by those at home. As McPherson points out, “letters to a wife or parent or sibling were written for an ‘audience.’ Even a diary was often intended to be read by others,” but he went on to state that “although the soldier may therefore have been tempted to put the best face on his own motives and actions or to avoid mentioning unpleasant and awkward facts, these letters and diaries were nevertheless more candid and far closer to the immediacy of experience


\textsuperscript{64} William D. Wilkins, diary, August 12, 1862, William D. Wilkins Papers.

\textsuperscript{65} William H. Tillson, diary, preface, William H. Tillson Diary, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.
than anything the soldiers wrote for publication then or later." At the same time, some letters and diaries were not intended for any broad circulation, even among friends and family, although few of these so indicate. One that does so is the diary of Robert Bingham, which has a note at its beginning specifying that he intended his diary for his wife and himself, and no others: "(PRIVATE) / Prison Experience / Prison Experience / This diary is intended only / for my wife – & concerns no / one & can interest no one / but her - / Ro. Bingham / Capt. G. 44th N. C. Reg' t." Bingham later added, "I wonder if she will ever see these prison experiences. I want no one else ever to see them. They are for me & her." Ironically, as with the diaries of nearly everyone who lived during this period that have come to historians’ attention, there is today a wide, if not popular, audience for these diaries. As it was, family and friends frequently read diaries written during the nineteenth century, and during the Civil War in particular, and many people considered diaries a journal of one’s experiences. Like many diaries written by prisoners of war, Bingham’s includes some of his deepest reflections and private thoughts. The diary proper opens with a six-stanza poem wherein he tried to express his feelings of loss, imprisonment, and depression verging on

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66 McPherson, For Cause & Comrades, 11.

67 The second and third lines are clearly duplicated without error on the first page of the diary for no clearly discernable reason. The second page contains the last four lines and nothing else.

68 Robert Bingham, diary, title pages, Robert Bingham Papers.

69 Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
despair as he learned to accept, or at least endure, his circumstances. One key theme throughout his diary was the loss of freedom, which he often combined with religious devotions or spirituality. Early in his captivity he wrote, “I wish I had some poems to read. I have novels, but no poetry. Why do I wish for poetry here? I had poems in the field, and scarcely ever opened them. But then I was free. Then when I felt the need of something beyond and above my duties & myself, something spiritual - I had only to walk to the river bank or to the woods or to the fields & let Nature raise her veil.”70 This passage also points to an important distinction in soldiers’ lives while “free” in the field and while confined in prison.

Religion was a key theme in prisoners’ diaries. While field letters and diaries do not typically mention the ways soldiers relieved their minds and experienced spirituality in daily life, they felt the loss of these things very keenly while in captivity. The diary of Julius Ramsdell of the 39th Massachusetts offers insights into the spiritual needs of prisoners and distinguishes these from soldiers’ behavior before their capture. On August 23, 1864, just four days after his capture, he wrote how, on his entry into Belle Isle71, he and other prisoners felt that their separation from friends and family could last forever, which “was a

70 Robert Bingham, diary, July 1, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

71 Although not as well known as Andersonville, Belle Isle Prison, situated on an island in the James River in Richmond, Virginia, was a major Confederate prison. The prison compound, which occupied about six acres of treeless land, had a maximum estimated capacity of about three thousand prisoners, but actually held as many as ten thousand prisoners at certain points during its existence.
solemn thought to us, and served to make us turn our minds to Him who is our only comforter in the hour of trial, and learn to trust the issue in his all wise and merciful hands.”72 A week later, Ramsdell said, “time hangs heavily upon us nothing to do and only our testament to read. Nearly every man has a Testament, and everyday they are read with probably more seriousness than ever before it certainly is the case with Charlie and myself.”73 Of his own faith, Captain Bingham wrote, “we may be called to the last struggle any day. That is in His hands, and may I commit my way to Him more fully than ever before. He has blessed me heretofore - and I trust Him for the future.”74 Church services were held regularly as well, as Bingham noted in his diary: “there is little Sunday in a prison – no quiet - no calm. But today we have had a little service down stairs - a bible class, and we were to have preaching, but the chaplain, also a prisoner, was sick.”75 Thomas Wier also made several mentions of religious activity and recorded he, “attend[ed] ‘Rebel Bible Class’” and later wrote of, “preaching in the different Barracks by the Rebel ministers Who have formed themselves into a conference.”76 Tillson also remarked on the spiritual needs of prisoners, describing a sermon as “being very appropriate. Saying that Christ is the only

72 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 23, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.
73 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 30, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
74 Robert Bingham, diary, July 1, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
75 Robert Bingham, diary, July 12,63, Robert Bingham Papers.
76 Thomas D. Wier, diary, July 27, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
consolation one can have here confined in prison. Prayed that we might seek comfort through Christ and be redeemed who is our only consolation and that we might be spared all sickness. Although robbed of our liberty and pursuit of happiness we were still free with our souls, that which men can not debar.”^77

While religious revivals periodically arose in Union and Confederate armies during the war, these tended to be localized or seasonal as compared with prisoners’ religious movements that maintained a steady presence among prisoners.^78

Prisoners frequently commented in their diaries on their health and their environment, unlike the diaries of soldiers outside of captivity that tended to focus on events of the day or military activity. For instance, Ramsdell’s diary entries before being taken prisoner principally concern his movements, position in the military, whether or not he performed drill or other duties and, once he arrived on the battlefield at the Siege of Petersburg, his duties at the front, the effect of

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Union and Confederate artillery barrages, and any other “action” that was taking place in his vicinity. Conversely, after describing his capture, Ramsdell’s diary entries, while still noting his movements until his arrival at Belle Isle, focus on his treatment by the Rebels and his new, acute experience of hunger in a more passive manner resulting from his lack of agency or ability to control his environment. Of his captors, Ramsdell summed up his perception of them early and tersely, “seeing the miserable condition of those who were brought here before us, and seeing also the brutality of our keepers and the indifference of the guards.” Regarding the lack of food provided by the rebels, Ramsdell complained on his third day of captivity, “by this time we were suffering terribly from hunger having had nothing given us since friday of last week, the day of our capture. Never in my life before had I known what it was to be hungry.” 79 About a week later, he concluded his entry for August 28 with, “Hungry all the time.” 80 Even though suffering from hunger, there were times that the quality of the food was so poor as to preclude eating it, which Ramsdell noted in early September when he wrote, “have no appetite to eat my corn bread. Very costive and troubled with Jaundees.” 81

Where the specifics of soldiers’ rations were infrequent topics for diaries outside of prison, the quantity and quality of prisoners’ provisions became a

79 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 22, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
80 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 28, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
81 Julius Ramsdell, diary, September 4, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
major theme in their diaries. William H. Tillson of the 84th Illinois Infantry Regiment was captured on September 21, 1863 while foraging for water after the Battle of Chickamauga. On October 3, 1863, he wrote in his diary that “we were crowded in where were others are are thick as we can lay as there are now 270 in the room. We draw ½ loaf of bread and a small small bit of pork for one days ration. We are getting to be aulful lousey being obliged to pick off and kill them from our clothes in order that we may sleep at night.”\textsuperscript{82} Two days later, barely more than two weeks after his capture, he said, “today we draw the same scanty rations. Its visible that men are growing thin and pale.”\textsuperscript{83} Later he recorded, “because of our hunger we eat all our bread & meat for supper and had none for breakfast this morning. If there is any thing to make a man gloomey it is not to have enough to eat”\textsuperscript{84} and he commented again on October 17 on the need for food, “last night we concluded to have some bred either by fair or unfair means. Our appetites Justified. We feel half starved Since that guards commenced the cheating game.”\textsuperscript{85} Other diarists were more monotonous in their entries describing their poor rations, such as Franklin Krause of the 143rd Infantry Regiment, captured on May 5, 1864, at the Battle of the Wilderness. Of his rations, Krause wrote daily, though often tersely. A typical entry for him was:

\textsuperscript{82} William H. Tillson, diary, October 3, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.
\textsuperscript{83} William H. Tillson, diary, October 5, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.
\textsuperscript{84} William H. Tillson, diary, October 12, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.
\textsuperscript{85} William H. Tillson, diary, October 17, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.
“drew a quart of meal and a very small piece of bacon for a days rations,” followed the next day with a verbatim entry that added one small comment: “drew rations today as usual cornmeal and bacon. Rather poor fare.”

The harsh and insulting treatment prisoners often received from their captors was another common theme in their diaries. Private Creed Thomas Davis of the Richmond Howitzers was captured on April 7, 1865, during Lee’s retreat from the Petersburg lines following Grant’s breakthrough. After commending his captor who “treated me with great magnanimity; giving me crackers, and parched coffee,” Davis wrote just two days later, “this morning they gave us corn on the husk which was thrown to us from the corn house as if we had been swine.” Later, on April 20, he wrote from City Point, “our vile negro guards become more insolent and domineering every day. They abuse the prisoners in a most infamous manner.” W. H. Merrell of the 27th New York Infantry wrote, “Some of the prison guards not unusually displayed their authority in the commission of the most gratuitous and unprovoked outrages. The notorious Lieut. Todd was singularly vicious and brutal in his treatment of the prisoners.” Merrell recorded specific incidents as well: “Upon one occasion, with

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86 Franklin Krause, diary, July 6, 1864, Andersonville Civil War Diary, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
87 Franklin Krause, diary, July 7, 1864, Andersonville Civil War Diary.
88 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, April 8, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary, Virginia Historical Society.
89 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, April 20, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
the flat edge of his weapon, he severely struck in the face an invalid soldier, who had not obeyed the order to fall-in for roll-call, with sufficient alacrity! At another time, one of the guard, in the presence and with the sanction of Todd, struck a prisoner upon the head with the butt-end of a musket.\textsuperscript{90} On July 3, 1863, Robert Beckham wrote of the constant insults and lies about the war's progress the guards told their prisoners, making it clear that physical abuse was only one form of abuse prisoners suffered: “the Yankee nation is the most infamously mean race that blights God's green earth and daily does the wisdom of our separation from them become more & more apparent. There is no honor, no truth, no faith, no honesty among them. They delight to insult and annoy defenseless captives.”\textsuperscript{91}

Prisoners’ diaries are also filled with their hopes for release from prison, through parole or exchange, and include numerous references to rumors of impending paroles or exchanges. Robert Bingham wrote in June 1863, “an officer came in yesterday and said that negotiations were pending to effect the exchange of officers and to-day they got our names - rank, place of capture &c. [etc.] But I fear that our hopes are doomed to disappointment and that we will be all the more depressed by having our hopes raised a little.”\textsuperscript{92} He followed that a few days later with, “today is bright & sunny again - & brings rumours of

\textsuperscript{90} W.H. Merrell, \textit{Five Months in Rebeldom, or Notes from the Diary of a Bull Run Prisoner, at Richmond} (Rochester, NY: Abner & Dabney, 1862), 29.

\textsuperscript{91} Robert Bingham, diary, July 3, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

\textsuperscript{92} Robert Bingham, diary, July 5, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
exchange &c - but these are quite too common to amount to much.”93 A couple weeks later, he wrote, “they have arranged the exchange of privates. I have some hopes – but faint, faint, dying, dying – dying.”94 and then a week after that, “there were some violent rumours yesterday about exchange - but no truth in any of them I fear.”95 On September 13, 1863, Bingham began his entry, “am getting more & more hopeless about exchange daily - & so more & more depressed,” before writing later in that same passage, “perhaps after all I may be paroled & get home in time to see the Summer's dying smile - & your living, loving, lovely smile - God grant it.”96 Bingham was far from alone in his interest in any chance for release. Tillson recorded his own hopes for an exchange, “this morning is bright and would be more so if we were certain of being parolled. It is said that eight hundred and fifty will be paroled and sent away to day.” Rumor mingled with hope in his entry as he continued, “as this is day the flag of truce boat comes which transports prisoners four hundred were seen to go down the road this morning. It is reported that we will go this week or next. At least the sooner the better For we long to be free.”97 He was still in prison two months later. Julius Ramsdell summed up the prevalence and importance of rumors of parole from prison when he wrote, “there has been hundreds of rumors spread through the

93 Robert Bingham, diary, July 29, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
94 Robert Bingham, diary, August 10, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
95 Robert Bingham, diary, August 17, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
96 Robert Bingham, diary, September 13, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
97 William H. Tillson, diary, October 9, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.
island daily that we are to be paroled. No other subject is listened to or talked about.”

That prisoners’ diaries share commonalities and that these often revolve around the specifics of their incarceration is not surprising. What is of particular interest, however, is the repetitive nature of their entries as they describe their ongoing and seemingly never-ending misery. Very rarely did prisoners allude to the outside world, except rather circuitously, as when they made occasional reference to newly arrived prisoners and the news that they brought of current events and campaigns, or of their hopes for parole or exchange. Unlike their letters, where prisoners frequently attempted to maintain and continue relationships, and even assist in home matters, the diaries reflect virtually none of this beyond concerns for how anxious their family might be for them, as when Bingham wrote, “I am always thinking about my precious wifie - & fearing that she is anxious about me.” Among the sources surveyed for this dissertation, few entries record the prisoners’ concerns and worries about what might be going on at home. Their incarceration curtailed prisoners’ perspectives to the point that the confines of the prison had virtually become their entire world. To read a prisoner’s diary is to read a record of suffering in occasionally eloquent, but often terse, pithy language.

98 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 27, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
99 Robert Bingham, diary, July 26, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
III. “If Justice Had Been Done Us, We Would Have Been Sent Home, Until Regularly Exchanged”

“Words are things, my son. I want you to know them and not be like the British officer who, when he and some of his command were taken prisoners and were told by their captors that they were to be paroled, demanded in great terror and consternation, ‘Pray, what kind of death is that?’”¹

—Robert Pickett (father of General George Pickett)

After their capture, prisoners almost entirely lost control over their lives and their welfare. As Robert Bingham wrote on his first day as a prisoner, “hostages, yes we are hostages and we may be called to the last struggle any day. That is in His hands, and may I commit my way to Him more fully than ever before.”² As “hostages” at the mercy and whim of their captors, Bingham and hundreds of thousands of other prisoners throughout the Civil War held faith in their respective governments to arrange for their eventual release and exchange from prison. They sometimes had opportunity, earlier or later in their captivity, to arrange to give their parole of honor not to engage in further hostilities until exchanged and thereby obtain their release. Neither exchange nor parole was a


² Robert Bingham, diary, July 1, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.
certainty at any point in the war and, for most prisoners, hopes for parole or exchange became their own source of fear and anxiety as they worried whether they might die before they were released from prison. For many soldiers, the option of taking an oath of allegiance to their enemy became a possibility, but one that often only heightened their hopes of exchange and simultaneously proffered an escape their conscience would not permit them to take.

While wary of entering into any agreements of parole or exchange of prisoners, the Union military, prior to the Battle of First Manassas, was nonetheless amenable to a policy of paroling and exchanging prisoners. General Order No. 65, issued June 12, 1862, stated: “military commanders may discharge men at their own request who exhibit to them satisfactory proof of their being paroled prisoners of war. To other paroled men they will give furloughs until notified of their exchange or discharged the service.”

This policy was based on a legal opinion by the North’s preeminent expert on military legal matters, Major General Henry W. Halleck, who expressed in a letter to Major General George B. McClellan on December 3, 1861: “after full consideration of the subject I am of the opinion that prisoners ought to be exchanged. This exchange is a mere military convention. A prisoner exchanged under the laws of war is not thereby exempted from trial and punishment as a traitor. Treason is a state or civil offense punishable by the civil courts; the exchange of prisoners of war is

only a part of the ordinary commercia belli." An expert at legal gymnastics, Halleck provided here an opinion that supported the Lincoln administration’s stance against the rebellion, refusing to acknowledge that the Confederacy held any official status as a belligerent under international law, while simultaneously recognizing the facts on the ground, and allowing for the official exchange of prisoners. However, he nonetheless ignored the fact that, under accepted international law, a sovereign state cannot enter into such agreements as part of the commercia belli, except with another sovereign state where a legitimate, international state of war is acknowledged to exist. Two weeks after General Order No. 65, the War Department reversed course and issued General Order No. 72, which read, in part, “no more furloughs will be granted to paroled prisoners. All furloughs heretofore given to them are hereby revoked, and all prisoners now at large on their parole or who may hereafter be paroled by the rebel authorities will immediately repair” to designated parole camps depending


5 International law in the modern concept was in its formative stages during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was based largely on the philosophical works of Francisco de Vitoria, Francisco Suárez, Alberico Gentili, and Hugo Grotius in the seventeenth century. During the eighteenth century, Christian Wolff published Jus Gentium Methodo Scientifica Pertractum (The Law of Nations According to the Scientific Method) (1749), which formed the original basis for Emer de Vattel’s Le droit des gens, or The Law of Nations (1758) which encapsulated and formulated the basis for the European concept of international law through much of the nineteenth century, until formalized treaties and conventions codified international practice. One of the first such was the Paris Declaration Respecting Maritime Law of 1856, which outlawed privateering. Ironically, the United States refused to become a signatory as it had relied heavily on privateers in its previous conflicts with Britain. It therefore rang somewhat hollow for Europeans when the United States refused to acknowledge Confederate privateers based on the 1856 Paris Declaration. For more on this, see John Fabian Witt, Lincoln’s Code: The Laws of War in American History (New York: Free Press, 2012).
on where the regiments had been raised.6 This arose from a belief, particularly in
the North, that prisoners willingly surrendered in order to receive a quick parole,
furlough home, and, perhaps, a long wait before being exchanged. There is little,
if any, evidence on the part of soldiers in the field to support this assumption. On
the contrary, soldiers repeatedly recorded the efforts they went through to avoid
capture and, not infrequently, condemned their officers for surrendering them.

The system of paroling captured prisoners of war was not new to the
American Civil War. It had been used in the American Revolutionary War and the
War of 1812 and had become an accepted part of the international law of war by
the eighteenth century.7 The basic tenets of the cartel from the War of 1812
became the foundation of the Cartel of Exchange8. Initially, neither side expected
the war to last very long and, consequently, neither side made long-term plans or

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6 Official Records, Series II, Volume IV, 94.

7 International law regarding war at this time was a matter of convention more than treaty
and often based on the philosophical works of scholars like Vattel. These accepted practices
formed the basis for American attempts to establish a Cartel of Exchange with England
during the Revolutionary War (which failed as Britain refused to enter into cartel agreements
with its rebellious colonies as such an action would be viewed by the international community
as granting sovereign status to the United States) and, as noted, the Cartel of Exchange of
1812 formed the direct basis for the cartel eventually adopted between the United States and
the Confederate States. See Witt, Lincoln’s Code, 21-23, 230-245.

8 A cartel represents a written agreement between belligerent nations. In the context of this
dissertation, it is used solely to refer to agreements regarding the exchange of prisoners of
war. In the War of 1812, the Cartel of Exchange stipulated that “Prisoners taken at sea or on
land on both sides shall be treated with humanity conformable to the usage and practice of
the most civilized nations during war; and such prisoners shall without delay, and as speedily
as circumstances will admit, be exchanged.” Robert C. Doyle, The Enemy in our Hands:
America’s Treatment of Prisoners of War from the Revolution to the War on Terror
(Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 60-61. During the American Civil
War, this agreement was called the Dix-Hill Cartel, named after its principal negotiators,
Major General John A. Dix and Major General D. H. Hill, representing the United States and
Confederate States respectively.
arrangements for holding large numbers of prisoners. The continued lack of planning and preparation after the war dragged on is difficult to understand, and, in many respects, reflected a lapse in judgment on both sides that ultimately led to the deaths of thousands of prisoners through starvation and disease. Many of these deaths might have been prevented through either a continually operational exchange program or a complete abnegation of parole and exchange by both parties that might have facilitated better logistical planning and support for prisoners.\(^9\) One positive aspect of Civil War military policy, however, was the development of a cartel agreement between the United States and the Confederate States for the purpose of paroling and exchanging prisoners of war; ideally, this would eliminate the need to secure and house large numbers of prisoners. While the history and formation of an official cartel of prisoner parole and exchange is beyond the scope of this dissertation, several factors shaped the delayed acceptance of what came to be known as the Dix-Hill Cartel (signed July 22, 1862). The cartel’s often-dysfunctional operation ultimately resulted in a complete breakdown of the agreement less than a year after it was signed. The Dix-Hill Cartel, which went into effect after General Order 72 was issued by the U.S. War Department, effectively overruled that General Order, but General Order 72s precepts, including the cancellation of furloughs and the establishment of parole camps effectively remained in force.

