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LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

LIVING THROUGH RAT HELL: THE LIVES AND ESCAPE ATTEMPTS OF SOLDIERS
AT LIBBY PRISON

BY

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LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA

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When many scholars study prison camps of the Civil War period, the Union prison camp at Elmira, New York, and its Confederate counterpart at Andersonville, Georgia, are among the most studied of these harrowing establishments. Like its more famous counterparts, Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia, served as a prisoner of war camp exclusively for captured Union officers from its establishment in 1862 until the collapse of the Confederate capital in the Spring of 1865. At the time of its creation, Libby was supposed to provide better living conditions for Union officers than those experienced by enlisted men at camps like Salisbury, North Carolina; Andersonville, South Carolina; and, nearby Belle Isle, Virginia. Although the camp was somewhat successful in accomplishing its initial purpose, as the war dragged on and supplies in the South became harder to acquire, the conditions at Libby deteriorated. Under the command of Major Thomas Turner, the head of Confederate prison camps in the Richmond area, Libby's abysmal environment continued to falter until a group of one-hundred and nine Union officers were ultimately prompted to stage an escape attempt in February 1864.

Originally built to serve as a series of tobacco warehouses prior to the war, Libby Prison consisted of three identical three-story brick buildings joined together as one entity located adjacent to the Kanawha Canal in Richmond, Virginia.¹ Facing the problem of housing an increasing number of captured Union soldiers, in 1862 the Confederate government commandeered the property from Luther Libby and named the prison in his honor.² Once the property had been acquired, the Confederates began concentrating their efforts on transforming the complex into a viable prison camp.

1. Bruce Klee, "Libby Prison," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, 37, no. 7 (02, 1999), 32.

2. Joseph Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout: The Daring Escape from the Notorious Civil War Prison* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2010), 32.

In transitioning the building from warehouse to prison, the confederates concerned themselves with making the prison escape-proof rather than viable for habitation. Those in charge of overseeing the transformation of the prison focused on tasks like whitewashing the warehouse to make it easier for the guards to spot any escapee who would attempt to scale down the side of the building.³ Simultaneously, the Rebel authorities paid little attention to improving the living conditions inside the structure itself. As Joseph Wheelan notes in *Libby Prison Breakout*, “Libby was not so much transformed into a jail as emptied of its goods and restocked with captive Yankees.”⁴ As the primary distribution center for captured Yankee soldiers sent to Richmond, Libby’s barren walls would go from being a tobacco warehouse to a processing center for over one hundred twenty-five thousand soldiers during the Civil War.⁵

For those imprisoned at Libby, the inadequacy of the building’s interior created numerous problems. Of the building’s three floors, the second and third floors were used as the living quarters for the inmates while the first floor offered space for offices, a makeshift hospital, and the kitchen.⁶ The dormitory floors were further subdivided into six distinct rooms, each one hundred and five feet long, forty-four feet wide, and eight feet high.⁷ Describing the conditions of his environment in a book adapted from his journal, Lieutenant Colonel Frederic Fernandez Cavada noted the “room we are in is long, low, dingy, gloomy, and suffocating.”⁸

In accordance with the dreary conditions of the main living quarters, the water closets on each floor were equally dreary and sparse. Each floor had one restroom, which was a converted

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Frederic Fernandez Cavada, *Libby Life: Experiences of a Prisoner of War in Richmond, Virginia, 1863-1864* (Philadelphia, PA: King & Baird, 1864) Microfiche, 23.

closet featuring a trough for urination and excretion. The privies also included a faucet over a tub, which served as the shower for approximately six hundred men.⁹ While the tubs were designed to hold one man at a time, the prison was often so crowded that the tubs were forced to “hold...three or four [inmates] at a time,” with many more scrambling for an open spot in the bathing mechanism.¹⁰ Receiving its supply of liquid from the nearby James River, the faucet over the tub doubled as the prisoner’s primary source for drinking water.¹¹

With approximately two hundred men in one of the “cells” at a given time, personal privacy was minimal to nonexistent. Ultimately, an inmate’s area in which he could sleep averaged “six feet by two of bare floor.”¹² Indeed, when the soldiers slept at night, they did so in “spoon fashion,” with one lying right behind another in rows of around fifty men in each line.¹³ Recalling his experience spending one night in Libby before being processed and sent to Belle Isle, Lieutenant Gilbert E. Sabre exemplified the recollections of many soldiers when he wrote, “sleep was impossible,” since he was, “tired and sore from continuous travel, burning with thirst and craving with hunger—[his] brain in a perfect whirl of confusion.”¹⁴ On top of the cramped experience of spending their nights in such a manner, the Union officers were also trapped in the same rooms during the daytime as well. Per instructions from Major Turner, Confederate guards would never allow their northern captives to go outside for fresh air or exercise.¹⁵ Instead, the

9. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 33.

