

Davenport and the Civil War

Ted Hinckley

ISSN 0003-4827

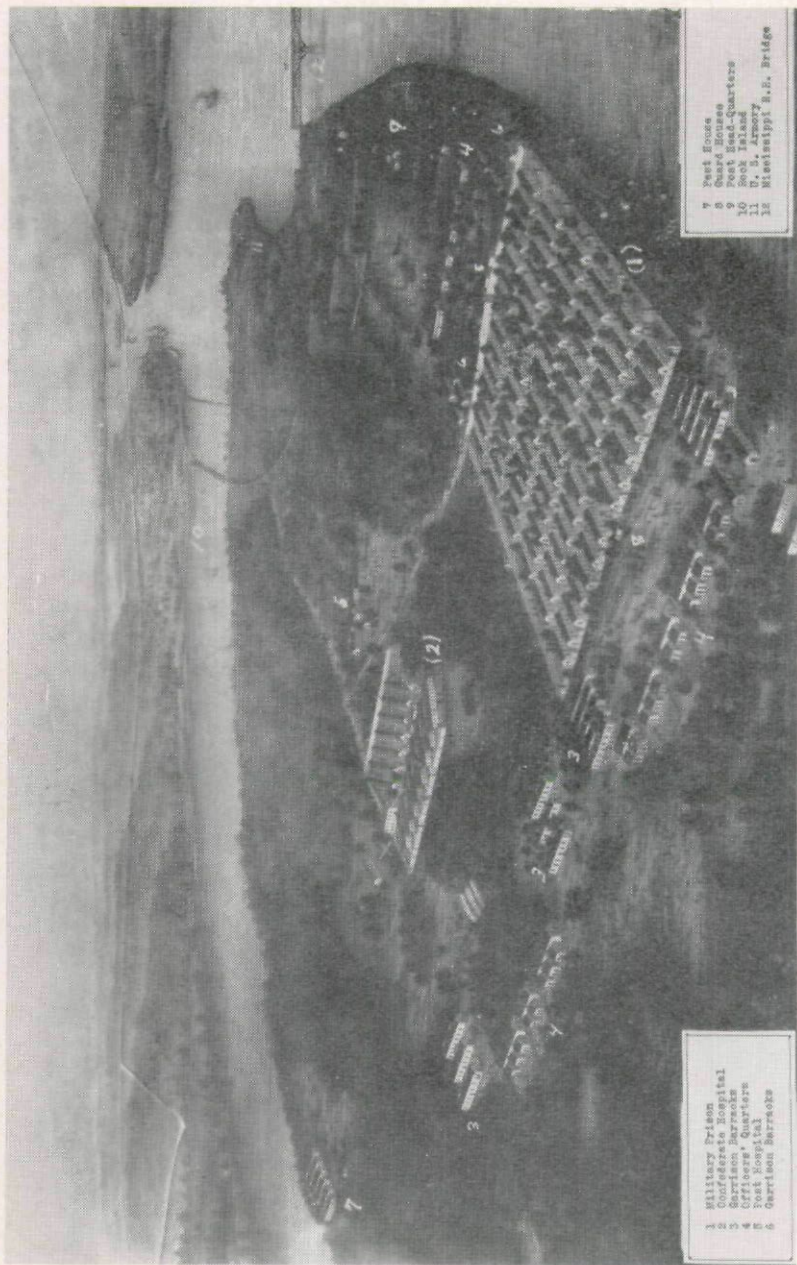
No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

Hinckley, Ted. "Davenport and the Civil War." *The Annals of Iowa* 34 (1958), 400-419.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.7505>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)



- 1 Military Prison
- 2 Hospital
- 3 Garrison Barracks
- 4 Officers' Quarters
- 5 Post Hospital
- 6 Garrison Barracks

- 7 Post Store
- 8 Post Office
- 9 Post Head-Quarters
- 10 Rock Island
- 11 Post Office
- 12 Mississippi R.R. Bridge

Courtesy of Rock Island Arsenal

A view of Rock Island and surrounding area in 1864, looking west.