At issue for U.S. military officials and prisoners alike was Article Four of the Cartel of Exchange, which stipulated restrictions on what duties paroled prisoners could perform:

All prisoners of war to be discharged on parole in ten days after their capture, and the prisoners now held and those hereafter taken to be transported to the points mutually agreed upon at the expense of the capturing party. The surplus prisoners not exchanged shall not be permitted to take up arms again, nor to serve as military police or constabulary force in any fort, garrison or field-work held by either of the respective parties, nor as guards of prisons, depots or stores, nor to discharge any duty usually performed by soldiers, until exchanged under the provisions of this cartel. The exchange is not to be considered complete until the officer or soldier exchanged for has been actually restored to the lines to which he belongs. *(Official Records, Series II, Volume IV, 267)*

At the outset of the war, the Lincoln administration steadfastly opposed the formation of any cartel agreement because it would imply a *de facto* recognition of the Confederacy as a sovereign state, in direct contrast to the Union’s contention that the Confederacy had no legitimacy to enter into such
agreements and that its adherents were in rebellion against the legitimate
government of the United States.\textsuperscript{10} Pressure from Northern politicians and from
the public, desperate to repatriate Union soldiers suffering in Southern prisons,
forced a change in Lincoln’s policy and permitted the acceptance of an exchange
cartel. Complications regarding the treatment of black soldiers in the Union army,
many of them escaped slaves, combined with Grant’s “no exchange” policy,
effectively put an end to large-scale exchanges in late 1863 and brought them to
a complete halt in spring 1864. Though ostensibly derived from the complication
of the South’s refusal to exchange black prisoners, Grant’s refusal to exchange
prisoners on this basis resulted from his desire to deny veteran soldiers to the
Confederacy through the form of prisoner exchange and defeat the South
through attrition.\textsuperscript{11} From then until almost the close of the war, prisoners on both
sides hoped, most often in vain, for a resumption of paroles and exchanges.
They listened avidly, though skeptically, for any hint of news indicating a
resumption of the cartel.

\textbf{Parole & Exchange}

Union and Confederate prisoners alike fervently hoped that they might be
quickly paroled or exchanged. For some, the boon of parole on the field of battle
happened quickly and, at least at first, alleviated the prisoners’ worries about life

\textsuperscript{10} Sanders, \textit{While in the Hands of the Enemy}, 75-76.

\textsuperscript{11} Sanders, \textit{While in the Hands of the Enemy}, 4.
in an enemy prison camp. For example, Elias Winans Price of Brooklyn, New York, the owner and operator of a bookbinder store, who enlisted in Company A, 5th New York Volunteer Artillery on August 21, 1862, at the age of 33, arrived with his unit in time to take part in the Battle of Harper's Ferry, Virginia, scant weeks after he first mustered into service. At the end of a fierce bombardment by General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's Corps, Union Colonel Dixon Miles surrendered the garrison. Stunned by his first experience with combat, Price wrote afterwards, “our Commander surrendered after 3 Days Fighting about 8 or 10 thousand prisoners of us, Arms, Ammunition, & Stores to Stonewall Jackson. We were paroled immediately & same night commenced to march away.”

Still a raw recruit, Price had received his baptism of fire and become a prisoner of war. Price and his comrades were paroled by the Confederates, on their word of honor that they would not engage in any military action until they had been properly "exchanged" for a Confederate prisoner. When paroled, they received an official copy of their obligations in brief, as shown in the parole of John Thompson (see figure 2.), which was typical of many paroles issued during the Civil War.

However, true freedom was not in store for Price or other paroled Union prisoners. Released by the Confederates, he effectively became a prisoner of the

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Union army. Led by his officers, Price and 12,000 other Union paroled officers experienced "Hard & Fatiguing Days" as they marched to Annapolis, Maryland. Union authorities boarded the paroled officers into cattle cars on a train where they continued "in the Cars . . . about 20 Cars full of Sick & Disabled. Cattle Cars, they treat us most of the time like Cattle."\(^{13}\) Price and the other prisoners eventually arrived at Camp Parole\(^{14}\) outside of Chicago, Illinois, where Union authorities detained them until the prisoners' eventual exchange. While at Camp Parole, the Union military tried unsuccessfully to get the prisoners to perform drill and basic garrison duty, to which Price wrote, "none of us can believe it is right for any officer to command us when we are Paroled Prisoners, or make us Drill either, or

\(^{13}\) Elias Winans Price to Maria Gibbs Price and Henrietta McDowell Price, Sunday, Sept 21, 1862, Elias Winans Price Papers.

\(^{14}\) Camp Parole, also known as Camp Douglas, was a repurposed prisoner of war camp for Confederate prisoners who had already been exchanged.
do Guard Duty. I never heard of such a thing before, never till is the case with us Harpers Ferry Prisoners, we have had to Drill, (but, its true without arms).” Price was not only familiar with some of the specifics of the cartel, but also aware that it was officially in effect at the time of his capture: “according to the Cartel of Exchange, passed in Augst, 22, I think it was, the terms drawn up between Genl Dix, on our part, and Genl Hill on the southern side, were that Paroled Prisoners were to do neither, Guard, Drill, Constabulary, Polise, or any Duty in Camp, nor to into any Camp of instruction untill regularly exchanged.” Price and his fellow prisoners’ letters were very nearly exact in their understanding of Article Four of the cartel, quoted above.

Paroled Union prisoners of war, held in camps in the North, keenly understood that they were being pressured to break the conditions of the parole to which they had pledged themselves. Price continued: "I think if Justice had been done us, we would have been sent home, until regularly exchanged. There was a Report in Camp last night that Jeff Davis had refused to exchange us because we had Broken our Parole of Honor, but, that he did not Blame the Men, but, Our Officers.” Price and his comrades well understood that words mean things, and they were highly troubled by the Union authorities’ repeated efforts to coerce them into breaking the strict terms of their paroles.

15 Elias Winans Price to Henrietta McDowell Price, November 11, 1862, Elias Winans Price Papers. The Cartel of Exchange was actually passed on July 22, 1862.

16 Elias Winans Price to Henrietta McDowell Price, November 11, 1862, Elias Winans Price Papers.
Thousands of soldiers during the Civil War became prisoners of war even though their own army prevailed in a given battle, and they were swept quickly from the chaos of battle into the grim uncertainties of captivity. Private Isaac Mcintosh of Company A, 28th North Carolina Infantry Regiment was captured on February 13, 1862 during the Battle of Fredericksburg when thousands of Union soldiers stormed across the Rappahannock River. Soldiers of Meade’s division captured Mcintosh during the furious hand-to-hand fighting that ensued and hurried him and other Confederates to the rear as prisoners of war. Over the course of the battle, Mcintosh’s regiment lost 16 men killed, 49 wounded, in addition to those taken prisoner. Mcintosh reported that, of his company, eight were killed, nine wounded, and 31 captured. Of his capture, Mcintosh wrote that he was, “taken to Burnsids headquarters and on Sunday was paroled and sent to quar Creek landing on the potomick. They kept us on a boat 3 nights and 2 days and then they sent us back to Fedricksburg and put us across the river on our own side and we are now near petersburg whear I expect we will have to stay until we ar exchanged and I cant tel when that will be.” Not wanting to spend a long time in camp until exchanged, Mcintosh continued: “if I am not exchanged in few days I intend to try to come home and if I am exchanged I will have to go to

my company and then it is unceartin when I will get the chance to com."\textsuperscript{18}

Missing from his letter are references to cattle cars and poor treatment or the hard marches that Union parolees experienced at the hands of their own fellow soldiers. Just as Union parolees were assigned to parole camps while they awaited exchange, the Confederate army also assigned Southern parolees to parole camps. Confederate soldiers, however, reported less stringent conditions in their parole camps, which were not as strictly organized around training the parolees as were Union "camps of instruction."\textsuperscript{19} McIntosh wrote his letter from Model Farm Barracks near Petersburg, Virginia, which served as a parolee camp during 1863. The Confederates used these camps primarily to ensure that parolees were available and ready for duty as soon as they were exchanged. In contrast to similar Union camps, "grievances were primarily limited to back pay and suitable clothing."\textsuperscript{20} While McIntosh was encamped with other paroled prisoners awaiting exchange, he hinted at being able to go home if his exchange was delayed, although he was somewhat vague whether this would be through an authorized furlough or "French leave" taken on his own. As Joseph Glatthaar notes: "soldiers who lived in Virginia or North Carolina often took 'French leave,'

\textsuperscript{18} Isaac McIntosh to Alexander McIntosh, December 22, 1862, Harriet R. McIntosh Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

\textsuperscript{19} While both the United States and the Confederacy maintained camps for their own paroled prisoners of war who awaited exchange, the United States maintained greater regulation over these camps and attempted, with very limited success, to enforce regular drill and garrison duties on the detained parolees, calling them "camps of instruction."

\textsuperscript{20} Galen D. Harrison, \textit{Prisoners' Mail from the American Civil War} (Dexter, MI: Thompson – Shore Inc., 1997), 228.
as they sometimes called it, slipping away for a brief time and then returning on their own.”

Soldiers paroled on the battlefield or shortly thereafter often came into direct contact with the immediate rear elements of the enemy, and were therefore in a position to observe their enemy close-up. Afterward, many of them provided intriguing insights about what they saw. McIntosh wrote some of his thoughts on the war in light of what he had seen of the enemy: "the yankees has got the worst whiping at fredicksburg they ever have got since the war commenced," he wrote, "they ar as tired of the war as we ar. I am in hopes they will maik peace and stop the war and let us com home and live in peace once more as we have don before.” McIntosh, who had spent some brief time among Union soldiers, was in a position to relate some of his impressions of their morale and perspectives. Captain William Tiemann of the 159th New York Infantry Regiment, captured during the Third Battle of Winchester, wrote that before being removed from the battlefield by his captors, he witnessed “groups of angry and excited men . . . from whose conversations we made up our minds that matters were going badly for the rebels. Dismounted cavalrymen, who we understood

21 Joseph T. Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army: From Victory to Collapse (New York: Free Press, 2008), 409. The term “French leave” was first recorded in 1771 according to the Oxford English Dictionary and referred to a French social practice of leaving a reception or other social gathering without taking formal leave of the host or hostess. The term appears to have entered American military usage during the French and Indian war and was used to indicate one had left their unit without permission.

22 Isaac McIntosh to Alexander McIntosh, December 22, 1862, pic592-593, Harriet R. McIntosh Papers.
belonged to General Imboden’s command, were taunted by their own men with cowardice and running from the Yankees.”

The experiences of Price and McIntosh regarding their paroles and exchanges are far from unique, although it is difficult to establish a “standard” for a parole or exchange experience as many such arrangements occurred on an *ad hoc* basis by officers in the field; the terms of parole could differ substantially and military commanders exercised their authority to grant paroles (sometimes without their superiors’ acquiescence or knowledge). Major John Bagby of the 34th Virginia Infantry Regiment signed his parole at the end of the war when the Army of Northern Virginia surrendered at Appomattox Court House, promising he would not “take part in hostilities against the government of the United States until properly exchanged; and that I will not do anything directly or indirectly to the detriment or disparagement of the authority of the United States, until properly exchanged.” Much earlier in the war, Major William H. Payne of the 4th Virginia Cavalry Regiment was promised a parole by his attending Union surgeon and wrote a letter regarding this promise, in which he described what the surgeon had outlined as the conditions of parole, which permitted him to return home, so long as he “reported to the nearest station when well.”

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month later, presumably after recovering sufficiently from the wounds that sent him to the hospital, Payne signed his parole stipulating that he would go home, report his condition by letter every fifteen days, and take no active role in hostilities until properly exchanged.26

Military authorities also exercised their authority and discretion at times in order to arrange for an exchange of prisoners that might be to their benefit. Seven captured Union surgeons were released on parole for the specific purpose of exchanging themselves for Confederate surgeons held by the North, promising: “we will use our best efforts that the same number of medical officers of the Confederate States Army now prisoners or may hereafter be taken be released on the same terms.”27 Likewise, the United States entered into prisoner exchanges with the Confederacy, in part because of the surplus of Union prisoners held in the South and, in large part, because the South held Colonel Michael Corcoran of the 69th New York Infantry Regiment, captured during the Battle of First Bull Run. Corcoran was a popular figure in New York politics and the Lincoln administration was heavily pressured to secure his release.28

Some prisoners wrote directly to congressional representatives or other governmental officials in attempts to secure their parole or exchange. Lieutenant John Ward of the 50th Tennessee Infantry Regiment wrote to Confederate


28 Sanders, While in the Hands of the Enemy, 77.
Senator Landon Carter Haynes of Tennessee, “the most effective and most expeditious means of affecting our exchange outside of a regular system is by Selecting an officer of my rank who is a Prisoner in the South and request the Confederate Government to release him on Parole to come north and have me liberated.” Ward had even selected an appropriate candidate for his own exchange, a Lieutenant Riley of the 47th New York Infantry Regiment, but noted that any officer of similar rank would serve just as well.29 Thomas Tunstall wrote William Seward, U.S. Secretary of State, proposing to leave the country for Cadiz, Spain in return for his release from prison, “I learn . . . that as a condition precedent to my release I am required to take the oath of allegiance. Although the condition is not repugnant to my political principles . . . I hesitate to comply. . . . I should be pleased to propose the inclosed parole as a substitute for the oath of allegiance.”30 While loath to take the oath of allegiance, Tunstall took the initiative to offer a parole on his own terms stating that he would not only refrain from further hostilities against the United States, he would depart the country and place himself well beyond the scope of the war.

Other prisoners wrote detailed letters concerning all they knew about the status of exchange agreements and the possibilities for their own parole or

29 John S. Ward to Louis Trezevant Wigfall, April 21, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

30 Official Records, Series II, Volume III, 525. Tunstall was a former U.S. consul in Cadiz. He was captured as captain of the CSS Alabama. His offer to give his parole was accepted and he was released, remaining abroad until after the war. President Cleveland appointed Tunstall as U.S. Consul to El Salvador
exchange. In many cases, they also revealed a detailed knowledge of current events and a shrewd analysis of the political situation that often underlay prisoner exchanges. Captain James William Foster of the 43rd Virginia Cavalry Battalion (later Mosby’s Rangers) wrote his sister from Johnson’s Island, “ere this reaches you you will have heard that a general exchange has been agreed upon. It is certainly joyful news in as much as it will afford freedom to some poor captives and inspire the rest with a new life.” Foster astutely analyzed Union exchange policy: “but I can not be made to believe that a general exchange ever will be consummated. It has always been shown inconsistent with the policy of the Federal administration. And they have begun by selecting prisoners from certain states not represented in the Va. Armies . . . Now you can decide for yourself what will be done when that supply is exhausted, since their motives are thus clearly developed.” As proof of the Union’s methodology for determining which prisoners to exchange with the Confederacy, Foster wrote, “one hundred officers (out of 2000!) left here to day for exchange.”31

In the same letter, Foster mentioned another curious feature of Civil War exchange policies, specifically those that permitted prisoners to work through others or on their own behalf in order to arrange for their own exchange. Of his status in this regard, Foster reported, “I rec’d a letter . . . informing me that a Federal officer has been sent through for my exchange. His letter was of 21st

Dec and I have not yet heard from him (the officer). I have almost despaired of hearing anything more but it is gratifying to know that efforts have been made for me. I can only return my sincere gratitude to my benefactor.”32 In the course of his letter, Foster revealed more than being simply apprised of the current state of affairs where prisoner exchanges were concerned; he also provided an analysis that hinted at deliberate Northern exchange policies aimed at preventing the exchange of Confederate prisoners from the Army of Northern Virginia so as to prevent any strengthening of the Confederate army that bedeviled the Union military the most.

Although prisoners considered parole and exchange the most likely and preferred means of release from prison on honorable terms, political difficulties between the belligerents effectively shelved the formal exchange program for much of the war, particularly where the treatment of captured black soldiers was concerned, with the North demanding that all captured Union soldiers be treated the same regardless of race, and the South’s stance that all captured slaves would be returned to servitude. Uncertainty about exchanges created deep anxieties among prisoners as they followed any news or rumor of exchange and kept as apprised of their chances for exchange as they could. Colonel Caleb Carlton of the 89th Ohio Infantry summed up the feeling of many Union soldiers on this topic when he wrote, “No prospect of an exchange yet – Probably no exchanges untill the Confederates agree to the exchange of negro soldiers. If it

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32 James William Foster, February 16, ?, James William Foster Letter.
was in my power it would not take me long to decide the question. I would give half a dozen negro soldiers for one white soldier and be well satisfied with the bargain.” Horace Lurton expressed his appraisal of the situation in similar language: “I have almost lost all hope of ever being exchanged though the papers are agitating the subject much, yet – I think the policy of the U.S. Authorities is ‘no more exchanges.’”

The relief prisoners felt when they were released on parole or exchanged went far beyond release from the physical hardships associated with life in a prison camp. Prisoners who mentioned that moment in their letters and diaries frequently exhibited immense relief at their new freedom and their love for their own country. William Wilkins recorded in his diary, “with impossible joy & thankfulness to God, I now note one of the happiest moments of my life. We . . . are to be released tomorrow morning. We have signed a Parole not to bear Arms against the Southern Confederacy . . . until exchanged. And sweet liberty shines in . . . before our eyes.” The next day, he wrote, “Once more under the glorious Stars & Stripes.”

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33 Caleb Henry Carlton to Sadie Carlton, December 16, 1863, Caleb Henry Carlton Papers. The issue of treating black soldiers the same as white soldiers became a major issue between the belligerents, with the South’s refusal to include black soldiers in exchanges stalling the exchange process and all but derailing it, particularly during the latter months of 1863.


35 William D. Wilkins, diary, September 23-24, 1862, William D. Wilkins Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
express the miseries consequently can not do the subject justice Nor describe my feelings when first released and first sight of the stars and stripes. The nearest I could was express in my first letter home, ‘that I felt like a Wild bird let loose from a cage.’” Of his release, Thomas Wier wrote drily, “The 14th & 20th Miss Regts left Camp Douglas on Cars for Cairo. without any regrets.” He later recorded the prisoners' thrill when finally returned to the Confederacy, “met Confederate Steamer Paul Jones. with flag of truce Much cheering & excitement.” Released at the end of the war, B. T. Holliday wrote, “there is an end to all earthly things and at last the good news come that we were to leave this place of sorrow and torture and go back to dear old Virginia again. . . . we Signed our parol not to take up arms until exchanged.”

The Oath of Allegiance

Parole and exchange offered prisoners an honorable means of relief from captivity. Taking the oath of allegiance to the enemy government was

36 William Tillson, diary, preface, October 25, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

37 Thomas Wier, diary, September 2, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.


39 Official Records, Series II, Volume III, 52. The oath of allegiance read: “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support, protect and defend the Constitution and Government of the United States against all enemies, whether domestic or foreign, and that I will bear true faith, allegiance and loyalty to the same, any ordinance, resolution or law of any State, convention or legislature to the contrary notwithstanding; and further, that I do this with a full
prisoners’ only other avenue of relief (other than attempting to escape).

Confederate and Union prisoners alike sometimes availed themselves of this chance to obtain their freedom. Taking the oath of allegiance went far beyond a parole, which merely obligated the prisoner not to take up arms against the capturing power until he was properly exchanged. To effect their release through the oath of allegiance, prisoners swore an oath and signed a document formally acknowledging their allegiance to the capturing power (see figure 3). The United States early established this method of inducing the defection of enemy soldiers as a matter of policy, particularly in the Western Theater of the war where Union armies made rapid inroads into Confederate territory. Mark A. Weitz has argued that widespread desertion within the Confederate Army and citizenry was an especially invidious source of weakness in the Confederate States, instrumental in the ultimate failure of the Confederacy, and that Union policy regarding the oath of allegiance encouraged Confederate desertion. While his arguments are not wholly convincing, he does provide valuable insight into some aspects of Confederate defection. Specifically, Andrew Johnson, Military Governor of

determination, pledge and purpose, without any mental reservation or evasion whatsoever: So help me God.”