10. Cavada, *Libby Life*, 52.

11. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 33.

12. Cavada, *Libby Life*, 44.

13. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 33.

14. Gilbert E. Sabre, *Nineteen Months a Prisoner of War: Narrative of Lieutenant G.E. Sabre, Second Rhode Island Cavalry, of His Experience in the War Prisons and Stockades of Morton, Mobile, Atlanta, Libby, Belle Isle, Andersonville, Macon, Charleston, and Columbia, and His Escape* (New York, NY: American New Company, 1865), 20.

15. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 33.

prisoners were constantly trapped inside the crowded shadowy corridors which primary accounts described as looking like “the black pall of a living death.”¹⁶

Prisoners’ exposure to Libby’s harsh treatment often began before ever setting foot in the warehouse in Richmond. As the newly captured Union officers arrived at the railroad station in the Confederate capital city, residents of Richmond would regularly stand nearby and jeer at the captured members of the enemy forces. In his book, Lieutenant Sabre recalled, “[A]t Richmond...there were those who delighted in ridiculing our situation.”¹⁷ Sabre then went on to relate that “we were met there [the railroad station] by a large crowd of hangers-on, loafers, and hard cases generally who were idling around the depot.”¹⁸ Other accounts from the period detail how “citizens of the Confederacy” would loiter around the prison itself “anxious to inspect the Yankees.”¹⁹ In one particular scathing account detailing the verbal abuse directed at him and his fellow captives by the people of Richmond, B. F. Booth notes he heard shouts such as “Say, you Yankee sons of bitches, what you’uns want to run off our niggers for?” or “Say, Yank, where is your arms? Ho, you bluebellies, where is the rest of you’uns?”²⁰ These vulgarities set the stage for the impervious conditions which the soldiers would experience during their stay at Libby.

Once the prisoners arrived at the ominous warehouse on the banks of the James, the first thing they saw was the sign which gave the infamous prison its name. Bearing the inscription, “LIBBY AND SONS, SHIP CHANDLERS AND GROCERS,” the billboard struck fear into the hearts of prisoners, some of whom had previously been unaware they were being transported to

16. Cavada, *Libby Life*, 23.

17. Sabre, *Nineteen Months a Prisoner of War*, 19.

18. *Ibid.*

19. B.F. Booth, *Dark Days of the Rebellion, or, Life in the Southern Military Prisons* (Indianola, IA: Booth Publishing Company, 1897), 61.

20. *Ibid.*, 62.

that particularly dreaded institution. Booth relates that once he saw the sign, he and his fellow captives, “woke to the realization that we were about to enter that infamous place of torture known as ‘Libby Prison.’”²¹ In like manner, General Orlando B. Wilcox recorded in his memoirs how he and his men were captured, “ordered to ‘pack up,’ and were marched with beating hearts, that beat like drums...to the chambers of the famous, or infamous, Libby Prison.”²² After the Yankee soldiers had been escorted into their “sort of unnatural tomb,” they would be searched by the Rebels for any federal money or other valuables in their position.²³ In the account of his one-night stay in Libby, Lieutenant Sabre noted the “officers of the prison came in and searched all those who arrived...for greenbacks.”²⁴ While some of the men attempted to hide their money in areas of their person where the Confederates would not likely search, others acquiesced by handing over their cash without protest.²⁵

Upon being processed, the prisoners began to experience the unique society of life within Libby’s walls. Lacking many of the basic supplies which they would have enjoyed at home or in the army’s camps, prisoners initially ate meals of bread and a little piece of meat to go with the water imported from the James River. However, as the war dragged on and supplies became more scarce in the South, the imprisoned officers at Libby were among those who bore the brunt of the food shortages.²⁶ In January of 1864, for example, prisoners were prevented from consuming any meat for a two-week period.²⁷ When spouses and friends in the North would send care packages to the soldiers, the Rebel guards would confiscate the parcels and consume the

21. Ibid.

22. Orlando B. Wilcox, *Forgotten Valor: The Memoirs, Journals, & Civil War Letters of Orlando B. Wilcox*, ed. Robert Garth Scott (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), 321.