Annals of Iowa

ESTABLISHED 1863

VOL. XXXIV, No. 6 DES MOINES, OCTOBER, 1958 THIRD SERIES

Davenport and the Civil War

BY TED HINCKLEY*

The Civil War is often referred to as America's first modern war. Proof of this is the record breaking number of lives expended, the prodigious consumption of material resources and the wide geographic extent of the actual fighting zones. Every Northern and Southern community contributed to the struggle in some manner: most of them gave of their flesh and blood; some became one vast factory or granary; a few served as logistical nerve centers. The region immediately surrounding Davenport, Iowa, presents an interesting and curious example of the military duties performed by one northern Mississippi river community in the years from 1861 to 1865.

When the firing at Fort Sumter announced the separation of the "Southern sisters" the western river town of Davenport was a population center for about 15,000 people. Directly across from it, on the Illinois side of the Mississippi river, was the railroad entrepot of Rock Island. Just four years before, these two cities had been joined by the first bridge to span the nation's greatest river. The erection of that pine and oak, truss-type structure had been facilitated by the Mississippi island known as Rock Island. Federally owned and the site of old Fort

* Mr. Hinckley is currently completing his doctorate in history at Indiana University. The research for this article was done while he was headmaster of St. Katherine's School in Davenport. He wishes to express his gratitude for their assistance to the staffs of the Davenport Public Museum and the Public Library, and to T. R. Walker, Curator of the Rock Island Arsenal Museum. Recognition should also be given to deceased Davenport Seth J. Temple whose 1927 paper on "Camp McClellan" (Davenport Public Library files) was most helpful.

Armstrong (1816-1836), the island lay across the river from Davenport and a few hundred feet from the Illinois bank. This three miles of insular real estate and the steamboat decorated levee of Davenport opposite it were to play a significant part, albeit relatively small, in the Civil war.

On April 16, 1861, Iowa's Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood received a telegram from Secretary of War Cameron stating that a call had been made upon him for "one regiment of militia for immediate service." The next day proclamations were issued urging the citizenry to sustain the government and for each county militia to organize into companies.¹ Iowans, like so many of their Northern comrades in arms, were utterly unprepared to fight a shooting war. Governor Kirkwood was unable to find anyone in the capital city who even knew what number of volunteers would actually constitute a regiment. Only after a hurried trip to Davenport to consult the knowledgeable Judge John F. Dillon did he secure a definitive answer.² In the pre-war years national holidays had always produced colorful parades by such Hawkeye militia companies as the "Blues," "Guards," and "Rifles." Essentially fraternal in purpose, these volunteer bodies had little military capability. Even worse, the State's ostensible arsenal of weapons was alarmingly short. Iowa, unlike other western states of that day, began the conflict without even a single unit of the regular army within its borders.³

Fortunately the State's lack of physical preparedness was counter-balanced by the reassuring war spirit of the Hawkeyes. On June 8, 1861, Governor Kirkwood was able to write to the Secretary of War: "I am overrun with applications of companies for admission into the national service. Our people are loyal, patriotic and devoted. Their

¹ Jacob A. Swisher, *Iowa in Times of War* (Iowa City, Torch Prtg. Co., 1943) p. 154.

² G. A. Hannaford, et al., *Wars, Sketches and Incidents* (Des Moines P. C. Kenyon, 1893), p. 370.

³ John E. Briggs, "The Enlistment of Iowa Troops During the Civil War," *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XV (July, 1917), p. 328.

hearts are with you in the national struggle. Their prayers daily ascend for the President. . ."⁴ The most immediate mobilization problem was one of turning farm boys into soldiers. To expedite the organization and training of these volunteer regiments, camps were established in or near most of Iowa's principal cities.

Davenport fortunately possessed the dual advantages of eastern telegraph and railroad links.⁵ During the 1850's the burgeoning river town had served as a market terminal for the distribution of substantial quantities of food stuffs. Iowa pork and vegetable crops had been regularly shipped South, even to such distant points as Cuba and Mexico.⁶ After April of '61 this extension of Mississippi commerce was shut off. The steamboat facilities, of course, remained and added to the attractiveness of the region as a potential troop rendezvous-training-embarkation center. An important recommendation, particularly in a rebellion, was the strong Union sentiment manifested in and about Davenport. Of the approximately thirty volunteer companies existent in Iowa on the outbreak of hostilities, four had been active in Davenport.⁷

For the above reasons the vicinity became, at various times throughout the Civil war, the site of five military posts, Camp McClellan, Camp Roberts (later called Camp Kinsman), Camp Joe Holt, Camp Herron, and Camp Hendershott, the last three named being in service only during 1861-1862.⁸ On August 8, 1861, Newton D. Baker, Adjutant-General of Iowa, after moving his office to Davenport, established Camp McClellan. It was the

⁴ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series III, Vol. I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), p. 261. (Hereafter cited as O. R.)