40 Mark A. Weitz, *More Damning than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005). Weitz’s central point is that desertion from the Confederate army was directly instrumental in its ultimate defeat. However, statistics indicate that desertion rates in both Union and Confederate armies were on par with one another, at approximately 10%. Given the North’s enormous superiority in available manpower with which to fight the war, Confederate desertion would necessarily had to have been much more prevalent than that experienced in Union armies to have significantly affected the South’s chances for success.
Tennessee, encouraged Tennessee soldiers to take the oath of allegiance to the Union as a means of weakening Confederate military strength. Because much of Tennessee was within Union control, the oath offered a means of release to prisoners who would not have to return to the field.\textsuperscript{41} As Confederate territory increasingly came under Union control, increasing numbers of Confederate soldiers and civilians from those areas took the oath of allegiance, often as a matter of convenience because their homes now lay behind Union lines.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{41} Weitz, \textit{More Damning than Slaughter}, 57-58.

\textsuperscript{42} Weitz, \textit{More Damning than Slaughter}, 117-118.
Union and Confederate authorities also applied considerable effort to obtain the oath of allegiance from prisoners held in prisoner-of-war camps, with a distinctly anemic reception on the part of the prisoners and often-limited results. It is difficult to judge the overall success of oath-taking programs among prisoners. There is support for the idea that oath taking had greater appeal among Confederate prisoners from territories under Union control, and not just an inducement to desertion in the field, which is a key point of Weitz. As Roger Pickenpaugh recounts, the diaries of several Confederate prisoners captured at Fort Donelson reveal Union attempts to induce prisoners to take the oath. While attempts to entice prisoners to take the oath generally met with little success, prisoners’ diaries relate the acceptance of the oath by perhaps as many as eight hundred to one thousand prisoners captured after the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson, with perhaps three to five hundred of these coming from Tennessee.43 The actual success of these efforts, still difficult to ascertain, was greater than extant diaries indicate, however. While records from some prison camps are vague, the Official Records suggest that perhaps as many as 2,000 prisoners availed themselves of this opportunity for release, the vast majority from

43 Roger Pickenpaugh, Captives in Gray: The Civil War Prisons of the Union (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 50-51. Farris Diary, Manuscript and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, entries for August 15, 28, September 1, 2, 1862. John K. Farris served as a physician in the 41st Tennessee Infantry Regiment. Lt. J.K. Ferguson Civil War diary, April 14, 1862 - May 31, 1863, entry for March 4, 1863, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis Libraries.
That most of the prisoners who petitioned to take the oath hailed from Tennessee is mirrored in the diary record, and the discrepancy in the numbers can likely be attributed to perceptual and diaristic bias. What is clear is that nearly 90% of all petitioners to take the oath captured with the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson, and Island No. 10, were Tennesseans, a border state with highly mixed loyalties. Once the Tennessee bias is accounted for, only two percent or so of prisoners elected to take the oath, indicative more of Tennessee’s violently divided loyalties than inherent weakness in Confederate loyalty as a whole. Julius Ramsdell of the 39th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment wrote of Confederate efforts to convince Union prisoners to take the oath: “offers are nearly every day sent in for men to take the oath of Allegiance with the promise to be sent to any point we wish outside the United States on a blockade runner. Some take the oath every day, but they are mostly foreigners who having few if any ties to keep them, care little whether they are out of the country or in it.” Ramsdell pointed out that Confederates even offered cash in their efforts to raise soldiers from among the prisoners: “great inducements are also held out for

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44 Official Records, Series II, volume III, 335, On February 27, 1862, Colonel James A. Mulligan, 23rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment wrote to Major General Henry Halleck about the prisoners at Camp Douglas: “Among the thousands of prisoners now in these quarters . . . many became soldiers in the army of the rebels by compulsion . . . This is especially the case with the Tennesseans, of whom large numbers express a desire to enlist in some of [my] companies. . . . One Tennessee Regiment . . . composed almost entirely of Irishmen . . . desire to enlist . . . in my regiment.” On March 11, 1862, Lieutenant Colonel Sidney Burbank commanding the Alton Federal Military Prison, wrote a similar letter requesting three hundred rebel prisoners be permitted to take the oath (p. 371). According to a March 19, 1862, letter from Colonel Richard D. Cutts, 1,640 prisoners from Camp Butler desired to take the oath of allegiance, 1,430 of whom were from Tennessee (87.2%), 387-390.
men to enlist in the Confederate army $1000 in Confederate money and $100 in gold. The officer who came into the enclosure with this obnoxious offer was hooted out. In punishment for which our usual allowance of bread for tonight was stopped.”

Prisoners clearly recognized discrepancies among those who chose to take the oath of allegiance, and their accounts support the *Official Records*. Thomas Wier described the varied success of some of these efforts, noting distinctions in the reactions of prisoners depending on their home state: “privelige given to the Prisoners to take the oath of allegiance The Yankey Corporal who Calls our roll Says no Mississippian had taken it.”

A few days later, he described the relative success of these efforts among prisoners from Tennessee: “Go Campbell the Bogus Governor of Tennessee, Comes & offers the oath of allegiance to the ‘Loyal men of Tenn’. They are a very ordinary looking Set.” While this statement is far from clear, it may well refer to the fact that most prisoners at Camp Douglas who did take the Oath of Allegiance to the United States hailed from Tennessee. In a rare personal acknowledgment of taking the oath of allegiance, Private J.C. Moore of the 18th Tennessee Infantry, also captured at Fort Donelson, wrote that he was seriously considering taking the oath of allegiance to the United States in exchange for his freedom. As he

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45 Julius Ramsdell, diary, September 14, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

46 Thomas Dabney Wier, diary, August 10, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

47 Thomas Dabney Wier, diary, August 29, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
reasoned, “my time for which I enlisted is out and two or three months over so I am not bound to report myself to Jeff Davis or anyone else.” Not exactly renouncing the Confederacy, Moore believed that he had served his time in the military, done his duty to the best of his ability, and served faithfully. With his contracted term of service over, Moore appears to have viewed the oath simply as a means to escape confinement and return home.

Family and friends also pressured prisoners to take the oath. Robert Bingham “got a letter . . . From Dr. W. W. Hall. He is ‘anti-secesh’ he says & says I had better take the oath - but is kind.” The prospect of taking the oath often raised difficult and troubling questions for prisoners, especially when pressured by their families. Lieutenant Lurton wrote from Johnson’s Island, “Pa is very desirous for me to take the Oath and come home. I know not what to do. I wish I could see you and talk over some plans for the future. How would you like to go to South American or Mexico? I am in earnest.” Thus, even as prisoners wrote their families to help arrange for their exchange, families sometimes encouraged captives to take the oath if that would mean they could be reunited at home.

Other Confederates used the oath of allegiance to escape captivity as well, but rather than return home, they agreed to serve in the Union army as a condition of their release. In one of the most successful oath-taking programs of

49 Robert Bingham, diary, August 12, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
50 Horace H. Lurton to A. W. B. Allen, January 17, 1864, Horace H. Lurton Papers.
the war, the Union ultimately enlisted about 6,000 former Confederate soldiers to guard outposts in the west where they would fight Plains Indians rather than “former comrades.”\textsuperscript{51} Although not quite as successful, in part because the Confederacy had no western frontier in need of guarding, the Confederacy managed to induce several thousand Union soldiers to join the ranks of Confederate soldiers on the front lines against the Union, with mixed success.\textsuperscript{52} Some of these men, captured Union soldiers turned Confederate soldiers and captured again by the Union, went on to serve in the regiments of Galvanized Yankees\textsuperscript{53} on the Western Frontier. The Union and the Confederacy both aimed their prisoner recruitment efforts at soldiers of foreign birth, especially recent immigrants, in the belief that these soldiers would feel less attached to their previous oaths and would be more amenable to exchanging confinement for service with their former foes.

Some prisoners actively sought their own release through swearing the oath of allegiance, for a wide variety of reasons, often claiming lack of loyalty to

\textsuperscript{51} Dee Brown, \textit{The Galvanized Yankees} (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press: 1963), 1.

\textsuperscript{52} Brown, \textit{The Galvanized Yankees}, 211-213.

\textsuperscript{53} See Brown, \textit{The Galvanized Yankees}, 8-9. Of uncertain provenance, Confederates may have first applied the term Galvanized Yankees to Union soldiers who had taken the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy and then served in the Confederate army. Union prisoner accounts from Andersonville made note of its use in this context, (see Warren Lee Goss, \textit{The Soldier’s Story of his Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and Other Rebel Prisons} (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1867), 225; and Melvin Grigsby, \textit{The Smoked Yank} (Chicago: Regan Printing Company, 1891), 182). As the term came into popular usage, its definition apparently broadened to include Confederate soldiers who took the oath of allegiance to the United States and afterwards served in the Union army.
the side they were currently serving and/or having discovered relatives serving on the opposing side. While convalescing in a smallpox hospital in Richmond, Virginia, Union soldier John Heimsvath wrote to an official in the Confederate government, “I would like to take the Oath of Allegiance to the Confederate States on account of my Brother being in the Confederate Army and several other Relatives of mine. Therefore I do not feel inclined to fight against them.”

Having laid out the basis for his appeal, Heimsvath put forth a personal connection he had with the correspondent in hopes that it might aid him in obtaining his freedom: “my reasons for addressing you o this Subject, is because you were School Commissioner of the Orphans House in Charleston, SC at the time I was an inmate of that institution.”54 Other soldiers also overtly offered their military services in exchange for release. Union soldier S. Kitchen, confined as a prisoner at Belle Isle, Virginia in 1862, wrote to Lieutenant Bulprins, one of the Confederate officers overseeing the prison guard, “I would respectfully ask that I may be allowed to take the oath and join the 8th Va. Cavalry as I have two Brothers in that Regiment. Such being the case I care not to fight for the north. I have no interest north and am anxious to get with my Brothers. I did not know where they were until I was taken prisoner.” Edward Vernon, also confined at Belle Isle, wrote Confederate Lieutenant V. Balseux that he was “desirous of taking the Oath and joint the C.S. Navy.” Kitchen explained he “was born in

54 John Heimsvath to unk., February 10, 1864, Confederate States Army, Department of Henrico Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
Scotland and had been living in New Orleans prior to the war. That is all my connection were living there I having been at Sea every since I was Eleven years old. I have not connection North and never wish to go back unless I go with the Southern Army as one of their numbers. I am young and wish above all things to join the Southern Navy.”55 In these cases, the prisoner explained that he had no particular allegiance to the North, but had come into the service of the Union through ignorance or circumstance. Each also pointed to his connections with the South, hoping to demonstrate natural affiliation and thereby obtain the sympathy of the Confederates and secure their freedom from prison.

Other prisoners took more creative approaches in their bid to convince Confederate authorities to allow them to take the oath of allegiance. Union soldier Henry Wagner even wrote to President Jefferson Davis while a prisoner at Belle Isle. After he established his relation to two prominent Confederate officers and his previous, unsuccessful, efforts to obtain release from prison, Wagner then placed considerable emphasis on the pressing nature of his request: “I am now eleven weeks in confinement and as every day threatens me to be send back north I rely on your Excellency, asking the permission to stay in the Confederate States,” Wagner closed with perhaps his strongest argument, the particular skills that he could offer to the Confederacy, “I am Ingegneur [engineer] and Architect and I have been during 5 year officer and Instructor in

55 Edward Vernon to V. Balseux, January 26, 1864, Confederate States Army, Department of Henrico Papers.
Military and Naval Schools in French Service." In another bid for freedom, Private Charles Alexander of Company E, 140th New York Infantry Regiment opened a letter by pointing out that he was really just a civilian who had the misfortune of being drafted by the Union: "I beg leave most respectfully to introduce myself as a clerk in A.T. Stewart & Co Silk Dept. and the draft combined with other misfortunes have placed me a prisoner of War on this Island." Unlike others who sought to take the oath of allegiance, Alexander specifically denigrated his fellow Union captives: "I am intermixed with six thousand prisoners and they are the greatest theives and lowest vandals of all countries upon the face of the Earth. That society dont suit me and as I am prepared to take the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy and become a peacable Citizen I appeal to your humanity to take me out of this difficulty." He closed with a reminder of his civilian career, hoping perhaps that the cachet and name recognition of the department store he worked for would help him: “You will be sure to recognize me as one of A.T. S&C’s men. Hoping this will merit your attention and solicit from you a reply." 

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56 Henry Wagner to Jefferson Davis, undated, Confederate States Army, Department of Henrico Papers.

57 Charles Alexander to unk., November 13, 1863, Confederate States Army, Department of Henrico Papers. A.T. Stewart & Company was a highly successful retail department store, founded by Alexander Turner Stewart. Over the course of several decades, it set the foundation and standard for most department stores that followed through innovations such as setting standard prices on all goods, catering to female customers, and initiating a mail-order business that was subsequently copied by Sears, Montgomery Ward, and Spiegel. The main outlet, The Marble Palace in Manhattan, also became the model for major department stores in New York and elsewhere. For more information, see Stephen Elias, Alexander T. Stewart: The Forgotten Merchant Prince (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992).
Some prisoners who refused to take the oath of allegiance sympathized with those who did. Captain Bingham of the 44th North Carolina Infantry Regiment wrote, “the Yankees are taking advantage [of news of Confederate defeats] by operating on the C. S. privates. A string of at least 400, dressed in U. S. uniforms marched under our windows. Many are taking the oath. No wonder, poor fellows - they hear nothing but Yankee news, and no one of us is allowed to speak to them.”

Julius Ramsdell also evinced sympathy for those of his fellow soldiers who took the oath: “a man cannot be blamed for taking the oath to a government he detests, as a last resort for saving his life from so slow and cruel a death. There are however but few who have been here long enough to make taking the oath an absolute necessity for saving life and there are only few but what reject all such offers with scorn.”

Warren Lee Goss of the 2nd Massachusetts Heavy Artillery Regiment, captured during the Seven Days Battles in 1862, admitted, “There were some among us so hopeless, so lost to every feeling but hunger, that they bartered their honor for food, and took the oath of allegiance to the detested Confederacy.” He did not condemn them and cautioned, “let those who blame them consider that these men had been suffering the torments of Andersonville, Belle Island, Salisbury, Charleston, and Millen, for many dreary months, and now before them was a hopeless winter,

58 Robert Bingham, diary, July 17, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

59 Julius Ramsdell, diary, September 14, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
without clothes to cover their nakedness, food sufficient to preserve health, or blankets to wrap themselves in at night.”\(^{60}\)

Notwithstanding the foregoing examples, very few prisoners actually availed themselves of the opportunity. Far more commonly, prisoners related their conscious refusal to take the oath of allegiance. They described the abysmal failure of the oath-taking programs, due to a combination of patriotism, loyalty, and, in some cases, outright pressure from other prisoners. For instance, William Tillson of the 84\(^{th}\) Illinois Infantry Regiment wrote, “there is a fellow said to be a Jew who wished to take the oath of allegiance to the confederate government which caused much anger and hatred And exclamations as ‘Hang the Traitor’ &c. So much so that it became unsafe for him to remain in the building was finally kicked down before he could get up stairs Such is our inclination to ward one who talks of taking the oath of allegiance to C.S.A.”\(^{61}\) In a similar vein, Thomas Dabney Wier of the 14\(^{th}\) Mississippi Infantry Regiment wrote, “the Federals Stick up on our barracks the oath of Allegiance to See who will take it – The Yanks Say ‘you will Soon have a chance to go home We are whipping you at evry point.’” Not so easily swayed, Wier reported, “the Prisoners curse them & tell them you dont know our people. Were Federal bayonets to glisten on evry hill in Miss & in the South We would not be Whiped.” Wier

\(^{60}\) Warren Lee Goss, *The Soldier’s Story of his Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and Other Rebel Prisons* (Boston, MA: Lee and Shepard, 1867), 223-224.

followed this with an admission that some of the prisoners “seem to think they would take oath if they were Sent home but would not Keep it.” The following day, Wier detailed some of the Union efforts to convince Confederates to take the oath: “the Military Commissioners Col R D Catts Maj J J Key & Lieut Canfield in Company with Col Mulligan visited the quarters of the various Regiments to See who were willing to take the oath of Allegiance.” As with previous efforts he wrote, “those from the Gulf appeared morose & Sullen and to the inquiries of Col Catts in regard to their Willingness to Subscribe to Subscribe to the oath growled out a defiant ‘No’ – Some hard words Said against those who would take the oath.”

Like Tillson, Wier acknowledged that some among the prisoners were willing to take the oath, but that they were in the minority and were, at the least, verbally abused by their fellow prisoners who preferred to remain loyal, even if it meant remaining in prison.

Prisoners overwhelmingly refused offers to take the oath of allegiance, even though they knew the alternative often resulted in starvation, disease, and death for many prisoners. Even from the infamous pens of Camp Sumter near Andersonville, Georgia, came accounts of prisoners refusing to take the oath of allegiance, regardless of the horrible living conditions or the possibility of their slow death from starvation or disease. John L. Ransom, Quartermaster for Company A, 9th Michigan Volunteer Cavalry, wrote, “all who want to can take the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy, and be released; am happy to say though

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62 Thomas Dabney Wier, diary, March 19-20, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
that out of all here, but two or three has done so, and they are men who are a
detriment to any army."63 Long after the war, Captain Frank E. Moran,
commanding Company H, 73rd New York Volunteers wrote, "when death was
reaping a ghastly harvest, and more than a hundred a day were borne out of the
death pen at Andersonville, there was a standing offer of liberty to those who
would renounce their allegiance to their country. Among the captives were skilled
workmen of every trade, whose services as mechanics were eagerly desired by
the Confederate authorities, and were sought on assurances of freedom, good
pay, shelter, food 'and all bodily comforts.'" Despite all inducements, Moran
wrote, "a beggarly corporal's guard only were induced in all those fearful months
to yield to the tempters, out of the forty-nine thousand Union captives confined at
Andersonville."64 In a deposition to the United States Sanitary Commission,
Private Prescott Tracy, Company G, 82nd New York Regiment of Volunteers, who
was captured by the Confederates on June 22, 1864, during the Siege of
Petersburg, stated, "Our men, especially the mechanics, were tempted with the

63 John L. Ransom, Andersonville Diary, Escape, and List of the Dead: With Name,
Regiment, Date of Death (Philadelphia, PA: Douglas Brothers & Payne, 1883), 160. John
Ransom's Andersonville Diary has been long discredited as a reliable primary source for
many purposes because, as William Marvel points out in Andersonville: The Last Depot
represented his book as an 'edited' version of his wartime diary, but so wildly inaccurate
were many of his dates and observations that if any such diary existed he must have failed to
consult it during the editing process." However, Ransom's Diary is corroborated in some
areas, such as this statement, which is supported by other diaries and memoirs and so is
included here.

64 Frank E. Moran, Bastiles of the Confederacy: A Reply to Jefferson Davis (Baltimore, MD,
1890), 168.
offer of liberty and large wages to take the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy, but it was very rare that their patriotism, even under such a fiery trial, ever gave way. I carry this message from one of my companions to his mother: 'My treatment here is killing me, mother, but I die cheerfully for my country.'  

Thousands of Confederates, enduring harsh treatment, scant rations, deplorable living conditions, and disease, nonetheless refused to take the oath of allegiance until Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia, after which most Southerners considered the war irrevocably lost. Of this sentiment, John King wrote, "I am proud to say that I never even thought of taking an oath of that kind until Lee had surrendered and the war was ended. Then it was necessary to take the oath to get home." Hunger tempted many to take the oath, but most prisoners, like King refused, "It was pitiful. Many men, once strong, would cry for something to eat. I know from experience. A few more of us could have worked in the carpenter shop had we agreed to take the oath of allegiance to the United States, but we refused. Our wages would have been 5 and 10 cents per day according to our capabilities; this didn't tempt me." True to his word, King refused to take the oath of allegiance until after the war was over, when finally,


66 John R. King, My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons Written from Memory (Clarksburg, WV: Stonewall Jackson Chapter No. 1333 United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1917), 33.

67 John R. King, My Experience in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons, 46.
“while standing together with our right hands raised the oath of allegiance to the U. S. was administered. Then we were given two days rations, our paroles handed to us and we were ready for the journey.”68 Major Robert Stiles of Virginia, captured at Sailor’s Creek towards the end of the war, remained a prisoner at Johnson’s Island until October 1865, even though most prisoners there were released in May or June because he “declined to take the somewhat remarkable oath propounded to us, and refused to give in addition my word of honor that I would say nothing against the Government of the United States.”69 Stiles does not mention if his eventual release was effected by his finally taking the oath of allegiance or not, but his long refusal after the war ended is nonetheless remarkable. An anonymous letter published in the New York News in January 1865 reported, “there are about five thousand confined here, who have resolved to die rather than do so. Although they are wrong, is there not a sublime heroism in the adherence of these men, amid such trials, to a cause which they believe to be right?”70

Although the war effectively ended with the surrender of Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, followed in quick succession by the surrender of the remaining Confederate field armies, Confederate prisoners continued to languish in Northern prisons. Ironically, prisoners who had offered to take the oath of

68 John R. King, My Experience in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons, 50.

69 J. William Jones, Confederate View of the Treatment of Prisoners: Compiled from Official Records and Other Sources (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1876), 279.