23. Cavada, *Libby Life*, 26.

24. Sabre, *Nineteen Months a Prisoner of War*, 21.

25. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 52-53.

26. Ibid., 75.

27. Ibid., 137.

goods.²⁸ As one soldier noted, Libby's prisoners were delighted when they received the jail's scrumptious soup—a bowl of “boiled water sprinkled with rice and seasoned with the rank juices of stale bacon.”²⁹ At one point the starvation became so bad that soldiers reported “often see[ing] them [other inmates] fight desperately over a morsel of bread, even beating and knocking each other down.”³⁰ These policies reveal both the disparate situation of the Confederate citizenry as the war reached its later stages as well as the contemptuous disregard the Rebel army displayed to their captives.

While life at the prison featured many hardships, Libby's inhabitants attempted to make the best of the situation by developing a unique social environment within the complex. For many in the prison, the time between roll call and sleep each day was spent participating in a vast array of social, spiritual, and recreational activities. In addressing the prison's activities after the war, Lieutenant Colonel Cavada wrote, “I am repeatedly struck by the fact of how much prisoners become like children.”³¹ One such example of prisoners employing playful activities consisted of a group who started a debating club known as the Lyceum.³² The club's name served the dual purpose of referring to the ancient Athenian center of debate as well as being a reference to the amount of lice inhabiting the prison (i.e., “Lice-I-See-‘em”).³³ Writing on the topic of the Lyceum, Cavada noted, “the scenes, which it at times, presents, are worth the graphic pencil of any artist.”³⁴

28. *Ibid.*, 137-138.

29. Cavada, *Libby Life*, 27.

30. *Ibid.*, 51.

31. *Ibid.*, 41.

32. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 37.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Cavada, *Libby Life*, 34.

In addition to the secular forms of entertainment, many captives used their time in confinement as an opportunity to grow in matters of faith and religion. Indeed, prisoners would assemble so often for purposes of worship and biblical instruction that Cavada claimed, “sermons...are of frequent occurrence.”³⁵ One captured Yankee, Chaplain Charles C. McCabe, viewed his imprisonment as a new opportunity to spread the gospel. Writing to assuage the fears of his wife, McCabe related: “There is not a calmer, happier man in Virginia than I all the time. God is with me. Souls are converted. If I had room I might tell much that would thrill your soul. God is in it.”³⁶ Long after they had left their days in captivity behind, those impacted by McCabe and others who were dedicated to spreading the gospel “would reflect on their confinement with [a] fondness” which demonstrated a more positive outlook than “the revulsion that...[other inmates] would harbor until their dying day.”³⁷

Despite the potential for social comradery and spiritual comfort, Libby’s inmates became more desirous of a way to leave the horrors of their environment as the war dragged on. Two phenomena occurring in 1863 would ultimately prompt a group of Union officers to stage the “Great Escape” in February 1864. First, in July 1863, the Union government halted all prisoner exchanges with the Confederates.³⁸ Although a cartel had existed since the war’s early stages, increasing tensions between the two sides in 1863 led to the system of prisoner exchanges being shut down.³⁹ Second, the suspension of prisoner exchanges escalated the problem of providing necessities for the inmates in the South’s already overcrowded prisons.⁴⁰ As historian Joseph

35. Ibid., 50.

36. Frank M. Bristol, *The Life of Charles McCabe: Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 103.

37. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 44.

38. Ibid., 27.

39. Ibid., 29-30.

40. Ibid., 30.

Wheelan notes, conditions at Libby became progressively worse as “rations slipped to semi-starvation levels” at the same time that “dysentery and pneumonia spread with frightening speed.”⁴¹ Faced with the two realities that there was little likelihood of being paroled and that the conditions at the prison were deteriorating, the situation was ripe for a group of creative officers to attempt to breakout from the confines of Libby.

As with many cases in the Civil War, neither of the leaders in the movement to breakout from Libby Prison, Colonel Thomas E. Rose and Major A. G. Hamilton, came from a stereotypical soldier’s background prior to the war’s outbreak. When the war began, Rose left his job as a schoolteacher in eastern Pennsylvania to enlist in the Union Army, while Hamilton abdicated his position as an architect to serve his country.⁴² Having both been captured during the Chattanooga campaigns, the two officers met one another when they were each surveying Libby’s cellars for a means of escaping the prison.⁴³ When the two men ascertained they were each there for the same purpose, Rose and Hamilton agreed to work together in developing a plan of escape.⁴⁴ Since all exterior windows and doors at Libby were constantly monitored by the guards, the new partners determined the most likely means of escape would be through digging a tunnel from the prison’s cellars to a position beyond the prison’s perimeter.⁴⁵

When deciding to construct a tunnel through the cellars, Rose and Hamilton contemplated numerous pros and cons of their strategy. On top of the covert nature of digging a route underground, Rose and Hamilton knew that by starting their tunnel in the cellar, they were

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., 105-107.