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁶ Federal Writers' Program, Iowa, *Scott County History, Iowa* (n.p: WPA, 1942), pp. 57-58.

⁷ John E. Briggs, "Enlistments from Iowa During the Civil War," *Iowa and War*, No. 2 (August, 1917), p. 8.

⁸ John Ely Briggs (ed.), *The Palimpsest*, XXII, (June, 1941), p. 8. Taken from 1907 privately published account of Benjamin F. Thomas, *Soldier Life*.

first of the city's five military cantonments and remained throughout the war as the foremost among them.

On the scenic grounds of Camp McClellan, situated on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi river, many a country lad began his martial transformation. The tenacity which he later displayed on the sanguinary bluffs above Pittsburg Landing evidenced that the Davenport transformation had been surprisingly effective. By August 17, the post boasted some twenty military buildings, among which were thirteen barracks, horse stalls, a commissariat, a granary, a guard house, and an officers' quarters. Many of these structures were so miserably erected that they had to be replaced in a few months.⁹

Despite this hasty construction, not all of the volunteer influx could be housed on the Camp grounds. Downtown Davenport buildings, such as the famous Burtis House and the Railway Depot were utilized as stop-gap barracks.¹⁰ This was but one of the many military elements which initially had to bow before necessity. William Stroup Fultz of the 11th Iowa Infantry later recounted how, because of a sparsity of uniforms, citizens could pass in and out of Camp McClellan almost at liberty. No less unmilitary were the pine lath swords with which the soldiers were equipped for sentry duty.¹¹

By the end of October some three thousand men were encamped at Camp McClellan and the mobilization crisis had been surmounted. After being mustered in on the 25th of that month, Hawkeye recruit Pete Wilson wrote to his father:

Our shanties are as tight as a good barn, bunked up like a ship two in a bunk. We have plenty of straw and we are very comfortable. Our fare consists of beef, bread, beans, potatoes, rice and coffee, we get plenty to eat and good enough. We are all satisfied with our camp arrangements.¹²

⁹ Davenport *Daily Democrat*, August 17, 1861; October 9, 1861; October 12, 1861. (Hereafter cited as *Democrat*.)

¹⁰ *Democrat*, October 11, 1861.

¹¹ Mildred Throne (ed.), "A History of Co. D, 11th Iowa Infantry, 1861-1865," *Iowa Journal of History*, LV (January, 1957), p. 39.

¹² John Ely Briggs (ed.), "Peter Wilson in the Civil War," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XL (April, 1942), p. 155.

Homesickness and military regimentation annoyed not a few Davenport trainees; however, the good rich soil of Iowa seems to have provided for most of their gastronomic wants.

As must always be the case when large bodies of men are concentrated together, the twin problems of hard liquor and even harder women, beset the five Davenport camps. Soldier White related to his father:

There are many of the soldiers that won't be content to stay at home in the evening, they run the guard and go down town on a spree. When there is a good many out, we sometimes have to go after them and have some fun bringing them back. Not all come back peaceably.¹³

Captain C. Barney of the 20th Iowa recollected:

One of them after figuring as principal in a general fight on the levee, and receiving a severe gash on the head from the fragment of an iron pot, was finally captured and brought back to camp lashed down on a dray.¹⁴

Not all of the female parasites were successful in their forays against Camp McClellan. On one occasion the *Davenport Gazette* reported: "Last evening several women of easy virtue, who were trifling with the soldiers about Camp McClellan Hospital, were treated to a cold bath in the Mississippi by order of the officer in charge."¹⁵