70 Jones, Confederate View of the Treatment of Prisoners, 290.
allegiance to the United States were detained far longer than those who had not, with the latter being released on parole for exchange. Captured on April 7, 1865, as Lee’s army retreated from Petersburg, Creed Thomas Davis remained in Newport News Prison until June 29, well over a month after President Andrew Johnson declared the war over. In his diary, Davis wrote of a change in attitude among the prisoners regarding the oath: “we take [the surrender of General Joseph E. Johnston] as a declaration of peace and rejoice accordingly, since has become known that the Confederacy is dead beyond resurrection, the men are perfectly willing to take the oath. We are dying to get our liberty.”

Anxiety over his delayed release continued to depress Davis: “I am wrought into a state of complete misery and life seems a dark and stormy sea. I have not one comforting thought, not not one.” During this time, Davis also recorded continued deaths due to disease, famine, and prisoners killed by the guards, as well as some prisoners’ attempts to escape because they despaired of being allowed to take the oath and set free. When he finally landed in Norfolk, Virginia, a free man, Davis wrote, “we jumped aboard a steamer bound for Richmond. We are as buoyant as the boat itself.” He appended to his diary a list of 130 prisoners who died in the prison between April 18 and June 17, which he was

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71 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, April 22, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary, Virginia Historical Society.

72 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 8, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.

73 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, June 29, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
able to record while he worked as a clerk in the prison. Of these, 107 died after
President Andrew Johnson declared the war over on May 9, 1865.

Rather than take an oath of allegiance to their enemy, many prisoners
chose a high chance of death while hoping for parole or exchange. Perhaps the
greatest testament to this fact is the statistics that underlay the grim reality of life
in a Civil War prison camp. Out of 194,743 Union prisoners incarcerated in the
South, 30,218 died in prison, while out of 214,865 Confederates confined in
Northern prisons, 25,976 died in prison. The option to take the oath of allegiance
to the enemy to escape confinement was available to most prisoners during the
course of the war, yet at least 56,000 succumbed to starvation or disease rather
than take this option while the vast majority of the remainder suffered in prison
until their parole or exchange. Even considering the potentials for parole or
exchange, the small numbers of oath-takers and the supporting diaries and
memoirs speak to most soldiers’ repugnance at the mere thought of taking the
oath.Apparently missing from the record are indications that soldiers eschewed
the oath because of the possibility of a more honorable release. Indeed, the
vehemence with which their fellow prisoners often treated those who did take the
oath speaks to underlying motivations of patriotism, loyalty, and hatred of the
enemy far more than to any practical considerations. After describing his fellow
prisoners’ visceral reaction to those who would take the oath, Tillson explained
some prisoners’ motivations in refusing the oath, which included loyalty even
when faced with perceptions of being deserted by their own government:
“although we dislike the way Uncle Sam is treating us none of us will desert our
colors I at least speak the almost unanimous sentiment of all. And I believe would suffer death first and a hatred of the enemy.” Tillson concluded tersely, “for well have we learned to hate rebels.” In the end, the oath of allegiance elicited little from most prisoners other than disgust and scorn for those few that accepted the offer. Even at the end of the war, many Southerners expressed a great melancholy that they now had to take the oath. William Elam wrote, “Yes – that cause to which I was so much devoted has been lost & thus four years of the ‘prime of my life,’ has it would seem been thrown away. Those of us who have been engaged in an honest undertaking and survivors of the great contest, are now, forced to take upon ourselves a most Solemn & rigid oath to the once great Union. . . . I have no regrets (save that we failed) and shall go forth holding my head as high as before.”

74 William H. Tillson, diary, October 25, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary. See also, James M. Mcpherson on this point in For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War, especially Chapter 11, “Vengeance Will Be Our Motto.”

IV. “RAISE AT ONCE THE BLACK FLAG”

“They shot me after I surrendered.”¹

—Private Owen Fox

Military circumstances and actions, as well as the national policies regarding prisoners of war developed by the United States and the Confederacy, affected prisoners’ experiences during the war. However, the passions and conduct of soldiers in the field, and those guarding prisoners, most often determined the actual treatment of prisoners. Far too often, captors demonstrated a willingness to kill prisoners on and off the field of battle that can only be explained as arising from a clear and visceral hatred of the enemy. Even without looking to the guerilla attacks and raids that characterized the Civil War in Missouri and Kansas, epitomized by the Bushwhackers, Jayhawkers, and Red Legs, and such figures as “Bloody” Bill Anderson and William Quantrill, a surfeit of evidence demonstrates the brutality and barbarity of the war. Battlefield examples include the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania and the Wilderness, both fought in Virginia in 1864 as part of Grant’s Overland Campaign. Prisoners on and off the battlefield suffered frequently from the brutality of their captors, and the passions of war often engendered a hatred of and callousness toward the enemy that rose to the surface when captors were faced with unarmed prisoners

¹ Quoted in Charles A. Humphreys, Field, Camp, Hospital and Prison in the Civil War, 1863-1865 (Boston: Press of Geo. H. Ellis Co., 1918), 106.
and acted beyond the constraints of military discipline or national policy. Beyond the personal passions of individual soldiers, the armies and governments that fought the Civil War similarly struggled with policies relating to giving quarter to the enemy and showing mercy rather than killing their defeated opponents. At various times during the Civil War, prominent leaders on both sides of the conflict contemplated or advocated military policies of killing all enemy combatants, allowing no quarter, and taking no prisoners. These were commonly referred to as black flag policies.

Historians have examined aspects of no-quarter policies. John Fabian Witt discusses the Lincoln administration’s initial treatment of Confederate privateers as pirates subject to hanging if caught, concluding that the North only reversed this policy after the South captured about 1,300 prisoners at the Battle of First Manassas.² In one of the most complete treatments of this subject, Lonnie Speer argues that the Civil War “was a vicious conflict that developed an intense hatred on both sides that degenerated” into acts of violence, retaliation, and even cold-blooded murder perpetrated by captors on both sides against their captives, both on and off the battlefield.³ This chapter supports Speer’s findings, extends them to include perspectives on the idea of refusing quarter to an enemy, and explores how prisoners perceived their treatment at the hands of captors who took matters


into their own hands to decide the fate of the prisoners in their charge. The examples below, egregious and disturbing as they are, likely only represent a very small fraction of acts of cold-blooded murder perpetrated against unarmed and defenseless prisoners.

**No Quarter**

It is difficult from the modern perspective to understand how close the United States came during the Civil War to implementing an official policy of refusing quarter to the enemy, of killing prisoners either outright or following a trial for treason. Nevertheless, that was the situation at the beginning of the Civil War, and the issue received far more than academic consideration. At the outbreak of the war, official Northern policy refused to acknowledge Southern privateer ships and considered all captured Confederate privateers sailing under letters of marque to be pirates. When the United States captured several privateers, the *Dixie*, the *Savannah*, and the *Jefferson Davis*, their crews were indicted on charges of piracy, subject to execution if convicted.\(^4\) Political necessity forced the United States reluctantly treat the sailors as prisoners of war following the Union defeat at the Battle of First Manassas, when the Confederates captured more than a thousand Union soldiers and threatened reprisals against a like number of Union prisoners if Confederates were not

\(^4\) Witt, *Lincoln’s Code*, 157-162. Tried unsuccessfully on piracy charges, the crews were finally released by the Union in May 1863 as part of a prisoner exchange with the South.
likewise accorded treatment as prisoners of war. However, the idea of giving no quarter to the enemy remained a part of Union policy, and it was codified in the Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field, written by Francis Lieber and issued in 1863 as General Order No. 100. Even though this General Order was not issued until after the de facto collapse of the Dix-Hill Cartel that had codified the process for exchanging prisoners between the North and the South, it was generally compatible with the Cartel because of the Order's restrictions on when Union soldiers could refuse quarter to the enemy. Two passages in particular are telling. First, while generally condemning no-quarter policies on the field, the Instructions stipulate, “No body of troops has the right to declare that it will not give, and therefore will not expect, quarter; but a commander is permitted to direct his troops to give no quarter, in great straits, when his own salvation makes it impossible to cumber himself with prisoners.”

Second, the instructions specify that troops not regularly organized and guerrillas, "if captured, are not entitled to the privileges of prisoners of war, but shall be treated summarily as highway robbers or pirates," or, in plainer language, summarily executed if caught. General Order No. 100 essentially permitted the killing of surrendered prisoners in two specific instances: when


6 United States, War Department, Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States, in the Field, Section IV, paragraph 82.
military necessity dictated it, and when the enemy consisted of guerrillas who were not afforded protection as prisoners of war. It is significant that it was deemed necessary to codify these circumstances in this General Order, thereby defining Union policy regarding the treatment of prisoners in the field.

Prominent Confederates advocated for no-quarter policies as well, although they were never adopted broadly. Brigadier General (later Lieutenant General) Stonewall Jackson’s brother-in-law, Captain (later Brigadier General) Rufus Barringer, reported a conversation with Jackson in which Jackson advocated a no-quarter policy: “I always thought we ought to meet the Federal invaders on the outer verge of just right and defence, and raise at once the black flag, viz., ‘No quarter to the violators of our homes and firesides!’ It would in the end have proved true humanity and Mercy.”⁷ Here, Jackson reflected a belief that the South could have achieved a quicker victory against the North had it refused to take prisoners on the field; that utter ruthlessness on the South’s part would more quickly have convinced the North to break off the conflict. Even if such a policy would have proved uglier and bloodier in the short term, he believed it would have ultimately saved thousands of lives. Even with these convictions, Jackson abided by the decisions of the Confederate government, forbore to implement black flag policies by the soldiers under his command, and told Barringer, “I see now clearly enough the people of the South were not prepared

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⁷ Mary Anna Jackson, *Life and Letters of General Thomas J. Jackson (Stonewall Jackson)*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, Franklin Square, 1892), 310. Captain Barringer reports this conversation as having taken place the evening of July 6, 1862.
for such a policy. I have myself cordially accepted the policy of our leaders. They are great and good men. Possibly, too, as things then stood, no other policy was left open to us than the one pursued by President Davis and General Lee.”

Even though he had moderated his perspective on black flag policies, Jackson specifically framed the issue during this interview in the context of the actions and orders of Union Major General John Pope of the Army of Virginia, “by the cruel and utterly barbarous orders of General Pope, who . . . has laid whole communities under the pains and penalties of death or banishment; and in certain cases directed . . . citizens shot without waiting civil process.”

Even though neither side broadly implemented black flag policies, incidents of executions in reprisal or retaliation for acts perpetrated by the other side occurred, and some became particularly infamous. One such example was the Palmyra Massacre of October 18, 1862, in which ten Confederate prisoners of war were executed as a reprisal for the abduction of the civilian and Union sympathizer Andrew Alsman, who had been seized as a prisoner of war by Confederates. But what of the soldier in the field? The evidence would indicate that some soldiers adopted their own, albeit limited, black flag policies in the heat of combat until sufficiently restrained by their commanders, gratuitously killing prisoners as they attempted to surrender or even after they had surrendered and rendered themselves non-combatants. Of the surrender of Harper’s Ferry, Private Elias Winans Price of the 5th New York Heavy Artillery wrote, “it is

reported, and I think it is true, that some of the Indiana Artillery saw Gen. Miles. He was shot about 10 or 15 minutes after he surrendered. we were all indignant. May God have forgiven him.”

While historians have debated the exact circumstances of Miles’s death, with somewhat conflicting accounts provided by eyewitnesses, what is certain is that “Miles received his mortal wound ten or fifteen minutes after the first white flag showed along the Union lines. With smoke covering part of the field and mist still lingering in the mountaintops, a chance shot from Walker's gunners on Loudoun Heights probably caused Miles's death.” This is precisely the impression given by Price, and accounts of the surrender that indicate Miles was killed a considerable time after the Union garrison raised the white flag. Brigadier General John Walker later concurred: "the garrison surrendered. Owing to the fog I was ignorant of what had taken place, but surmising it, I soon ordered my batteries to cease firing. Those of Lawton, however, continued some minutes later. This happened unfortunately, as Colonel Dixon S. Miles, the Federal commander, was at this time mortally wounded by a fragment of shell while

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9 Elias Winans Price to Maria Gibbs Price and Henrietta McDowell Price, September 21, 1862, Elias Winans Price Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina. Dixon S. Miles, commanding the Union garrison at Harper’s Ferry was actually a colonel. He was mortally wounded in the left leg by an artillery shell and died the following day, September 16, 1862.

10 Chester G. Hearn, Six Years of Hell: Harpers Ferry during the Civil War (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 187.
waving a white flag in token of surrender.”

In other words, Brigadier General Alexander Lawton ignored the surrender of the Union garrison and maintained his artillery fire on the defenseless garrison for perhaps as long as fifteen minutes after the garrison capitulated.

Soldiers killed prisoners at close range on the battlefield as well, continuing to attack, wound, and kill them after they had surrendered. For instance, toward the end of the war, George Williams, a fifer in Company B, 123rd Ohio Infantry Regiment was captured during the Battle of High Bridge on April 6, 1865, three days before Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia. In a letter home after his capture, he described at length the plundering of his personal effects, followed by a description of the wounding of Captain John Fritz Randolph, who “was wounded through the lung after he had given up his sword. He is doing well as could be expected.”

Williams’ story is corroborated in a history of the regiment that contains this passage on the incident: “Capt. Randolph was shot through the breast by a cavalryman, after having surrendered.”

Robert Bingham hinted at similar brutality just before he was captured when, “in a trice every rebel had 5 or 6 Yankees around him. Some

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12 George Williams to his sister, April 17, 1865, George Williams Papers.

13 C. M. Keyes, The Military History of the 123d Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry (Sandusky, OH: Register Steam Press, 1874), 111.
were sabred, some shot - some captured very hurt,” indicating that the Union soldiers gave little thought to taking prisoners until the rebels were thoroughly beaten: dead or wounded. Another example was reported by Chaplain Charles A. Humphreys of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry Regiment who wrote, “soon I heard a low response and found the man whose disabled horse had in falling pinned him to the ground, and who was shot after he surrendered.” Humphreys managed to take the wounded man to a nearby farmer’s house where “as soon as I saw the wound, I saw also that it was mortal. The cruel shot—fired after he had surrendered and while he begged for mercy—had pierced his body completely through.” Humphreys tended to Private Owen Fox as best he could and “tried to get from him some message for his wife and little ones at home, but he would not—his agonies were too great; and he kept crying out even with his dying groans, ‘Chaplain, they shot me after I surrendered.’” While these cases do not speak to any official black flag policy in either the Union or the Confederate armies, they clearly demonstrate that the passions of soldiers in battle can make the act of surrender itself a hazardous one for the would-be prisoners.

The relative attention paid to the plundering of everything of any value from the prisoners, compared with the scant mention of an officer who was shot

14 Robert Bingham, diary, August 26, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

15 Humphreys, Field, Camp, Hospital and Prison, 105-106.
and nearly killed after surrendering his sword, is indicative of outrage for the loss of personal property and a violation of the prisoners’ rights, yet the continued assault on some prisoners received barely a mention and is similarly glossed in Bingham’s account. While not certain, this dichotomy may be due to the prevalence of continued violence against prisoners at the moment of capture. Here again, the regimental history mirrors the aspects that George Williams included in his letter. After giving a single sentence to the wounding of Randolph, the history described the treatment of the prisoners: “the regiment, or so many of them as did not make their escape after their capture, remained prisoners until Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House—a period of two days—but time enough for the Rebels to ‘go through’ our boys, stripping them of everything valuable, taking even their hats and shoes.”  

Instances of *de facto* black flag practices occurred on at least a few occasions during the war when Confederate troops continued to kill black Union soldiers attempting to surrender. The most infamous example is the Fort Pillow Massacre. On April 12, 1864, forces under the command of Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest overran the Union garrison at Fort Pillow in Tennessee. The Union garrison consisted of the 6th U.S. Regiment Colored Heavy Artillery, the 2nd Colored Light Artillery, and 13th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment. The engagement between Confederate and U.S. troops that led to the

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massacre began in March 1864 when Forrest’s brigade attacked Paducah, Kentucky and Forrest sent his famous message, “If you surrender, you shall be treated as prisoners of war; but if I have to storm your works, you may expect no quarter.” Union Colonel Hicks refused, and Forrest began his assault on Fort Pillow, which part of Forrest’s command had already surrounded. Forrest’s assault was successful and, in the aftermath, numerous accounts began to surface indicating that Forrest’s soldiers, with or without his consent, carried out his threat of no quarter.

In the Battle of Fort Pillow, hundreds of Union soldiers, most of them black, were slain while attempting to surrender. The Union military subsequently issued threats to Confederate military authorities in the West, beginning with an acknowledgment that war can be brutal and that, after a garrison has put up a long and protracted defense, the attackers have sometimes killed the garrison indiscriminately when the position was taken, but that it has always brought “dishonor upon the commanders that ordered or suffered it.” In this letter, Major General Cadwallader C. Washburn also threatened to unleash his soldiers similarly: “the treatment which Federal soldiers received would be their guide hereafter, and that if you give no quarter you need expect none.” Although reluctant to engage in black flag policies himself, Washburn made it clear to Forrest that he would mete out similar treatment to Confederate prisoners should

there be a repetition of an incident such as happened at Fort Pillow. Finally, Washburn attempted to find common ground with Forrest regarding black soldiers, but this included an implied warning that he would accept no distinction in the treatment of prisoners based on race: “I concur in your remark that if the black flag is once raised there can be no distinction so far as our soldiers are concerned. No distinction in this regard as to color is known to the laws of war.”

Outrage at the Fort Pillow massacre swept the North and instigated hearings on the proceedings of the battle and its aftermath, specifically focusing on the slaughter of black troops after the garrison surrendered.