43. David D. Ryan, *Cornbread and Maggots/Cloak and Dagger: Union Prisoners and Spies in Civil War Richmond* (Richmond, VA: The Dietz Press, 1994), 93.

44. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 107.

45. Ibid.

less likely to be discovered by the guards or loose-lipped prisoners.⁴⁶ The reason the guards would be unlikely to discover the pair's activities resulted from the fact that the lower levels of the prison, including the cellar, were infested with river rats.⁴⁷ The number of rats that lived in the lower regions of the prison were so large that the cellar and other subterranean rooms at Libby came to be known as "Rat Hell."⁴⁸ Since neither the prisoners nor the guards wished to spend any significant amount of time in that area of the prison, Rose and Hamilton believed they would be able to go about constructing their tunnel with minimal interference.⁴⁹

Once they had settled upon the plan of constructing the tunnel, the pair began digging in the fall of 1863.⁵⁰ The first task in the creation of the tunnel consisted of digging through the back of the kitchen's furnace on the building's lower level.⁵¹ The men decided to access the cellar in this manner in order to avoid having to sneak past a heavily guarded area on a nightly basis when travelling to the dig site.⁵² Employing his skills as an architect, Hamilton directed Rose as the two men constructed their entrance into the east cellar.⁵³ With only a pocketknife and a chisel at their disposal, the two men spent every night from December 19 until December 30, 1863, digging through the furnace's back wall into the east cellar.⁵⁴

Having completed their entrance to the cellar, the next task faced by Rose and Hamilton was to begin construction of the tunnel itself. Due to the amount of time it had taken the pair to construct the entrance, Rose and Hamilton determined to increase the amount of men involved in

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 45.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 106.

50. Ibid., 109.

51. Ryan, *Cornbread and Maggots/Cloak and Dagger*, 94.

52. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 112.

53. Ibid., 116.

54. Ibid., 113-114.

their plot to escape.⁵⁵ In making the decision to expand the conspiracy, the leaders knew they had to be careful in choosing who to include, since some of the prisoners were known to act as informants for their Rebel captors.⁵⁶ Ultimately, the two selected a group of thirteen men to join them in the enterprise.⁵⁷ While the digging initially went off without any problems, the team began experiencing difficulties as their tunnel had to be shut down when it was filled with water from the nearby Kanawha Canal.⁵⁸ Undeterred, the men began constructing a second tunnel until it unexpectedly caved in.⁵⁹ Having lost their first two tunnels, the majority of the men were ready to abandon the endeavor, but Rose and Hamilton convinced them to maintain their efforts.⁶⁰ The dedication demonstrated by Colonel Rose in particular comes as no surprise for a man, who Lieutenant Colonel Cavada referred to as being “animated by an unflinching earnestness of purpose, unwearingly perseverance, and no ordinary engineering abilities.”⁶¹

Unfortunately for the co-conspirators of the escape plot, the third attempt at constructing a tunnel presented additional challenges. As the men approached the sewer lines where they intended to break through and use as a subterranean escape route, they discovered that the sewer was sheathed in a lining of “seasoned oak—rock hard and three inches thick.”⁶² Sickened by the stench of the nearby sewage and unable to penetrate the oak encasement, the diggers determined to abandon the project, much to the chagrin of Colonel Rose and Major Hamilton.⁶³ Having lost the majority of their team, the leaders of the endeavor formulated a new approach for their

55. *Ibid.*, 117.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, 117-118.

58. *Ibid.*, 119.

59. *Ibid.*, 122.

60. *Ibid.*, 125.

61. Cavada, *Libby Life*, 167.

62. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 127.