As early as September 25, 1861, the first Davenport-trained military body had boarded the river transport "Jennie Whipple" and headed down river. That some of their sons had gone forth to war "without arms, and in many instances without comfortable clothing. . . Some were almost barefooted, some had only pants and coat" shamed many Scott county residents and caused the local *Daily Democrat* to emit a protesting blast.¹⁶ The deficiencies, while exaggerated, had existed. Fortunately the huge logistical build-up at St. Louis remedied most of these soldiers' needs before they went into battle.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁴ Capt. C. Barney, *Recollections of Field Service with the 20th Iowa Infantry Volunteers, —or What I saw in the Army* (Davenport: *Gazette*, 1865), p. 22.

¹⁵ *Davenport Gazette*, August 12, 1864. (Hereafter cited as *Gazette*.)

¹⁶ *Democrat*, September 25, 1861.

Strenuous efforts had enabled the outpouring of the Hawkeye manhood reservoir to be properly channeled. By March 21, 1862, Iowa had prepared for combat sixteen infantry regiments, four cavalry regiments, and four batteries of artillery.¹⁷ That spring found Davenport's military training facilities adequate to meet all future troop mobilization contingencies. Thereafter, military demands for the training of volunteers oscillated most irregularly.¹⁸

Camp McClellan, largest of Davenport's five encampments, had its first birthday in August of 1862. The year-old Camp could take pride in its service as a rendezvous-training center for the 8th, 11th, 13th, 14th, and 16th Regiments of Infantry.¹⁹ By a series of tragic events which occurred during this anniversary month in the northern sister-state of Minnesota, fate prepared a strange new role for Camp McClellan.

As one peruses the *Official Records*, he becomes cognizant of the serious internal as well as external difficulties which confronted Iowa throughout the Civil war. Domestically, the draft friction of 1863 and the menace of the pro-Southern Knights of the Golden Circle seemed threatening. From without, particularly in 1861, there was the likelihood of Missouri raiders; possible Indian violence from across the Minnesota border never vanished. Recall, that the Northern armies fought not only against the eleven seceding states but often in Indian country as well. In the New Mexico, Nebraska, Dakota and Colorado territories Indians engaged thousands of Northern soldiers in scattered hostilities from 1861 to 1865.

Of all of Iowa's immediate potential dangers, Governor Kirkwood appears to have been concerned most over possible Sioux depredations from the northwest.²⁰ The

¹⁷ O.R., Series III, Vol. I, pp. 940-941.

¹⁸ Briggs, *Iowa and War*, *op. cit.*, p. 353 ff.

¹⁹ Harry E. Downer, *History of Davenport and Scott County, Iowa*, I (2 vols.; Chicago; S. J. Clarke, 1910), p. 670.

²⁰ O.R., Series III, Vol. I, pp. 57, 128, 158, 163, 185-186.

Governor's forebodings were not without considerable justification. Fortunately for Iowa the appalling Sioux up-rising of August 1862 was contained in Minnesota.

Ignited by a handful of "blanket Indian" malcontents, what should have remained a local flare-up was extinguished only after slaughter had swept far up the Red river valley and south almost to the Iowa border.²¹ Only after the most severe fighting were troops from Fort Snelling able to defeat Little Crow and his desperate followers; but not until some 400 settlers had been killed.

By early September over 2000 Indians, the majority women and children, had been rounded up in General Sibley's campaign to restrain any such future massacres.²² During early 1863 the United States Congress abrogated all treaties with these Sioux, thereupon leaving them homeless. This only legitimized what was already a fact, for shortly after their capture by Sibley's forces, the Indians had been incarcerated within Fort Snelling and at Mankato, Minnesota. So intense, however, was the public wrath against the redmen that over three hundred of them were condemned to be hanged as participants in the August massacres.²³

A portion of those unfortunate people were shipped west to Nebraska Territory. On March 23rd Davenport's *Daily Democrat* must have jolted not a few of its readers when it revealed: "There is a prospect that the reprieved Indians [only 38 were finally hanged] at Mankato, Minnesota, are to be transferred to this place . . . To turn them loose would ensure their speedy death at the hands of the outraged Minnesotans. . . There are about 200 of the red devils chained together in pairs."²⁴ A month later 278 of the Sioux braves, 16 squaws, and two papooses were removed from their

²¹ Federal Writers' Program, *Minnesota: A State Guide*, American Guide Series (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), pp. 314-315.