Confederate soldiers offered no quarter to black soldiers, and the white soldiers who fought with them, on some occasions where the complications of fast-moving cavalry battles were not at issue and the wanton murder of surrendering Union soldiers afforded little opportunity for defense. One of the most egregious examples of such wide-scale killing occurred at the Battle of the Crater on July 30, 1864, during the Siege of Petersburg. After tunneling under the Confederate positions, the Union army detonated a total of 8,000 pounds of gunpowder, creating a large crater about 170 feet long, 120 feet wide, and perhaps thirty feet deep. The Union poured a large number of soldiers into this gap in the Confederate line in an attempt to end the siege, but the Confederates rallied and halted the Union advance. Major William H. Powell, aide-de-camp to General James Ledlie, commanding the 1st Division of the Union XIX Corps

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participated in the battle and later wrote, “over the crest and into the crater they [the Confederates] poured, and a hand-to-hand conflict ensued. It was of short duration, however; crowded as our troops were, and without organization, resistance was vain. Many men were bayoneted at that time—some probably that would not have been except for the excitement of battle.”¹⁹ Brigadier General Edward Porter Alexander, in command of the Confederate artillery at the battle, added, “there were, comparatively, very few Negro prisoners taken that day. It was the first occasion on which any of the Army of Northern Virginia came in contact with Negro troops, & the general feeling of the men toward their employment was very bitter. . . . That made the fighting on this occasion exceedingly fierce & bitter on the part of our men, not only toward the Negroes themselves, but sometimes even to the whites along with them. . . . Some of the Negro prisoners, who were originally allowed to surrender to some soldiers, were afterward shot by others, & there was, without doubt, a great deal of unnecessary killing of them.”²⁰

Race fueled other instances of black flag policies carried out by local commanders and their soldiers. As the battle of Poison Springs in Arkansas and its aftermath, which featured white and black Union soldiers fighting against white

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and Indian Confederate soldiers. The Confederates decisively routed the Union in the engagement, which took place on April 18, 1864, a mere six days after the Battle of Fort Pillow. When the Confederates broke the Union lines, which consisted of hundreds of black troops from the 1st and 2nd Kansas Colored Infantry, the resultant slaughter became infamous and led to retaliatory acts against Confederates by black soldiers operating in that region. Not only were the majority of Union casualties black, but the majority of the black casualties, roughly two-thirds were killed, while only about one-third were wounded, in a nearly precise reversal of normal casualty ratios, indicating a high probability that many wounded and surrendering black soldiers were slain out of hand by exultant Confederate troopers. Post-battle reports by Confederates did not dismiss their own treatment of black soldiers, but often commented specifically on the sheer violence of the Confederate Choctaw Indians against the black Union soldiers, many of whom were scalped, in addition to other atrocities that Confederate officers tacitly condoned. Shortly afterwards, black troops committed similar atrocities when they overran Confederate positions at the Battle of Jenkins’ Ferry on April 30, 1864. At one point in the battle, “the blacks easily overran the battery position, impaling every Confederate within reach, 


22 Urwin, “‘We Cannot Treat Negroes...as Prisoners of War,’” 197-198.
including three gunners who raised their hands in surrender.” Afterward, as the two sides began to disengage, black soldiers reportedly murdered wounded Confederate soldiers as they screened the Union withdrawal.\(^\text{23}\)

Aside from the hatred of black soldiers displayed by Confederates, which resulted in black soldiers killed on the battlefield even as they tried to surrender, racially motivated hatred incited more cold-blooded examples of black flag policies enacted on a local basis. Warren Goss described the immediate actions of the Confederates after the surrender of the Union garrison at Plymouth, North Carolina: “we were marched into the open field in front of Plymouth, where we were strongly guarded for the night. . . . There were about twenty negro soldiers at Plymouth, who fled to the swamps when the capture of the place became certain; these soldiers were hunted down and killed, while those who surrendered in good faith were drawn up in line, and shot down also like dogs. Every negro found with United States equipments, or uniforms, was (we were told by the rebel guard) shot without mercy.”\(^\text{24}\) In June 1863, Lieutenant Commander Elias K. Owen, commanding the ironclad U.S.S. *Louisville*, reported to Acting Rear Admiral David D. Porter of the Mississippi Squadron that the *Louisville* had recently picked up several deserters from the Confederate army, one of whom reported he had “witnessed the hanging at Richmond, Louisiana of

\(^{23}\) Urwin, ""We Cannot Treat Negroes...as Prisoners of War,"" 207-208.

\(^{24}\) Warren Lee Goss, *The Soldier’s Story of his Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and Other Rebel Prisons* (Boston, MA: Lee and Shepard, 1867), 61.
the white captain and negroes captured at Milliken’s Bend. General Taylor and command were drawn up to witness the execution.”25 Owen further reported, “the sergeant who commanded a company of contrabands,26 and who was captured by Harrison’s cavalry some weeks ago, was also hung at Perkin’s Landing.”27

Local instances of black flag policies were also reported where black troops were not involved in the fighting at all. At the Battle of Plymouth, North Carolina, part of the Union garrison included the 1st and 2nd North Carolina Volunteers, whom Confederates considered traitors or deserters. Goss wrote, “the Buffaloes, as the North Carolina companies were called, escaped in some cases by swimming the river before the final surrender. On those who were not thus fortunate, fell all the concentrated rage and hatred of the rebels. . . . on our way from Plymouth to Tarboro' I saw several of our North Carolina men selected out as deserters, and, without even the ceremony of a drum-head court-martial, strung up to the limb of trees by the roadside.” Of his own treatment after the fall of Plymouth, Goss wrote, “We were closely guarded, but not, as a general thing, badly treated.”28


26 During the Civil War, the Union army applied the term “contraband” to escaped slaves, which the United States refused to return to the Confederacy. The term first gained prevalence after Major General Benjamin Butler first refused to return three escaped slaves on the grounds that, since Virginia considered itself seceded from the Union, the Union was under no obligation to return fugitive slaves.


28 Goss, The Soldier’s Story, 61-62.
Lives Held Cheaply

Although the examples given above of soldiers killed while trying to surrender can perhaps be attributed to passion, anger, battlefield chaos, or any number of motives beyond a conscious “black flag” policy even on the part of the individual, such is not the case with prisoners killed by guards within the confines of the prison camp, exclusive of the use of deadly force during escape attempts. These instances involve guards shooting at, and often killing, prisoners for little or no apparent reason. Ostensibly, many prisoners were killed for attempting to cross the “deadline” that was set within the stockade and beyond which prisoners were not permitted to pass and were subject to deadly force if they attempted to do so. However, the circumstances of such shootings rarely seem so clear and frequently involve prisoners who posed no threat to the guards nor who were attempting to escape. Many of these appear, rather, to have been gratuitously slain by prison guards who had little or no respect for the lives of the prisoners and held their lives cheaply, taking advantage of any opportunity to kill a prisoner under any circumstances the guards felt they could explain to their superiors. Given the relative inaccuracy of the weapons used by most prison guards, guards may even have taken careful aim at prisoners as a matter of course, waiting for the opportunity to kill one.

Prisoners’ diaries and memoirs speak to an appalling callousness on the part of prison guards respecting the lives of their charges that seem to prove that guards placed little value on the lives of prisoners. It is not difficult to find such
instances, which prisoners wrote about with a frightening frequency in their diaries. Lieutenant Dickerson of the 44th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment described the overzealousness of the guards in enforcing the deadline at a prison near Columbia, South Carolina: “any one stepping over the inside of dead line is shot at once and some that don’t touch it. There is no warning, the first you know is the wound or the report of the gun that one is in danger.” Dickerson then provided a very particular example of a prisoner being shot even though he had not violated the deadline nor could he have been considered to be making an escape attempt: “I saw a captain shot one morning who was sitting on part of an old chair reading his Bible. He was about two feet from the inside line, with his back to the guards, reading to himself. He was shot in the back.”29 It is difficult to conceive of this as anything but premeditated murder on the part of the guard. Thomas Dabney Wier of the 14th Mississippi Infantry Regiment recorded a similar example in his diary: “3 Rebel Prisoners are Shot by a cowardly Yankey whilst they are cooking not dreaming or thinking from the crack in yonder little House a loaded gun is being pointed at them.”30 Julius Ramsdell of the 39th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment likewise wrote from Belle Isle: “during the night two of our men were shot by the guards for getting into the ditch or what we call the dead line.” The next day, Ramsdell recorded another incident, beginning in

29 Edward E. Dickerson, diary, October 23, 1864, Edward E. Dickerson Papers.
30 Thomas Wier, diary, June 15, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
disgust, “In the early part of the evening one of our regiment Sergt. French of company G. was deliberately shot dead by one of the guards, a boy no more than ten years old.” According to Ramsdell’s detailed account of the incident, the prisoner was killed for not moving fast enough for the young guard who was watching the prisoners at the time, when, shortly after threatening the prisoner, the guard killed him with a single shot to the head.31 Chaplain Charles Humphreys of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry Regiment was explicit in his condemnation of prison guards frequently firing on prisoners, “it was in Danville that I witnessed for the first time the reckless shooting of prisoners in their confinement. We were penned up in a large tobacco warehouse, and one of our men, happening to look out of a second-story window, received a shot in the head from the guard below.” Humphreys also plainly laid the blame on a complete and largely institutional indifference to the lives of the prisoners on the part of the guards as he continued, “it was simple recklessness on the part of the Confederates as to the lives of their prisoners.”32

The frequency with which guards fired into the prison enclosures created a marked nervousness among the prisoners. As Captain Robert Bingham of the 44th North Carolina Infantry Regiment described in his diary, “the sentinel shot at somebody last evening & night before last I was decidedly uneasy. Several men

31 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 26-27, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.
32 Humphreys, Field, Camp, Hospital and Prison, 124.
got drunk . . . & raised a row right under my bunk. . . . presently the sentinel
began to call to them - & continued to call & I feared he would fire into the room
every second.”33 The threat of being shot by the guards, even at night in the
prison barracks or tents created an atmosphere of anxiety among prisoners, who
could never feel safe for a moment. John H. King of the 40th Georgia Infantry
Regiment described very similar circumstances at Camp Chase, Ohio when he
wrote, “At a certain hour at night, the guards would cry out, ‘Lights out,’ and if the
lights were not immediately extinguished, the guard would fire into the room
regardless of whom he might kill or maim.” He continued with the complaint that
“no friend of a suffering comrade dare make a light, however extreme the illness,
or imminent the peril of the sufferer, or to speak above a whisper during the night
watches. If so, the bullet from the rifle of a guard would come whistling into the
barracks to kill or to wound some luckless sleeper.”34 Virginian John R. King
reported that the black guards at Elmira prison constantly taunted the prisoners
with threats such as: “‘look out, white man, the bottom rail is on top now, so you
had better be careful for my gun has been wanting to smoke at you all day!’
Often their threats came true. Many times during the night . . . we in our tent

33 Robert Bingham, diary, August 26, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers, Wilson Special
Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

34 John H. King, Three Hundred Days in a Yankee Prison: Reminiscences of War Life,
Captivity, Imprisonment at Camp Chase Ohio (Atlanta, GA: Jas. P. Daves, 1904), 82. John
H. King is hereafter referred to as Georgian John H. King to distinguish him from Virginian
John R. King, 82.
hugged the ground very closely expecting to hear a bullet sing at any moment."35

As proof of the vigilance of the guards and their willingness to shoot at prisoners, some intentionally provoked their guards in a dangerous game of “can’t get me.” Captain Sumner Shearman of the 4th Rhode Island Volunteers described his experiences toying with the guards: “the guard had instructions to fire at any prisoner who might show himself at the window. We not infrequently tantalized the guard by going near enough to be seen by him, and dodging back just as he fired.”36

Although investigations into shooting incidents sometimes occurred, few if any of the guards faced disciplinary actions, because their versions almost invariably overruled prisoners’ statements. In any event, the prisoners rarely heard what became of these investigations, and in many of their accounts, they simply indicate that nothing was done with the shooter. Captain W. A. Wash of Company I, 60th Tennessee Infantry Regiment was captured by the Union at the Battle of Big Black River Bridge in Mississippi on May 17, 1863, and transported to the prison at Johnson’s Island, Ohio. Regarding a shooting incident on July 25, 1864, Wash wrote, “at half-past nine o’clock that night a sentinel shot into Block 5 and wounded one man in the arm and another in the shoulder. That was the hour

35 John R. King, My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons Written from Memory (Clarksburg, WV: Stonewall Jackson Chapter No. 1333 United Daughters of the Confederacy), 28. John R. King is hereafter referred to as Virginian John R. King to distinguish him from John H. King.

36 Sumner Upham Shearman, Battle of the Crater and Experiences of Prison Life (Providence, RI: Rhode Island Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society, 1898), 17-18.
at which lights were required to be extinguished, and the guard claimed that he fired at a light, but fifty men who were in the room declared that no light was burning. Colonel Hill investigated the affair, but we never knew to what conclusion he came.”³⁷ After the shooting incident he witnessed near Columbia, Dickerson wrote, “The guard was not removed and no attention was paid to him. He reloaded his gun and kept his beat until the whole guard was changed.”³⁸ Wier likewise reported after three prisoners were killed, “nothing done with the offender.”³⁹ William Tiemann recorded at least one instance where an investigation into a prisoner shooting occurred. Having left Libby Prison, Tiemann found himself confined in Salisbury, North Carolina, which likewise had a deadline within the enclosure. Of the shooting, Tiemann wrote, “one of the guards, a mere boy, had shot one of our officers, second Lieutenant John Davis . . . approaching near the dead line had been fired upon and instantly killed.” Although “the utmost indignation was aroused by this cruel and cold-blooded murder and promise was made us by the prison commandant that a careful investigation should be made and the guard adequately punished," Tiemann wrote that the prisoners' later learned the guard in question had been promoted

³⁷ W. A. Wash, Camp, Field and Prison Life: Containing Sketches of Service in the South, and the Experience, Incidents and Observations Connected with Almost Two Years Imprisonment at Johnson’s Island, Ohio, Where 3,000 Confederate Officers were Confined (Saint Louis, MO: Southwestern Book and Publishing Co., 1870), 244.

³⁸ Edward E. Dickerson, diary, October 23, 1864, Edward E. Dickerson Papers.

³⁹ Thomas Wier, diary, June 15, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
and granted a furlough rather than punished. Of the killing of prisoners at Point Lookout, Creed Davis wrote, “it is singular that these murders are allowed. They are not even investigated.” Georgian John H. King mirrored the comments of other prisoners when he noted after a shooting incident at Camp Chase, “of course nothing was done to these cowardly guards. Doubtless they were complimented for gallantry and are now drawing pensions from the United States Treasury, on certificates of meritorious service.”

Other accounts also reported the frequency with which guards killed their prisoners and, in some cases, imputed racial hatred as an underlying motivation. B. T. Holliday of Stuart’s Horse Artillery reported that at Point Lookout “along this fence on the inside of the prison was the ‘Dead-Line’, and to cross that line was to run the risk of being shot by the guards. New prisoners, knowing nothing of the dead line, would sometimes venture up to the fence, and pay the penalty.” Later, Holliday also wrote, “during my imprisonment at Point Lookout, negro troops took the place of white guards. They were the first negro soldiers I had seen. It was a bitter pill for Southern men to swallow and we felt the insult very keenly. They were impudent and tyrannical and the prisoners had to submit to many indignities.” More specifically, Holliday recalled when he “saw a negro run the


41 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 8, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary, Virginia Historical Society.

42 John H. King, Three Hundred Days in a Yankee Prison, 82.
point of his bayonet into a prisoner who crossed his beat to go into the cook
house to get his ration.”43 In a similar incident, Creed Davis reported, “the negro
guards last night, without any provocation, bayoneted one man, killing him upon
the spot and shot at another but missed his mark.”44 Virginian John R. King
reported that at Elmira, New York, “Numbers of scars were left on the frame work
of the closets made by negroes firing at the prisoners.”45

Prisoners also described how seemingly minor infractions of camp rules
could result in serious injury or death. Georgian John H. King, confined at Camp
Chase in Ohio, explained that an order had been issued by the prison authorities
proscribing dumping out any water at the water pumps. However, King wrote,
“one of the unfortunates, not aware of the order, washed out his tin cup at the
pump and threw out the water on the ground before filling the cup with water to
drink.” Unfortunately for the hapless soldier, “a guard seeing him throw the water
on the ground, at once fired at him and missing his aim severely wounded an
unlucky prisoner standing some distance beyond him, breaking his leg, rendering
it necessary in the judgment of the Yankee surgeon to amputate the poor fellow's
fractured limb.” King described another incident in which the prisoners were

43 B. T. Holliday, “Account of My Capture,” 18 (unpublished memoir), B. T. Holliday Papers,
Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

44 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 8, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary, Virginia Historical
Society

45 John R. King, My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons Written
from Memory (Clarksburg, WV: Stonewall Jackson Chapter No. 1333 United Daughters of
the Confederacy), 28.
required to cross a ditch with their blankets so that the guards could ensure no prisoner had more than one blanket, and were only to cross the ditch when ordered to do so. Unfortunately, one of the prisoners stepped across the ditch sooner “and was immediately shot down by the guard. The poor fellow's leg was so badly shattered that amputation was rendered necessary another one made cripple for life.” In another incident, a black guard illegally confiscated a watch from a prisoner, after which the white officer in charge forced the guard to return the watch. As a result, “this made the negro very angry and on guard a few days later he saw the owner of the watch going into the cookhouse with a hundred or more prisoners marching four ranks deep, so he fired at the man.” The guard, however fired indiscriminately into the ranks of prisoners and, "missing the rank he was in, he fired at every man in the rank next to him, two were shot through the body, one in the arm and one in the hand. The two who were shot through the body died, the other two lived." This latter incident exemplifies the complete subservience of prisoners, who could be held to deadly account even for perceived infractions according to the guards’ discretion.

That guards took the deadline seriously is certain, as numerous accounts attest. Melvin Grigsby of the 2nd Wisconsin Cavalry Regiment described the deadly earnest of the prison guards at Andersonville: “to cross it—it even to get

hand, or foot, or head, a hair's breadth over—was instant death."\textsuperscript{48} Warren Goss wrote, "any person who approached it, as many unconsciously did, and as in the crowd was often unavoidable, was shot dead, with no warning whatever to admonish him that death was near."\textsuperscript{49} Diarists and memoirists frequently described in grim detail instances of guards killing prisoners for crossing or approaching the deadline, and many make clear that the author believed the shootings wholly unwarranted. Of his first day in Andersonville, Grigsby wrote, "I stood within a few feet of one who was filling his can safely inside of the dead-line, when some others, struggling for a place to get water, accidentally pushed him so that he fell with his head under the pole. That instant his brains and blood went floating down the stream."\textsuperscript{50} That the prisoner was accidentally pushed across the deadline appears to have been of no moment to the guard in this account. Likewise, Goss described an incident on his second day at Andersonville, when "a poor one-legged cripple placed one hand on the dead line to support him while he got his crutch, which had fallen from his feeble grasp to the ground. In this position he was shot through the lungs, and laid near the dead line writhing in torments during most of the forenoon, until at last death came to his relief. None dared approach him to relieve his sufferings through fear of the same fate." That Goss considered this an act of unwarranted murder is clear, but

\textsuperscript{48} Melvin Grigsby, \textit{The Smoked Yank} (Chicago: Regan Printing Company, 1891), 99.
\textsuperscript{49} Goss, \textit{The Soldier's Story}, 85-86.
\textsuperscript{50} Grigsby, \textit{The Smoked Yank}, 99-100.
his subsequent description of the guards actions after the event implies inordinate cruelty on the guard’s part: “the guard loaded his musket after he had performed this dastardly act, and grinning with satisfaction, viewed the body of the dying, murdered man, for nearly an hour, with apparent pleasure, occasionally raising the gun to threaten anyone who, from curiosity or pity, dared to approach the poor fellow.”

To be sure, the guards’ perspective surely differed and, charged with ensuring prisoners did not approach the wall close enough to cross it, guards may well have deemed many shootings thoroughly justified. Prisoners’ perspectives differed sharply. As these examples illustrate, prisoners perceived such acts as driven more by cruelty and a lack of regard for prisoners’ lives than from any sense of security.

The diligence of the guards at Libby Prison did not even allow Union prisoners to get breaths of fresh air, as the windows were off limits in the cramped quarters of the tobacco warehouses they were housed in and the stench of their dead companions forced many to risk death at the windows to escape the smell that surrounded them. Goss wrote of Libby prison that, “during the day, in the corners of our garret the dead remained among the living, and from these through all the rooms came the pestilent breath of a charnel-house. The vermin swarmed in every crack and crevice; the floors had not been cleaned for years. To consign men to such quarters was like signing their death warrant. Two men were shot by the rebel guard while trying to get breath at the

51 Goss, The Soldier’s Story, 85-86.
windows.”  

52 Captain William Tiemann of the 159th New York Infantry Regiment, captured during the Third Battle of Winchester, wrote after his arrival at Libby Prison, “we were cautioned by our comrades not to approach the windows too closely as the guards had a habit of firing at it if they saw a face, and in some cases the shots had taken effect.”

Guards often exhibited a callous brutality towards their charges, showing no consideration for their weakness or injuries, or even respect for the scant hospital facilities afforded the prisoners. An unknown Union soldier from the 7th West Virginia Cavalry Regiment was captured while performing service as a provost guard, guarding prisoners near Covington, Virginia. While held at Belle Isle, the unknown soldier described the harshness of the guards: a guard grabbed “a gun from a sentinel standing near, and ran the through the arm of a prisoner, who had fallen, and was in the act of rising to his feet. The bayonet went through his arm and and in to his side. [The guard] tried to pull it out again, but it did not come out as easily as he expected; so he put his foot on the man and pulled out the bayonet, cursing all the time, swearing he would kill them all.”

54 Of an incident involving the guards shooting into the prison hospital, Thomas Wier wrote simply, “a crazy man from Hospital was Shot through the

52 Goss, The Soldier’s Story, 27.


guards also fired indiscriminately into crowds of prisoners at times, killing or maiming soldiers without warning. Goss wrote that, “frequently the guard fired indiscriminately into a crowd. On one occasion I saw a man wounded and another killed; one was lying under his blanket asleep, the other standing some distance from the dead line.”