63. Ryan, *Cornbread and Maggots/Cloak and Dagger*, 102-103.

tunneling scheme. Rather than try to obtain access to the sewer lines, the pair proposed digging under the prison's yard to a spot beyond a tobacco shed which lay on the premise's perimeter.⁶⁴

With the new plan in mind, Rose and Hamilton assembled the other thirteen men and persuaded them to return to their former efforts.⁶⁵ The men agreed and began digging around the clock with the three digging teams rotating every eight hours.⁶⁶ For thirteen days in late-January and early-February 1864, the men fervently toiled without any major complications.⁶⁷ Finally, on February 8, 1864, Colonel Rose returned from his digging shift and announced that the tunnel was complete.⁶⁸ The group determined to rest that day and stage the escape the following night.⁶⁹ On the day of the escape, word began to spread among the captives of the tunnel's existence.⁷⁰ Since the conspirators realized a larger contingency would attempt to flee than they had originally counted on, the men determined to allow the original fifteen to attempt the escape first.⁷¹ On the night of February 9, 1864, with Rose and Hamilton leading the way, the fifteen conspirators along with ninety-four other officers used the tunnel to flee from the horrors of Libby Prison.⁷²

The one hundred and nine officers who escaped from Libby on February 9, 1864, experienced varying degrees of success and failure in their attempts to reach the Union lines. Given that the nearest Union encampment was around one hundred miles away, it is somewhat miraculous that fifty-nine of the officers avoided recapture by members of the Rebel Army sent

64. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 143-144.

65. *Ibid.*, 145.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Ryan, *Cornbread and Maggots/Cloak and Dagger*, 105-106.

68. *Ibid.*, 106.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 159-160.

71. *Ibid.*, 160.

72. *Ibid.*, 187.

to find them and made it to safety.⁷³ Aiding some of the men in their flight to freedom was Elizabeth Van Lew, a wealthy Richmond woman who led an underground spy movement for Union officials during the Civil War.⁷⁴ Harboring fugitives at her mansion during the week that followed the escape, Van Lew provided shelter to men like Colonel Abel Streight, one of the most prominent officers who used the tunnel to escape from Libby.⁷⁵ Van Lew's efforts ultimately aided Streight and his travelling companions in obtaining their freedom.

Unlike the fifty-eight men who escaped, the fates of the remaining officers were very unfortunate. Of the fifty officers, who failed to obtain their freedom, forty-eight had the misfortune of being captured by the Confederates, while the other two drowned during their journey to the Union lines.⁷⁶ The forty-eight men who were brought back to Libby "experienced the full measure of dejection and despair when they were promptly shut away in Rat Hell."⁷⁷ The prisoner who felt the full force of Major Turner's wrath was none other than Colonel Thomas E. Rose.⁷⁸ Initially striking off with Major Hamilton, Rose had been separated from his friend when the Colonel had been stopped for questioning in Richmond.⁷⁹ While Hamilton eventually made it to safety, Rose would be recaptured by his former tormentors.⁸⁰ After travelling approximately one hundred miles over the span of five days, Rose had almost reached the federal lines in Williamsburg, Virginia, when he was recaptured by Rebel troops disguised as Yankee officers.⁸¹ Upon his return to Libby, the Confederates threw Rose into Rat Hell with his fellow recaptured

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid., 87-88.

75. Ryan, *Cornbread and Maggots/Cloak and Dagger*, 109-110.

76. Wheelan, *Libby Prison Breakout*, 187.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid., 190-191.

79. Ibid., 189.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid., 191.

compatriots.⁸² Over the span of his thirty-eight day sentence to the prison's dungeon, those in charge of the prison gave Rose barely enough cornbread and water to survive his incarceration.⁸³

Once they arrived back on Northern soil, the condition of the escaped convicts made an impression on Union officials, who determined to resume the prisoner exchange cartel in order to alleviate the suffering of men like Thomas Rose and others who remained in captivity.⁸⁴

Although the cartel would only reopen for a period of two months in March and April 1864, Colonel Rose and thirty-three other men from Libby were released in April 1864.⁸⁵ Those who remained at Libby would eventually be set free once Union forces occupied Richmond on April 3, 1865.⁸⁶

Synonymous with the death, disease, and despair experienced by the those who were incarcerated within its walls, Libby Prison's legacy reflects the dark side of the American Civil War. Although the overarching legacy of destruction appears at first glance, like with the war itself, the accounts of those who survived the horrors of their experience demonstrated the resiliency with which members of both sides fought to protect their country. From the perseverance it took to create a social atmosphere featuring a glimmer of hope through activities like the Lyceum and the sermons of Chaplain McCabe to the courage required for men like Hamilton and Rose to brave Rat Hell and construct the tunnel, the terrors of Libby Prison brought out the very best in leaders willing to answer the call and take a stand. Rather than being remembered solely for its harrowing conditions, Libby should also be recalled as a stirring

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid., 210-211.

85. Ibid., 223.

86. Ibid., 219.

example of the resiliency of American soldiers willing to fight and persevere in defense of their country.

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