²² *Gazette*, October 15, 1862.

²³ William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, II (4 vols.; St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1924), pp. 255-259.

²⁴ *Democrat*, March 23, 1863.

log stockade at Mankato and transferred to an empty corner of Camp McClellan at Davenport. The 200 x 200 foot pen was labeled Camp Kearney,²⁵ exactly why is not clear.

Fortunately the officer in charge, as well as the Davenport community, soon realized how abject and docile these "fiendish butchering heathens" actually were. Iowans came to be most favorably impressed by the thrice-daily Christian worship services carried on by the Sioux.²⁶ After a short time their manacles were removed, and as none attempted to escape, considerable liberty was permitted them.

Camp Kearney's inmates were not long in discovering that there was a local market for their bows and arrows. Soon these "Indian-made" items, in addition to their mussel-shell rings and the usual hand-wrought jewelry, were circulating in Scott county. Some of the Indians were even permitted to earn spending money by laboring on local farms. According to Professor Folwell, a large portion of them asked to be allowed to enlist in the volunteer army, but the Secretary of War decided that it would be inexpedient to grant the request.²⁷

It is not surprising that by December of 1863 the novelty of the Sioux captives had worn off. Earlier, in April of that year, a reporter for the Davenport *Daily Democrat* had described them:

A fairer lot of Indians in physical development it would be difficult to find. They are large, straight and of resolute mien. No captivity can obliterate the native majesty or dim the fiery restless eye of these strong patriotic savages.²⁸

But by December the same newspaper declared:

Ugh! When at Camp McClellan the other day we visited the Indian pen, where they have some 365 men, women and children, real "native Americans." We have read something of Indian romance, but in looking at those specimens we could not see it. . . We could see no evidence of nobleness or

²⁵ *Democrat*, April 27, 1863.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Folwell, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

²⁸ *Democrat*, April 27, 1863.

dignity of character but rather evidence of treachery and cruelty. . . Every one of them proved guilty of the murder of one of the white men should have been hung with the 28 already executed.²⁹

Eighteen hundred and sixty-three had been the year of decision for Northern and Southern armies. "Marsh" Lee and his indomitable army were unwilling, however, to accept the omens of Vicksburg and Gettysburg. The Davenport community which had already provided five training-rendezvous camps, and only recently an Indian prison, was therefore called upon to assist in a new wartime endeavor—a prison center for captured Confederates.

As early as February of 1862, Adjutant General Baker of Iowa had written to Senator James W. Grimes about Davenport as a likely location for a prisoner of war camp. "Three thousand prisoners," he wrote, "can be kept here at 16 cents each per day, Government furnishing building, fuel and guards."³⁰ No immediate action was taken on this matter. Exactly what site Adjutant General Price had in mind is not now clear. The Federally-owned island of Rock Island must have been discussed earlier as a possible prison locality. Its ready accessibility by Mississippi river steamboats, and the rail link of the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad, not to mention its relative isolation by water, recommended it.

At the outbreak of the Civil war neither side was equipped to handle large numbers of prisoners. Before the conflict ended the Confederacy had incarcerated some 194,743 captured soldiers, while the Union imprisoned approximately 214,825.³¹ Due to its belated victories, it was not until 1862-63 that the North began to be confronted with seriously pressing demands for prisoner-of-war camps. To help meet these needs

²⁹ *Democrat*, December 3, 1863.

³⁰ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. III, p. 269.

³¹ James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States*, V (6 vols.; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1906), p. 507. This volume, pp. 483-515, is recommended reading for a brief summary of the whole Civil war prisoner-of-war story.

the government-owned Rock Island was designated as a military prison in July, 1863.