Prisoners, confined for months and even years in Civil War prison camps, sometimes despaired of life and, to save themselves from a slow death by disease or starvation, actually provoked the guards into killing them. Goss described one such incident while he was in Andersonville: “men becoming tired of life committed suicide in this manner. They had but to get under the dead line, or lean upon it, and their fate was sealed in death. Goss then detailed an incident involving a New York soldier who had previously tried to escape from prison. Although he does not indicate exactly how, Goss noted that the prisoner lost his cooking utensils and his blanket as a result of his escape attempt and was then “obliged to endure the rain and heat without protection, and to borrow, beg, or steal cooking implements, eat his food raw, or starve. Lying in the rain often at night, followed by the tropical heat of day, was torture which goaded him to desperation.” Having made his decision, the prisoner “announced his determination to die, and getting over the dead line, was shot through the

55 Thomas Wier, diary, June 16, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

56 Goss, The Soldier’s Story, 86.
A soldier from the 7th West Virginia Cavalry wrote that he saw a man “shot outside of the dead line. He was a one legged man. Some of the men said he was crazy and think he must either have been crazy or tired of life, for he deliberately walked outside of the dead line and stood there. He saw the guard make ready to fire, but never moved he was shot in the chin, the ball passing through his breast, and coming out at his back. He lived about five minutes. Some of the men said it was the same guard who shot three out of the five [that this soldier had witnessed shot by the guards].”

**War Psychosis**

Prisoners’ diaries and memoirs contain reports of the callous and wanton killing of prisoners within the confines of the prison camp and very specifically define these shootings as murders. Such disregard for the lives of their charges verges on a pathological contempt or hatred for the enemy, even when in such a helpless state as that which defined prisoners’ existence. Prisoners’ accounts of these incidents make it difficult to determine the actual frequency with which shootings occurred, but they do indicate that guards fired into camps regularly, which severely depressed the prisoners’ already low morale. Like the actual frequency of shootings, guards’ motivation is difficult to ascertain, and the truth probably crossed the full spectrum from simple attention to duty to flagrant

57 Goss, *The Soldier’s Story*, 87.

murder. Prisoners nearly always construed the latter to be the motivation behind these shootings and ascribed a heartless callousness to their guards. E. L. Cox of the 68th North Carolina Infantry Regiment, captured and taken to Fort Delaware, described three prisoners shot during November and December, then concluded, “the Yankees seem to murder prisoners without remors or conscience.”\textsuperscript{59} By January, shooting incidents had become so prevalent at Johnson’s Island that Robert Bingham wrote, “these infamous home guards . . . are getting large & shooting at everybody–shot several times last night.”\textsuperscript{60} Following the April 1864 killings of James Beatie of the 4th Florida Infantry Regiment and Michael Healey of the 30th Mississippi Infantry Regiment, an investigation conducted at Camp Morton determined that there was some truth to prisoners’ assertions that such shootings were at least sometimes intentional. After the investigation, Colonel Ambrose Stevens, commanding the prison camp, wrote William Hoffman, the Commissary-General of Prisoners, “the shooting in question was a malicious and premeditated act on the part of the guard” who had “repeatedly threatened to ‘shoot some rebel,’ stating that they had shot two [of his] fingers off,” when he served in the field.\textsuperscript{61} While Stevens charged the guard with murder, the outcome is unknown.

\textsuperscript{59} E. L. Cox diary, December 20, 1864, E. L. Cox Diary, Virginia Historical Society.
\textsuperscript{60} Robert Bingham, diary, January 16, 1864, Robert Bingham Papers.
\textsuperscript{61} Ambrose A. Stevens to William Hoffman, April 21, 1864, Microcopy 598, Record Group 393, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
The deliberate murder of prisoners brought home to them personally, in a way no other could, that their lives were effectively forfeit as prisoners of war and valued as nothing by their captors who could, and did, kill them with impunity. Bingham commented, “Baker has been confined 12 months and more - was to [have been] shot once next day - & hanged once - has been exchanged twice - and two Yankees are in the field for him - such is Yankee honor,” mingling his belief in the paucity of the value prisoners’ lives held with his contempt for the captors who treated them so.62 Prisoners' belief that their guards would willingly kill them without provocation lent a macabre and gloomy aspect to their existence. The horrid conditions within the camps brought innumerable physical ailments and the deaths of thousands of prisoners over the course of the war only exacerbated prisoners' feelings of hopelessness.

62 Robert Bingham, diary, July 6, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
V. "ONE OF THE MOST HORRIBLE CRIMES KNOWN"

"In all the Southern prisons, as near as could be ascertained, about
65,000 men fell victims to rebel brutality. Who can doubt but that it was a fairly
concocted, premeditated plan of their captors to destroy them, and that, too, in a
most horrible manner?" ¹

— John W. Urban

Guards’ often harsh and deadly treatment of prisoners was only one
aspect of the horrid and squalid conditions of the prison camps that held them.
Prisoners most frequently referred to their prisons not as “camps” (the official
term) but as “pens,” not merely signifying places of confinement but juxtaposing
the sites with animal enclosures and likening their own treatment to less than that
of animals. Prisoners’ letters on the conditions of their captivity are often of
limited value because of the censorship they went through. As William Tiemann
wrote in his unpublished memoir, “not a line as to our condition was permitted . . .
we could simply say that we were yet alive and that was all.” ² The extant
evidence from diaries and post-war memoirs provides a glimpse into an
existence characterized by mistreatment, malnourishment and starvation, as well
as endemic diseases such as scurvy and diarrhea. Prisoners received little relief

¹ John W. Urban, Battle Field and Prison Pen, or Through the War, and Thrice a Prisoner

² William Francis Tiemann, unpublished memoir, “Prison Life in Dixie,” 37, William Francis
Tiemann Memoir, Virginia Historical Society.
from these conditions from their captors, even less from their own government,\(^3\) and only occasional assistance from family, friends, or other charitable benefactors in the form of care packages, which prison authorities sometimes prohibited. That prison conditions were harsh and conducive to famine and disease is not in question. Charles Sanders, Jr., has strongly argued that the lack of adequate food, shelter, and medical provisions was both institutional and intentional on both sides of the conflict.\(^4\) The stark reality of the mortality rates in prisons North and South speaks plainly to the squalor, filth, and bleakness that prisoners struggled against. Prisoners’ reactions to these conditions reflected a combination of acceptance, resilience born of necessity, and mounting hatred and contempt for their jailers and the enemy government, as distinct from their armies in the field, which prisoners commonly accorded respect as worthy opponents.

The lives of prisoners of war in the American Civil War were never easy and often ended due to disease, starvation, and exposure to the elements. These hardships were often revealed in prisoners’ initial impressions of the camps they entered. From the moment they entered the prisons, they often recognized that

\(^3\) Agreements made during the course of the negotiations for the exchange of prisoners included provisions allowing the United States and the Confederate States to provide necessary supplies of clothing and other matériel for the prisoners’ comfort. Both sides made few attempts to do so, as the supply of the armies in the field nearly always took precedence over the supply of prisoners.

their reprieve from the dangers of the battlefield and the discomforts and deprivations of their journey to prison were but the beginning of a long ordeal. The day he entered Belle Isle, Julius Ramsdell entered into his diary, “As we passed over the bridge which connects the island with the mainland, we felt as if we were to be separated from friends, home, country, and the world perhaps forever.”\(^5\) Major Morton Tower of the 13\(^{th}\) Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, captured at the Battle of Gettysburg, wrote of his entrance into Libby Prison, “the gloomy and forbidding exterior of the prison and the pale, emaciated faces staring vacantly at us through the bars were repulsive.”\(^6\) B. T. Holliday described his impression of his arrival at Point Lookout prison: “When we were ushered in to the Bull Pen, the cry of ‘Fresh Fish’ saluted our ears. It was a term applied to all new prisoners. My first sight of the prisoners shocked me. They looked so starved. Their faces were so lean and pinched. I, however, soon became accustomed to their appearance, and in course of time, I looked as they did.”\(^7\)

Prisoners’ initial impressions were soon confirmed and the squalor of their conditions exceeded even their worst fears. When Julius Ramsdell was first confined in Libby Prison before his transfer to Belle Isle, he wrote of his first night there: “we lay down upon the dirty floor to sleep. weak and hungry and crowded

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\(^5\) Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 22, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

\(^6\) Morton Tower, unpublished memoir, nd., 2, Morton Tower Memoir, Virginia Historical Society.

together so that we could scarcely move, it seemed as though the foul and impure air we breathed would smother us.”

William Tillson wrote, “we are confined loussey dirty half starved and thinly clad.” Prisoners’ sufferings made them wish for any chance to leave, even if it meant returning to the battlefield. Creed Davis wrote, “I do not feel that I can live in prison another week. Active service in the field, which to all the dangers and risks of battle, would be far preferable to it.”

Even while the privations and sufferings of the prisoners due to scant rations, rampant disease, incessant lice infestations, lack of adequate clothing, and exposure to the elements killed many and devastated the morale and spirits of others, most nonetheless strove to survive. Some, however, gave up entirely and simply waited for death to take them, which, in the conditions that prevailed in prison camps both in the North and in the South, was virtually a certainty for those who ceased to hope and look after their own welfare.

A prisoner’s daily life was generally boring, with few requirements or responsibilities required of them by their guards. Of his time as a prisoner, Tieman wrote: “our prison life was dull and monotonous. We amused ourselves as best we could, but mainly by sleeping or walking around.”

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8 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 22, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.


10 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, April 22, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary, Virginia Historical Society.

regulations and conditions varied somewhat depending on the specific prison and its condition at the time, prisoners lived under markedly similar routines at most prisons. Prisoners were generally divided into squads of approximately one hundred men, each under the charge of a sergeant responsible for the distribution of rations and for reporting the condition of the men in his squad to the prison authorities. Roll-call was typically conducted each morning when the first rations of the day were distributed and often consumed two or more hours as the guard accounted for any prisoners not present for roll-call through sickness or death. Because of the time it took to distribute rations, some prisoners snuck into other squads to receive more than their allotted share of rations, an act known as “flanking.” Rations were likewise distributed in the evening. Other than being present or accounted for at roll-call, the prisoners’ few duties included cooking their own food and policing their own living areas, whether they be barracks, open stockades, or buildings converted for prison use.

With the rest of the day left to themselves and very little to occupy it, prisoners engaged in a variety of activities in an attempt to overcome the pervasive monotony. Some spent much of their time walking or jogging to try to keep themselves healthy but, more commonly, prisoners passed their days in sedentary activities. The more literate prisoners read virtually anything they could


get their hands on, and newspapers prisoners received passed constantly through the camp. Religion and gambling vied with each other among prisoners, while others engaged in carving objects to send home as souvenirs or to use in camp as a form of currency to purchase additional rations or get a haircut.\(^\text{14}\)

Occasionally, prisoners were engaged in work details, which sometimes required they consent to a limited parole in which they agreed not to escape while being permitted outside the prison to perform manual labor such as hauling water or retrieving firewood for use in the prison. At other times, prisoners were permitted to work on parole making shoes or constructing buildings as was done at Andersonville.\(^\text{15}\)

Beyond these limited pursuits and opportunities, however, prisoners had very little to occupy their time or attention.

**Starvation**

Starvation, rampant in prisons North and South, severely affected prisoners’ physical and mental health and morale. Of his experience regarding the rations, William Tillson wrote, “because of our hunger we eat all of our bread & meat for supper and had none for breakfast this morning. If there is anything to make a man gloomey it is not to have enough to eat.”\(^\text{16}\)

To obtain food at all, prisoners had to crowd around the inside of the gate where rations were


\(^{15}\) Marvel, *Andersonville*, 46-47.

\(^{16}\) William H. Tillson, diary, October 12, 1863.
distributed, and often only the fittest prisoners could make the trip (see figure 4).

Those too weak from hunger were often dependent on the charity of other prisoners. Even for those who could gather to receive their rations, disappointment was the order of the day, as Creed Thomas Davis wrote in his diary: “our rations are codfish and hard navy crackers, a very poor bill of fare for one with as bad teeth as I am so unfortunate to have. I am indescribably miserable. I am out of heart.” A short time later, Davis tied his hopes for exchange or release directly to his hunger: “good God, if they should not let us

Figure 4: Andersonville Prison, Ga., August 17, 1864. Issuing rations, view from main gate (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Lot 4181, Item 16)

17 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, April 21, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
out today, I feel that the disappointment will kill me. Starved as we are, a day or week is an age of misery.” Warren Goss wrote that the rations at Belle Isle were so small that “All other thoughts and feelings had become concentrated in that of hunger.” Prisoners frequently commented on the effect of their rations on their overall morale and wellbeing, often in tandem with their references to the effects of weather, as will be discussed below.

The fixation on food and rations, both in quantity and quality, or rather the lack thereof, is a common and central theme in most prisoners’ diaries. Private Franklin Krause of the 143rd Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment was captured on May 5, 1864, at the Battle of the Wilderness and transported to Andersonville Prison. There, he reported, he “got a small cup of boiled rice for a days rations. Rather slim fare and a little piece of bacon.” The following day he wrote that he “drew ½ loaf of cornbread and a little piece of bacon. Rather hard fare.” Nearly every day, Krause recorded the rations he received, typically consisting of little more than some corn meal and a small piece of bacon. Although complaining about the limited rations he received, for most of June and July he noted that he was “usually well.” The monotony of the diet and the slim fare is clear in some

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18 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 1, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.

19 Warren Lee Goss, The Soldier’s Story of his Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and Other Rebel Prisons (Boston, MA: Lee and Shepard, 1867), 38.

20 Franklin Krause, diary, June 16-17, 1864, Andersonville Civil War Diary, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

21 Franklin Krause, diary, July 8, 1864, Andersonville Civil War Diary.
of his diary entries beginning around mid-July 1864, such as his entry for July 12: “drew rations today as usual cornmeal and bacon. I am tired of the Confederacy. Have been in the Rebs hands a little more than 2 months. Have had nothing but corn and stinking meat. I call it poor fare.” Famine was so common that, even when prisoners received care packages from home or some other charitable source, they recognized that these represented only a brief intermission in their otherwise interminable hunger. William Tiemann described his thoughts after eating a full Christmas dinner: “it was nothing to us that to-morrow we would be hungry again—we had had one ‘square meal’ at least and that was all the thought we had.” At another time, however, Tiemann pointed out how the passage of holidays particularly reminded them of their lack of freedom, and simultaneously drew their attention to their own hunger at times when others were feasting. Regarding the Thanksgiving holiday, he wrote, “Thanksgiving day passed in gloom and silence. Our thoughts were all with the dear ones at home and our misery was added to in thinking of them as assembling together and that their minds too would be sadly disturbed by the thoughts of us and our welfare, and then the pangs of hunger were made the more severe as our minds turned to the feasts so many others were enjoying with little thought on their part of the hunger we were enduring, or, if though of, little realizing how great was our

22 Franklin Krause, diary, July 12, 1864, Andersonville Civil War Diary.
need.”\textsuperscript{24} While not as melancholy as Tiemann, Robert Bingham wrote in his diary on August 6, 1863, that it was the “Yankee thanksgiving day” and used the occasion to write about all the people in his life he felt thankful for, but he did not mention any feasting or extra rations, a striking omission on a day traditionally devoted to feasting as well as giving thanks.

Prison guards sometimes cut or eliminated prisoners’ rations as a disciplinary measure. Julius Ramsdell reported one such incident that began when a one-eyed Confederate officer came into the prisoners’ enclosure and, after some heated words with some prisoners, a prisoner knocked the officer to the ground. The officer quickly left, but soon returned “with a couple of pistols, swearing he would kill the man who struck him.” When the culprit could not be found, the Confederate officer “declared that not a man out of the 3500 on the island should have a mouthful to eat until the Bucktail was found and given up to him.” Although the culprit was known to many of the prisoners, they refused to give him up to the guards, so the prisoners’ rations were stopped altogether, as the officer had threatened. With no rations to assuage their appetites, Ramsdell wrote, the prisoners “weak and hungry and oppressed by the excessive heat we lay upon the sandy ground with neither strength or ambition to move.”\textsuperscript{25} Aside from punishment for specific infractions, some prisoners also alleged that their rations were reduced as a punishment when the prisoners’ army won a battle. An


\textsuperscript{25} Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 26, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
unidentified Union author wrote that at Belle Isle, “whenever our men gained a victory, our rations were diminished.”

The rations provided to prisoners were rarely good and their accounts specifically described the poor quality of their food. Tiemann wrote that, while rations were never plentiful, they “grew poorer and smaller every day. At times we had meat or soup only once a week. The soup was made of black beans, ‘nigger beans’ we called them, mouldy and full of worms.” When they received meat, Tiemann wrote, it “was always beef, ‘lights’ or lungs and entrails forming part of the allowance, on some occasions this beastly mess being cooked and served without cleaning the entrails which were full of the half digested food of the animal.”

W. H. Merrell recorded the normal rations at Libby Prison early in the war: “between eight and nine we received our morning ration, which consisted of bread (half baked), beef and water. The individual allowance was in quantity about one-half what a well man would naturally require. Our second and only other ration was received between four and five in the afternoon, and consisted of bread and soup—( the beef dispensed in the morning being taken from the ‘slops’ of the day previous.) —This was the standard bill of fare. The


prisoners, sick and well, were compelled to accept it or—go without.”29 A week after his capture at the Siege of Petersburg, still suffering acutely from hunger, Julius Ramsdell tried to describe how prostrate from famine prisoners had become: “we sat upon the floor so weak we could scarcely move, and watched with eager eyes the door in hopes someone would come with some kind of food for us. What it was we cared not.”30 Warren Goss also commented that the rations provided to the prisoners, while never plentiful, nonetheless “became daily worse, less in quantity, and poorer in quality” as his time at Belle Isle wore on.31 Julius Ramsdell complained of the reduced rations he received at Belle Isle compared with Libby Prison: “we lay upon the sandy ground with nothing to eat, with the burning rays of the sun pouring down upon our unprotected heads,” until their rations are finally brought in, which then prompted his complaint that although the rations “are the same as we had in Libey only we get one half as much.”32 According to Julius Ramsdell, the only relief from the endless hunger came when prisoners managed to get some sleep: “in our sleep we are at home and satisfying the cravings of hunger. The terrible gnawing in our stomach we no

30 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 22, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
31 Goss, *The Soldier’s Story*, 46.
32 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 24, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
longer feel but for the time we are happy, until daylight brings us back from those pleasant dreams to the gloomy reality.”

The sheer level of hunger occasioned theft of food at times, which at least some prisoners understood, if not wholly condoned. Tiemann wrote that at Libby Prison, prisoners sometimes tried to make a few biscuits last for several days and kept them in their haversacks, from which other prisoners sometimes stole them. Of the thieves, Tiemann wrote, “surely there is pardon for those who half crazed by hunger did yield to this temptation when the very sight of food was enough to completely turn their wits.” William Tillson commented on thefts of food in Libby Prison: “let Fax have [some bread]. He put it near his head last night and toward morning caught a man stealing it ran after him and caught the thief. But he didn’t have the bread. It was the last bite we had.” Far less forgiving than Tiemann, Tillson proffered his solution to the problem: “when a man by hunger and meanness is lead to do bad an act of stealing out to be shot.” In a different approach to dealing with hunger, Warren Goss wrote of a prisoner who stole the boots from the feet of a dying soldier in order to purchase a little extra food, essentially reasoning that the food would do him more good than the boots would do for the dying man.

33 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 30, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
36 Goss, The Soldier’s Story, 39-40.
Prisoners were occasionally able to drop cautious references to their conditions in letters home. For example, in a request to receive clothes as part of a care package from home, Caleb Carlton of the 89th Ohio Infantry wrote, “we manage to exist here – but it is severe. We wear the same clothes we were captured in, do our own Cooking and Washing. We sleep on the floor. My saddle blanket forms my bed and covering,” which he followed with a wry piece of humor: “altogether we are a well dressed and nice looking set of gentlemen.”

In another example, Carlton made a cautious complaint about his rations that “unfortunately we are not allowed to received any more boxes and consequently will have to come down to Confederate rations,” which he followed with another attempt at humor: “it will be a fortunate thing for you young housekeepers for when we do get home there will be but little grumbling about meals or the style of cooking them.”

Prisoners were sometimes able to augment their rations or personal amenities through purchases from camp sutlers, their guards on occasion, or from care packages sent by friends and relatives, which prison authorities often allowed prisoners to receive. As prisoners’ money was generally confiscated upon their arrival at prison, they frequently relied on tobacco as a form of money. As Creed Davis described this, “For one chew we can get our hair cut, faces

37 Caleb Henry Carlton to Sadie Carlton, October 29, 1863, Caleb Henry Carlton Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

38 Caleb Henry Carlton to Sadie Carlton, December 16, 1863, Caleb Henry Carlton Papers.
shaved, or any article of clothing washed. A chew of tobacco is also good for one cracker.”

Dr. Joseph Jones, who inspected the Andersonville prison under direction of the Confederate government, particularly detailed the rations provided to prisoners and harshly indicted the Confederacy for their poor quality: “the long use of salt meat, oftentimes imperfectly cured, as well as the almost total deprivation of vegetables and fruit, appeared to be the chief causes of the scurvy. I carefully examined the bakery and the bread furnished the prisoners, and found that they were supplied almost entirely with corn-bread from which the husk had not been separated. This husk acted as an irritant to the alimentary canal without adding any nutriment to the bread.” While some blamed their own governments for not securing the release of prisoners, all condemned the short rations and extremely poor quality of the rations provided. In fact, many prisoners’ visceral reaction to their rations is remarkable in light of the military rations to which they were accustomed. The fact that Union and Confederate prisoners alike similarly complained about the quality and quantity of their rations is significant as an indication of just how poorly prisoners were typically fed.

39 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 2, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
40 Frank E. Moran, Bastiles of the Confederacy: A Reply to Jefferson Davis (Baltimore, MD, 1890), 40-41.
Weather

Prisoners suffered severely from the weather, both during the summer and the winter months, because of extreme shortages of good shelter, clothes, and wood for burning. William Tiemann wrote during his captivity that, “it was bitter cold. . . . the wind blew keenly and chilled us through and through . . . the cold and pangs of hunger together giving us chance for only a fitful wakefulness.”41 Julius Ramsdell spent his second night in captivity sleeping in the open on an island in the Appomattox River where it passed through Petersburg. With their blankets and tents taken from them, Ramsdell reported that it “kept raining and we were wet through to our skins and had nothing to sleep upon or to put over us. We passed the night miserably in this manner, without once closing our eyes to sleep we were so wet and cold.” For Ramsdell and thousands of other unfortunate Union prisoners, the cold, wet night was replaced by the hot, August sun of Virginia when the prisoners were transferred from Libby Prison to Belle Isle in the middle of the James River. Writing of his impressions of that transition, Ramsdell wrote, “very hot. . . . with the barren, sandy, and unprotected enclosure into which we were driven like a drove of cattle, it seemed to us that our sufferings were yet to commence.”42 In the open air of many Confederate prisons such as Belle Isle and Andersonville, lacking in any substantial shelter or woefully ill-provisioned in tents, prisoners suffered from changes in weather from

42 Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 20, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers.
day to day. Ramsdell described the discomfort that swings in weather conditions brought to prisoners: “the dew from the river last night was very heavy and we woke up this morning wet through. Through the night we suffered from the wet and cold, but as soon as the sun rose we suffered more from heat. During the sleepless night we longed for the day and the sun, and through the day we longed equally as much for the night.” A lack of proper clothing often contributed, particularly in cold weather, because most soldiers were captured with only the duty uniform they had worn into battle and guards often confiscated prisoners’ possessions, including blankets and overcoats. While a prisoner at Danville, Tiemann wrote, “it was bitter cold; the river Dan froze over . . . and poorly fed and scantily clad as most of us were we felt the weather severely.”

The weather likewise depressed prisoners’ spirits, particularly as they often had no shelter or an inadequate tent. Creed Davis wrote in May 1865, “it is a gloomy rainy day, just one of those that would drive a morbid melancholy man to commit suicide. The prisoners are crowded in their little tents to protect themselves from storm.” Noting particularly that he and his fellow prisoners were still wearing only their summer uniforms even as the fall weather chilled them, Tillson wrote, “It is a wonder than flesh and blood can standing it so well Here we are poor and week with barely food enough to sustain life, Are obliged to exercise to keep warm. With our summer clothing, no conveniences not

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44 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 5, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
enough of any thing except cold water." Continuing on this train of thought, Tillson considered the prospect of remaining in prison during the winter months, while still wearing only summer uniforms and still lacking in adequate blankets or shelter: "the prospect is not cheering the idea of remaining here late in the winter or all of it is very severe situated as we are with scanty clothing the idea of half freezing is not pleasant. Had I not seen hard times heretofore this would greatly grieve me. But now I look upon with a calm determination to grin and bear it. with fortitude."\textsuperscript{45}

Many prisoners tried to receive fresh clothes to replace their old ones, not merely as protection from the elements but, in some cases, simply to keep themselves clothed at all. Robert Bingham made several references to the condition of his clothes and letters he had written to receive a resupply of new clothes: "I hope for warm clothes. ... I am expecting my clothes most anxiously.... no letter today and no clothes yet."\textsuperscript{46} Bingham also related prison rules restricting the clothes prisoners could maintain: "They have got very strict about clothing now - limiting us to one suit - & if one gets new clothes making one give up what he has on.... but I hope my clothes will come. I wish they had come long ago, when they let us have anything. I am not lucky about clothes somehow."\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45} William H. Tillson, diary, October 24-25, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.

\textsuperscript{46} Robert Bingham, diary, August 17-18, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

\textsuperscript{47} Robert Bingham, diary, October 3, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
Davis, who likewise sought futilely for clothes from home, ended up in bare rags and his underclothes. Davis had not suffered from the elements as much as prisoners had in other times and places, but nonetheless wrote, “I am still naked, or almost so; and as for shoes, I do not possess an inch of leather.”

Beyond mere physical or psychological discomfort, prisoners’ exposure to the elements was also frequently deadly. At Andersonville, many prisoners “had neither blankets nor dugouts, only the sand to lie on, and the heavens to cover them.” As a result of their exposure, not a few succumbed, as an unidentified Union prisoner wrote: “I have seen many of the weak and sick in time of storm lying nearly half covered with water; the sand half way up their sides so that they could not even turn over; but just had to lie there until they died. Many of the weaker ones were drowned in this way.” Even when their exposure did not kill them, they often suffered lifelong debilities, as this unidentified author noted when he wrote, “the first week we were on the island we had no fire, and those who remember the severe cold of that winter, can imagine how we suffered. My feet were badly frozen that they never got entirely over it.”

48 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 24, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.

Disease & Death

That conditions in prison camps, both North and South, were often deplorable is not in question. Prisoners’ reactions, however, reveal a significant focus on the prevalence of disease, based in no small part on a poor and inadequate diet that led directly to ill health and death. These conditions were not only deadly, but also frequently defined prisoners’ very existence and came to encapsulate their lives. Diseases such as diarrhea and scurvy, though preventable, became commonplace for prisoners, many of whom did not survive the deprivation of the most basic provisions of food.

Diarrhea due to malnutrition, an ongoing and constant complaint of prisoners, caused many deaths. Early in his captivity, Thomas Wier summed up the condition of thousands of his fellow prisoners in a diary entry that read, in its entirety: “Sick – dyeing – visitors – Medicine – Diarreah, Coughs.” 50 Wier subsequently made clear that diarrhea, far from an isolated illness, was endemic amongst the prison population: “since We reached here all the boys do is take Diarreah and cough medicines & curse ‘blue bellied Yankees.’” 51 “I have been sick for the past week with the flux. the prisoners are terribly troubled with this Complaint. Many die.” 52 Further, Wier affirmed that rampant diarrhea arose not only from a lack of resources concomitant with an influx of an unexpectedly large

50 Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 28, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
51 Thomas D. Wier, diary, March 4, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
52 Thomas D. Wier, diary, July 17, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.
number of prisoners, but even when sufficient time had passed to provide adequate resources for the prisoners. While a prisoner at Johnson’s Island in Ohio, Robert Bingham complained in his diary: “I have been sick all day - had diarrhoea all night & have been a good deal troubled today - am weak from it.” In a later entry he wrote, “troubled with diarrhoea all the time.” W. A. Wash, also confined at Johnson’s Island, wrote that at one point in his captivity “chronic diarrhoea [was the] most fatal” among the prisoners.

The pervasive presence of diarrhea, one of the most common complaints, is virtually ubiquitous in prisoner accounts. Creed Davis, captured by the Union toward the end of the war during the final collapse and retreat of Lee’s army wrote, “I am sick today,” just a few days after his capture, followed by this entry the next day, “went to bed last night very sick, but am much better today.” Just a few days later, Davis reported, “I am still unwell, many of the prisoners are prostrated with diarrhea. It is the result of the bad water we are forced to use.” Although Davis indicated that the general conditions in the prison camp gradually improved over the latter part of April, he nonetheless complained again at the

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53 Robert Bingham, diary, August 1, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
54 Robert Bingham, diary, August 8, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
55 W. A. Wash, *Camp, Field and Prison Life: Containing Sketches of Service in the South, and the Experience, Incidents and Observations Connected with Almost Two Years Imprisonment at Johnson’s Island, Ohio, Where 3,000 Confederate Officers were Confined* (Saint Louis, MO: Southwestern Book and Publishing Co., 1870), 212.
56 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, April 16-17, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
57 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, April 19, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
beginning of May, “I am sick today and was completely played out last night. My stomach is disordered.” Franklin Krause began to complain of diarrhea after about a month and a half in prison: “haven’t been very well. Have the diarrhea,” and then recorded the next day that he was “not very well. Have the diarrhea.”

For two weeks, in fact, he reported that he continued to suffer from diarrhea, until finally he was able to say that he did not have “the diarrhea quite so bad.”

Diarrhea was not the only illness prisoners had to contend with; they frequently recorded scurvy and other diseases afflicting the prison population. While their accounts were sometimes personal and at other times referred to prisoners in general, the severity of illnesses is clear. Regarding his own health, William Tiemann wrote that he “was troubled with a severe boil and also a touch of scurvy, and was so miserable generally as to retain my couch all the time.” Aside from his physical infirmity, his condition depressed him so severely that he believed he would have “given up entirely had I not chanced one day to overhear a remark made by a brother officer to another, ‘poor Tiemann! I am afraid he is going to make a die of it!!’” Tiemann continued to write that he believed this chance remark he overheard was the only thing that focused his mind on surviving “at least long enough to reach home.”

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58 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, April 16-17, April 19-May 2, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
59 Franklin Krause, diary, July 10 – 11, 1864, Andersonville Civil War Diary.
60 Franklin Krause, diary, July 29, 1864, Andersonville Civil War Diary.
other prisoners, an unidentified author held in Andersonville prison wrote, “many also suffered terribly from scurvy. I have seen men living, who were so bad with scurvy, that all their teeth had dropped out, and their cheeks were eaten away until we could see their gums.” This prisoner also reported outbreaks of smallpox that devastated the prison population and proved beyond the abilities of the prison medical staff to adequately contain: “the smallpox broke out in camp, and the doctors came into camp to vaccinate. Many were vaccinated, but as far as I know, all who were vaccinated died.”

The deadly result of the diseases rampant within the prisons was imminently visible to the prisoners, as the bodies of those who had succumbed to their illness were carried out regularly. In May 1865, still held as a prisoner of war after hostilities had ended, Creed Davis wrote, “the deaths in prison are on the increase. The ambulances are busily engaged all day in hauling out the dead. At present rate, the whole prison will die in 3 or 4 months.” A month later, with disease still a severe and deadly problem in the prison, Davis wrote, “the health of the prison, which has been very bad do not improve in the least. Dysentery and typhoid fever are very prevalent indeed and generally ends fatally. If the prisoners continue to die at present rates, in a few months none will be left to tell the horrors of Newport News Prison.”

63 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 30, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
64 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, June 5, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
Even when access to proper medicine was not available, prisoners attempted to self-cure their ailments whenever possible with whatever makeshift curative was at hand. For example, William Tillson obtained a far greater ration than normal through extra bread purchased from the guards and ate too much for a stomach used to minimal rations. Afterward he wrote, “the supper made me sick for it was the too much satisfying of hunger And I was somewhat opposed to it. By taking some charcoal cinders pounded up in Water for medicine and taking good care of my self the next day I was soon much better.”

Shoeless, Creed Davis did his best to protect his feet from the hot, June sun when he was forced to stand in the open for hours for an inspection. Of his makeshift protection, he wrote, “as I was barefooted my feet were terribly sun burned upon the instep by the sun. While standing still I protected them somewhat by holding bunches of pepper weeds between my toes.” His attempts were not wholly successful, and he wrote, “I am in considerable pain today from my feet, the top of which is a solid scab. They were blistered the other day while standing in the field undergoing a sort of inspection by the prison authorities. If I had shoes now I could not wear them.”

Prison authorities and inspectors often commented on the condition of the prisoners. While often finding fault with prison procedures, availability of medical supplies and other things within the purview of the prison management, they also

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66 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, June 4-6, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.
frequently faulted the prisoners themselves for the squalor that existed within the prison camps. For example, Roger Pickenpaugh discusses an inspection of Andersonville prison that cited the prisoners' habit of defecating and urinating immediately outside their own tents, rather than in the “sinks,” as a principal cause of the filth, stench, and disease within the camp. A similar report by the Sanitary Commission regarding its inspection of conditions at Point Lookout prison related similar conditions in which the prisoners “live, eat, and sleep in their own filth,” rather than take proper care of themselves. While the report recommended placing a competent officer in charge of ensuring basic living conditions within the camp, it likewise asserted that the prisoners lacked the fundamental interest in their own well-being to handle these affairs.

Contrary to these accounts from prison authorities and inspectors, prisoners’ diaries and memoirs made frequent reference to attempts to endure the terrible conditions of their confinement and maintain as much health, dignity, and humanity as possible in the face of tremendously adverse conditions. Creed Davis, who surrendered in the collapse of Lee’s army, was forced to march from the battlefield to prison, and complained, “I am sick today, which I expect comes from having gone barefooted on our march from Petersburg to City Point.” He continued the next day, “I am sick today, yet I make the preservation of my health


68 Sanders While in the Hands of the Enemy, 175.
my only study. I should hate to die particularly at this time as the war is said to be at an end.”

Davis continued to complain of being sick or unwell for several weeks, but was finally able to see a surgeon who gave him some pills, after which Davis wrote, “I feel better now. . . . My health is better and my spirits have consequently revived, and I feel something like a man and less like a prisoner.”

As rumors of a possible release from prison continued to spread throughout the camp, Davis wrote, “I am without shoes and completely barefooted. I am doing my best to husband my strength as I will have to foot it to Richmond when I am released.”

Rather than submit to infestations of lice, prisoners struggled constantly to rid themselves of the pests. Robert Bingham described how he “took a skirmish or two after lice. They are very numerous - on the grass - in the rooms . . . everywhere. I had my clothes boiled Frid. & had them Sat. - had the boiling done again Monday & was annoyed Wed. & very much today. but it cannot be helped.”

Nearly every diary or memoir surveyed for this dissertation contains accounts of prisoners’ vain attempts to rid themselves and their clothes of lice,

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69 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, April 15-16, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.


71 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 2, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.

72 Robert Bingham, diary, June 1, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.
through what they termed “skirmishing,” a continuance of military terminology to a new, albeit smaller, foe. On his second day at Andersonville prison, Melvin Grigsby wrote that he was told that all he had to do to survive his time at Andersonville was “to answer at roll-call, draw your rations, and fight lice.” He later described the camp as consisting of “thousands of men sitting in the sun, nearly naked, picking away at their clothes picking off the lice. The place was literally alive with lice and fleas.”

Prisoners recorded the deaths of others, a common occurrence, with a grim fatality. William Tillson wrote, “last Wednesday a corpse of one of our boys was carried by 4 or 6 negroes with an officer. some carrying it the others the coffin. He was tossed and jerked roughly. It was a hard sight. Many boys go to the hospital every day.” Franklin Krause wrote simply, “another of our detachment died today. Had the diarrhea.” Prisoners’ deaths from disease were not limited to enlisted camps but encompassed officers as well. Confined at Johnson’s Island, Robert Bingham wrote, “I was at a poor fellow’s dying bed. I do not think he will be alive tomorrow - Lieut. Williams, 4th N. C. C. brother of Wm. Crutchfield’s wife. He has typhoid fever poor fellow. It is sad to die so, tho while there is life, there is hope.” The following day, Bingham recorded, “Williams died

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75 William H. Tillson, diary, October 21, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.
76 Franklin Krause, diary, July 26, 1864, Andersonville Civil War Diary.
at 8 o’clock last night & we buried him this evening. We made up money & got a walnut coffin. It was the saddest burial I ever attended.” He followed that report in the same entry with accounts of other prisoners who were dying: “Another N. C’an [North Carolinian] died today, & another sick man is dying or dead.” An unidentified survivor of Belle Isle and Andersonville described the guards even refusing to allow prisoners to bury their dead on occasion: “during the severe cold weather five died on the island. They were taken outside of the breastworks and laid on the ground. They laid there nearly a week.” That soldier also recorded his disgust at the guards for allowing the subsequent desecration of at least one of the bodies when “hogs came and ate the head almost off one of them, and would, I suppose, have eaten them all, if they had not been so hard frozen and partly covered with snow.” In a sweeping statement that touched on the large numbers of prisoners who died in prison, Creed Davis wrote, “another beautiful Sunday finds us in this horrible place. . . . many of the prisoners . . . have gone to their final rest, and forever left this world of strife.” Davis continued with the ironic observation, “to think what these gallant souls have suffered in the last four years, and now when peace begins to dawn over our unhappy country, to lay down and die.” He closed that train of thought with the comment, “but it may be a blessing to them after all, as now who knows what we have got to

77 Robert Bingham, diary, September 29, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

78 Unidentified Author, memoir (Mss5:1UN3:8), “Fourteen Months in Prison,” 5, Unidentified Author, Memoir.
suffer in the future as we are a subjugated country.”79 Creed Davis wrote after a visit to the prison hospital, “I was terribly impressed at the sight of so many poor sick fellows with death mark upon them. They are dying all over the Hospital. I could hear them in their deliriums talking about home.” He followed this with the plaintive remark, “it is doubly awful now to die after the war is over and upon the eve of our release from prison.”80

**Placing Blame**

Throughout the Civil War, and especially during the last year of the war, both the United States and the Confederacy sought to place blame for the treatment of their prisoners specifically in the hands of their enemy. These arguments continued long after the Civil War ended, and are reflected in both official and personal records. Union Medical officers photographed some prisoners returned to the North following exchanges of seriously ill prisoners during 1864; these photographs revealed the extent of starvation among some prisoners held by the Confederacy who had lost up to half of their body weight (see figure 5).81 While the South bore the brunt of criticism (both during and after the war) for its treatment of prisoners, Jefferson Davis and other prominent Confederates tried

79 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, May 7, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.

80 Creed Thomas Davis, diary, June 11, 1865, Creed Thomas Davis Diary.

81 This photograph was taken at the U.S. General Hospital, Div. 1, Annapolis, Maryland by A. Hill Messinger, Union surgeon. The caption indicates that the prisoner had been held at Andersonville, but transferred to Belle Isle prior to exchange.
(both during and in the decades following the Civil War) to defend the conditions prevailing in these camps. A surviving prisoner, Captain Frank Moran of the 73rd New York Infantry Regiment, who was captured by Confederates on July 2, 1863, during the fighting at the Peach Orchard at the Battle of Gettysburg, issued his own rebuttal. In it, Moran quoted from the report of Dr. Joseph Jones, who

Figure 5: Returned Federal prisoners from Andersonville (i.e. Belle Isle) prison (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Lot 4181, Item 2)
inspected the Andersonville prison under direction of the Confederate government. Dr. Jones’ report read, in part, “scurvy, diarrhœa, dysentery and hospital gangrene were the prevailing diseases. From the crowded condition bad diet and dejected, depressed spirits and condition of the men, their systems had become so disordered that the smallest abrasion of the skin from the rubbing of a shoe, or from the effects of the sun, or from the prick of a splinter, or from scratching, or from a mosquito bite, in some cases took on frightful ulceration and gangrene.”82

Prisoners often focused responsibility for prison conditions on the enemy government, indicating a distinct perception that policy more than anything else drove conditions in the prisons. John W. Urban, a private in Company D, 30th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment wrote after the war that “to Jefferson Davis, his cabinet advisers, and to the demons whom they sent to these prisons to carry out their devilish plans . . . belongs the infamy of perpetrating one of the most horrible crimes known in the history of the world.”83 Moran likewise indicted Jefferson Davis explicitly for his role in the deaths of thousands of Union prisoners: “the mighty crime and guilt of Andersonville will cling to the name of Jefferson Davis when his monument is dust.”84 Rather than focusing on the President or cabinet

84 Moran, *Bastiles of the Confederacy*, 168. Moran also served for a time as the historian for the National Association of Union Ex-Prisoners of War.
in general, other prisoners directed their animus at specific cabinet secretaries more directly and intimately linked prison conditions to war-planning and policy. For example, Georgian John H. King wrote that Union Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton had deliberately fabricated an excuse to suspend the exchange of prisoners of war, thus “inaugurating a system of slow and certain death at the Federal prisons” that would become a grim “record of Stanton’s brutality.”

Lieutenant Alva C. Roach of the 51st Indiana Infantry Regiment, captured on May 3, 1863, during General Abel Streight’s raid into Alabama, later wrote, “I do not . . . charge the mass of the Southern people with complicity in the inhuman treatment they received. Jeff. Davis, Robert E. Lee, and other rebels high in authority, and the monsters whom they placed in immediate command of the prisoners, are alone responsible.”

Other prisoners defended the conduct of the guards at Confederate prisons and the minimal rations provided to Union prisoners while laying the blame for prisoners’ treatment on more senior officials in both the Confederate and Union governments. One such defender was James Madison Page, a Lieutenant in the 6th Michigan Cavalry, captured on September 21, 1863, by the 5th Virginia Cavalry while on a reconnaissance to the Rapidan River. Of Captain

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Henry Wirz, in charge of the prison stockade at Andersonville, Page wrote, “Wirz was but a subordinate under Gen. John H. Winder, who was the prison’s commander. Captain Wirz had charge only of the interior of the stockade, and in every way he was subject to the orders of his superior officer.” More directly, Page argued, “Captain Wirz was unjustly held responsible for the hardship and mortality of Andersonville.” Like others, Page held his own Union government responsible for his suffering because the breakdown of the exchange system forced both sides to maintain their prisoners in inadequate conditions. Page particularly asserted that the Union was well aware of the lack of resources in the South to care properly for the prisoners in its charge on any long-term basis. While this defense of Wirz from a Union prisoner stands out, his placement of ultimate blame on his own government for the conditions existing in Southern prisons is not unique, and was echoed by many Union soldiers held captive in the South.

Not surprisingly, many prisoners placed the blame for their suffering at the feet of their immediate guards. Captain W.A. Wash of the 60th Tennessee Infantry, confined at Johnson’s Island, wrote shortly after the end of the war, “insufficient clothing, shelter, food and medicine sent scores of victims to the grave. As success crowned the armies of the North their severity toward the


89 Charles W Sanders, Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 252.
prisoners increased, and, as the prospect lessened, to many, of getting a chance at rebels on the open and honestly contested field of battle, an itching desire grew to kill the unarmed and defenseless."⁹⁰ Confederate prisoners’ acrimony at their treatment also rested heavily on the relative bounty of the North compared with the South, as one author described in his strong reaction to Northern allegations regarding Southern prisons: “though in a land flowing with plenty, our poor fellows in prison were famished with hunger, and would have considered half the rations served Federal soldiers bountiful indeed. Their prison-hospitals were very far from being on the same footing with the hospitals for their own soldiers, and our men died by thousands from causes which the Federal authorities could have prevented.”⁹¹ Perhaps the most striking and shocking description of conditions in Civil War prisons is that of the prisoners themselves, and these reveal a level of suffering that is difficult to comprehend and reflects systemic problems in Union and Confederate prisons.

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⁹⁰ Wash, *Camp, Field and Prison Life*, 244

⁹¹ J. William Jones, *Confederate View of the Treatment of Prisoners* (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1876), 115. Although most of the evidence used in this dissertation is drawn from prisoners’ letters and diaries, some use of post-war memoirs is useful in analyzing prison conditions and prisoners’ assignation of blame for their conditions as an augmentation to extant diaries. The censorship and restrictions placed on prisoners’ letters make them a relatively poor resource in this regard, though caution must be exercised when considering post-war memoirs.
CONCLUSION

“Amid hopes and fears, sorrows and joys, amid scenes of strife and toil, the day wears away. We have "skirmished," cut bones, studied books, recited lessons, preached, and, we trust, practiced, heard numberless and contradictory rumors’ about exchange, witnessed new arrivals of "fresh fish," swept our rooms, cooked and eaten our scanty allowances, formed new and lasting acquaintances, and the twilight at length with its mellow haze settles down around us and hides the weary day.”

— Louis N. Beaudry

*The Libby Chronicle,* quoted above, was a weekly publication by the prisoners of Libby, and Louis Beaudry, Chaplain in the Fifth New York Volunteer Cavalry, served as its editor-in-chief. For the subscription price of paying attention, Beaudry and his associates attempted to provide their fellow inmates with as much news as they could along with an accounting of the conditions within the prison. The newspaper also attempted to maintain prisoners’ morale by including religious or philosophical pieces aimed at providing prisoners with a perspective on their circumstances that might help their survival. Each issue

1 Louis N. Beaudry, *The Libby Chronicle, Devoted to Facts and Fun: A True Copy of The Libby Chronicle as Written by the Prisoners of Libby in 1863.* Albany, NY: Louis N. Beaudry, 1889, 28. Seven copies of the Libby Chronicle were produced by Union prisoners between August 1, 1863 and October 2, 1863. With no printing press available, the prisoners distributed manuscript paper to its columnists. The resultant documents were then read to the prisoners at 10:00 am Friday mornings over the course of the seven editions completed.
included humorous works, which must have been intended to take prisoners’ minds from their daily struggle and provide them with an occasional chuckle. However, as the newspaper makes clear, it was all but impossible for prisoners to ignore the horrors of their circumstances and hard even to endure them. In another issue, Beaudry bluntly acknowledged the harsh realities: “no shadow falls upon the inmates of Libby so dark and threatening as that of the death roll and the dead cart. Every morning the rumbling wheels of an ominous vehicle are heard on Cary street. . . . The dead are then heaved in, like carcasses in a butcher’s dray, to be borne away and cast into unnamed graves.”

Prisoners endured some of the most brutal conditions of any soldiers during the war. Regarding the long-term physical and mental debilities that Civil War veterans suffered after the war ended, Judith Pizarro, Roxane Cohen Silver, and JoAnne Prause have written: “[the Civil War] POW experience was not associated with signs of physical or nervous disease alone, but was associated with an increased risk of comorbid physical and nervous disease,” whereas, by contrast, “being wounded was associated with an increased risk of nervous disease alone, a decreased risk of physical disease, and decreased signs of comorbid physical and nervous disease.” Where Civil War veterans suffered


3 Judith Pizarro, Roxane Cohen Silver, and JoAnne Prause, "Physical and Mental Health Costs of Traumatic War," Archives of General Psychiatry 63 (February 2006), 197. In their closing paragraph, the authors note: “our analysis is the first to use objective military and medical records to demonstrate the development of postwar disease ailments over the life course among veterans of any war.” A random sample of 35,730 Union recruits with records
from numerous nervous disorders following the war, such as paranoia, psychosis, and memory problems, those who had been prisoners of war also suffered from numerous cardiac and gastrointestinal problems not found as frequently among veterans who had not been prisoners of war. While this represents only a portion of the conclusions from one study of postwar medical problems among Civil War veterans, this study is significant in that it correlates some of the commonalities among them (e.g., age, background, percentage of soldiers killed in the veterans unit). The authors' conclusions were derived from a sample of Civil War veterans' medical histories throughout their postwar lives to determine probabilities of disabilities arising and indicate a very high rate of nervous disorders among former prisoners of war compared with other veteran cohorts. In another study focused on physical disabilities and morbidity among Civil War ex-prisoners in the postwar years, Dora L. Costa has found that soldiers who became prisoners when they were under thirty years old “were more likely than non-POWs to die of any cause and to die of heart disease and stroke. They also exhibited more adverse cardiovascular signs and symptoms and valvular heart disease,” while those thirty years old or older at the time of

The sample maintained at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., was reduced to a final sample of 16,200 whose Pension records contained complete information regarding medical history at enlistment, during and after the war, and the age and cause of death.
captivity were less likely to suffer severe physical ailments “suggesting that those older men who survived POW camps may have been more robust.”

The prisoner-of-war condition deeply affected prisoners’ postwar lives, as well as their combat experiences, which most prisoners had also endured. A testament to this fact is the veterans associations that developed during the postwar years exclusively for those who had survived captivity in the enemy’s prison pens. While other organizations, such as the Grand Army of the Republic (for Union veterans) and the United Confederate Veterans, formed to provide a venue and platform for veterans to meet and press their concerns and positions through publications and political support, others formed solely to address issues unique to former prisoners of war. These included a National Association of Union Ex-Prisoners of War (organized in 1873) and smaller chapters and associations. Even as the Grand Army of the Republic campaigned for legislation in support of Union veterans, organizations devoted to former prisoners of war similarly pressed the public and politicians to heed the concerns of former prisoners. For example, one state association, the Ohio Association of Union Ex-Prisoners of War, held reunions with the express intent of “interest[ing] the

4 Dora L. Costa, “Scarring and Mortality Selection Among Civil War POWs: A Long-Term Mortality, Morbidity, and Socioeconomic Follow-Up,” *Demography* 49, no. 4 (November 2012): 1186. This study utilizes the same sample of Union veterans identified in the article written by Pizarro, Silver, and Prause. Costa’s conclusions indicate that younger soldiers who survived captivity died earlier in life in the post-war years than did those who were never imprisoned and, in particular, suffered from a higher incidence of heart disease and stroke. By contrast, Costa finds, older soldiers who survived captivity tended to live longer than their non-POW comrades, and she concludes that this may have been the result of a stronger constitution among this cohort of former POWs.
people at large in the ex-prisoners of war, but may lead Congress to see the necessity of doing something for the benefit of ex-prisoners of war.”

In a related example, the United Confederate Veterans used its records and recorded histories in published form in attempts to influence state boards of education regarding textbooks and curriculums, including references to the treatment of prisoners during the war, as a means of promoting Southern perspectives on the prisoner-of-war issue and potentially influencing regional and national thought on the topic.

Becoming a prisoner of war during the American Civil War was a traumatic experience, which introduced prisoners to new cultural experiences when they encountered their enemy’s civilian population for the first time. The transport through civilian territory was frequently the first time civilians ever saw their enemy, and they were sometimes surprised to discover that their enemy was human. Becoming a prisoner often led prisoners on a journey of physical abuse, food that was neither healthy nor plentiful enough to stave off starvation, abominable sanitary conditions, rampant outbreaks of deadly diseases, and the constant threat of deadly force for real or perceived infractions of prison rules. The brutal conditions within Civil War military prisons were endemic in the North.

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5 Ohio Association of Union Ex-Prisoners of War Association, Proceedings of the Ohio Association of Union Ex-Prisoners of War (Columbus, OH: Ohio State Journal Printing Establishment, 1884), 4.

and in the South. Both administrations were well aware of the circumstances in which the enemy kept their soldiers and, similarly, knew very well how they treated enemy soldiers under their charge. Neither the United States of America nor the Confederate States of America provided any substantive relief to the prisoners it held nor made adequate arrangements for the opposing government to provide adequately for its prisoners. If it can be difficult to prove abuse by institutional and systemic intent, as Charles Sanders charges, it is easy to demonstrate that tens of thousands of prisoners on both sides nonetheless succumbed due to neglect on the part of their keepers.

Another issue, only hinted at in this dissertation but worthy of consideration, is the degree to which prisoners exercised agency within their environment and their experience of prison, which is a primary argument in José O. Díaz's dissertation. While I have argued that captivity in the Civil War entailed a complete subjugation of prisoners' will, they nonetheless had small opportunities to engage in commerce with camp sutlers, other prisoners, and even guards on occasion. They also gambled, helped their fellow prisoners, stole from their fellow prisoners, and talked endlessly about the possibilities for their exchange. Some plotted their escape (and there were a few successful attempts). Some examples of prisoners’ attempts to exert control over their lives survive for us to study in the form of their letters and diaries, the former even

7 José O. Díaz, “To Make the Best of Our Hard Lot: Prisoners, Captivity, and The Civil War” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2009.)
including examples of prisoners’ attempts to engage actively in home affairs, and artifacts crafted by the prisoners as souvenirs, keepsakes, gifts for family members, or articles for barter. David Bush has explored a large number of such artifacts crafted by Confederate prisoners held at Johnson’s Island; these include rings carved from hard rubber uniform buttons, sketches of the prison and fellow prisoners, and other items sculpted or made by prisoners.8

The question of prisoners’ agency is also particularly important in the context of the Civil War, when Union and Confederate prisoners alike sometimes compared their captive condition with that of enslaved African Americans. Such comparisons reflected a perceived equivalence between the status of a prisoner of war and that of a slave. Ann Fabian specifically analyzes this view in her study of post-war narratives by Union ex-prisoners of war. Fabian argues that “to describe their confinement, white prisoners borrowed descriptions of slavery. It is not surprising that antebellum Americans deprived of freedom thought first of slavery. . . . The discomforts of the military were compounded in prison camps, and soldiers who might once have described themselves as ‘slaves’ of military regulation and strict discipline now saw themselves supervised by men accustomed to disciplining slaves. What little freedom they retained in northern

armies vanished in southern prisons." While similarities existed between prisoners and slaves, both subject to hard confinement and arbitrary rule, prisoners could anticipate a release from their condition and return to their unit or normal life, while slaves had no such expectation of release; nor could prisoners typically be sold (although the Confederacy threatened to sell captured African American Union soldiers into slavery). However, the squalor of their prison and the severe shortage of resources wore away at prisoners’ motivation. In many ways, too, the lack of productive work wore the prisoners down. Confined for weeks and months on end, prisoners found themselves subjected to an arbitrary and foreign military regulation to no purpose, rather than the accepted discipline of their own service in which they had actively campaigned for the government or cause they had joined, whether voluntarily or through a military draft.

In the course of this dissertation, I have demonstrated that becoming a prisoner was a shocking experience that left captives feeling numb and helpless. Prisoners described very similar reactions to their captivity, whether they surrendered to the enemy *en masse* like Elias Winans Price at Harper’s Ferry or were swept up in the midst of battle as Isaac McIntosh was during the Battle of Fredericksburg. More shocks awaited prisoners as they were taken to the enemy’s rear, often involving long marches or being crammed into overcrowded steamers or cattle cars. Some prisoners died on the way while others

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encountered the enemy home front, often for the first time. Díaz touches on this issue in his dissertation, though he largely limits his analysis to the humiliation of surrender many prisoners felt.¹⁰ I have shown that, from the outset, captivity left prisoners in varying stages of shock and grief, compounded by their quick transport to prison where, on the way, they frequently encountered enemy civilians who often taunted or humiliated them.

I have also shown how prisoners’ letters and diaries told more about the prisoners and the conditions of their confinement than was strictly related by the words they put on paper. As William Merrill Decker discussed, many Civil War soldiers were literate and aware of certain formulaic conventions of letter writing, already considered archaic and old-fashioned by the time of the Civil War.¹¹ However, prisoners frequently fell back on these formulaic expressions as a means of dealing with the trauma and despair associated with their condition. In addition, where the content of letters and diaries written by soldiers in the field were very conversational in tone and covered a wide range of topics, those written by prisoners of war tended to be highly restricted in content, rarely extending beyond their present circumstances and the immediate conditions of their confinement. This factor went beyond the strictures of censorship and implied a significant narrowing of the prisoners’ perspectives.

¹⁰ Díaz, “To Make the Best of Our Hard Lot: Prisoners, Captivity, and The Civil War.”
While prisoners languished, their thoughts most often focused on the possibility of their release through parole or exchange. With little else to occupy their minds, an honorable release became an obsession with prisoners throughout the war. During the early years of the war, and especially after the Cartel of Exchange was signed, their hopes were often fulfilled, though hundreds and thousands still succumbed to the appalling conditions and scarce rations provided them. Even so, the vast majority of prisoners, Union and Confederate, preferred to await parole or exchange rather than take an oath of allegiance to their captors. Taking such an oath would have freed countless thousands of prisoners, but not on terms they were willing to accept. Several historians, such as Gerald Prokopowicz and Charles Sanders, have discussed the process of prisoner parole and exchange during the Civil War, but not how prisoners refused to be released on taking an oath of allegiance. 

Their convictions and personal sense of honor demanded they remain in prison, regardless of how much they suffered or whether that decision would cost their lives.

I have also shown how prisoners found themselves the subject of “black flag” policies or acts. Officials at the highest levels of the military and civilian administrations on both sides of the conflict considered enacting black flag policies as a means of shortening the war or retaliating against their enemy for

“acts of injustice.” Beyond that, however, prisoners on the battlefield often found themselves the target of black flag policies enacted by their captors, sometimes at the command of officers but often resulting from the venting of personal hatred. Lonnie Speer discusses these attitudes at some length in War of Vengeance, but he does not address the wanton killing of prisoners by their guards, recorded at prisons in the North and the South and thoroughly reported in prisoners’ diaries and journals.

Finally, I have demonstrated that the prisoner-of-war condition in the Civil War was characterized by despair, disease, and an intolerable lack of food, shelter, and water. The suffering of these prisoners is difficult to imagine, particularly as it involved the treatment of Americans by Americans. It is well established that such maltreatment and abuse was the norm rather than the exception in Civil War prisons. Many historians, notably William Marvel, James Gillispie, and Roger Pickenpaugh, have touched on this aspect of prisoner life in their treatments of individual prisons. Though complete in their own right, their focus on the institution sometimes elides the prisoners’ experiences and points to particular prison failings at particular times. Prisons’ failings should not be taken


in pieces, but rather considered as part of a disturbing whole that presents a startling picture of what Civil War prisoners endured.

Regardless of the circumstances that occasioned their surrender, prisoners throughout the war suffered at the hands of their captors, with the exceptions to this standing out more for their rarity than their commonness. Sanders has argued that the Union and Confederate governments often treated prisoners as pawns, each government alleging harsh treatment of prisoners held by the enemy to justify the harsh conditions of the prisoners it held, often taking the form of reduced prisoner rations and refusals to accept paroles and exchanges under the cartel.\(^\text{15}\) Whether this was truly institutional is more difficult to ascertain, and Sanders points to many of these measures as localized, short-term, or both. Whether from policy or simple neglect, roughly a quarter of all prisoners died at the hands of other Americans who only barely provided the minimal necessities for existence. The high mortality is even more significant because most prisoners did not spend extraordinary lengths of time in prison, though “extraordinary length” is a subjective term given prisoners’ living conditions. Indeed, the exchange system, even when barely functioning, provided for the release of many prisoners in a relatively short period and, even after it effectively broke down towards the end of 1863, a bare year and a half remained to the war, limiting the amount of time most prisoners spent

\(^{15}\) Charles W. Sanders, Jr., While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 3-4
incarcerated. Yet their mortality does not appear substantially alleviated for this fact. The prisoners, of course, could not know the war would end in the spring of 1865, and their time spent in captivity after the collapse of the cartel must have seemed to many destined to last forever.

While studies of battles, campaigns, and military leaders are published with regularity, and the lives of the common soldier and the experiences of many particular military units have received attention, the story of prisoners of war is only slowly being told and understood, beginning principally with the work of William Hesseltine in the 1930s. This scholarship remains far from maturity, and there is much work to be done. Being a prisoner of war defined many soldiers’ military experience and was a large part of that experience for many others. With perhaps as many as one in seven soldiers surrendered on the field as prisoners, it is impossible to understand fully the Civil War soldier, the Civil War itself, or the passions that may have contributed so egregiously to the deaths of so many soldiers without adequately understanding how prisoners of war were treated.

I have argued that the prisoner-of-war condition in the American Civil War was distinct, even among the shared experiences of other Civil War veterans. Captivity faced prisoners with starvation, disease, and harsh conditions to a degree and duration not confronted by other soldiers in the field. Beyond this, however, what set prisoners so distinctly apart from their fellow soldiers was their complete subjugation to the enemy, which began with the humiliation of surrender and utterly deprived them of their purpose as soldiers. Bereft of family and friends, save through the tenuous link of censored letters that traversed two
postal systems between nations at war, prisoners faced seemingly endless days with too little food and too many adversities. Day after day, prisoners watched as their fellow inmates succumbed to the brutal conditions and made their final trip out the gates to the camp cemetery. These experiences formed the essence of prisoners’ lives and defined the prisoner-of-war condition for hundreds of thousands of soldiers held captive during the American Civil War.
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