Commissary General of Prisoners, William H. Hoffman, always a dollar-conscious administrator, ordered that the barracks "be put up in the roughest and cheapest manner—mere shanties, with no fine work about them. . ." ³² Captain Charles R. Reynolds, Ass't. Quartermaster, was assigned the task of constructing the compound. The plans which he secured from the Quartermaster General's Office were, if necessary, to be modified to meet "the character of the ground." ³³

Tree-covered and largely free of swamp land, the three-mile-long island soon rang with the sounds of hammers, shovels and saws. By late November of 1863 the Army felt that the Rock Island prison was prepared to begin receiving its motley charges. The Camp, laid out in a square, consisted of 84 wooden barracks in six rows of fourteen each; auxiliary structures were provided outside the compound proper for guard troops, supplies, etc. The streets were a hundred feet wide, and the distance between each of the barracks was forty feet. Each building was one story, raised three feet from the ground, and stood twelve feet high. One hundred and twenty men slept in a barracks 100 x 22 feet; 18 feet was taken up at one end for a cook house. Surrounding the 84 dwellings was the prescribed "twelve foot fence with a sentinel's walk on the outside four feet below the top." Drainage was good, the water supply was adequate, and portable cesspools assured maximum toilet sanitation. ³⁴

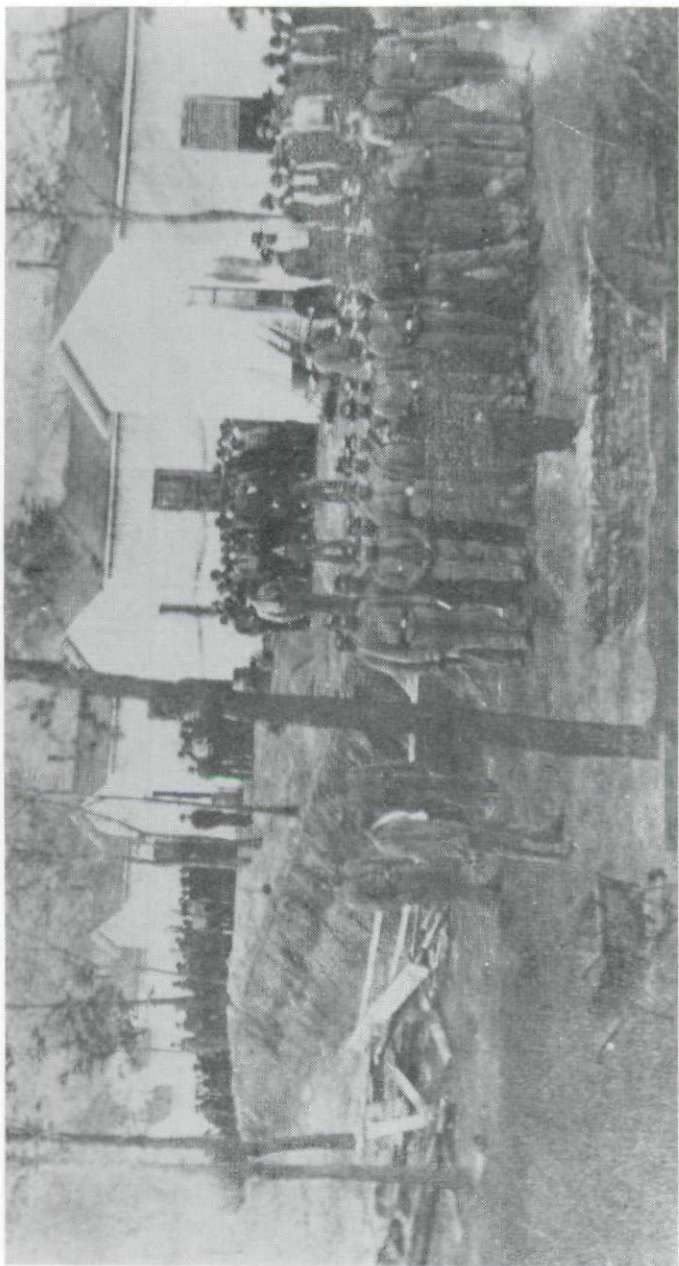
Brig. General William W. Orme noted that "natural obstacles to an escape are very trivial around this island," ³⁵ and urged that at least fourteen full companies of the Invalid Corps be designated to secure the prison.

³² O.R., Series II, Vol. VI, pp. 115, 196.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁴ For a description of the Camp see: *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 663, 939. O.R. Series II, Vol. VII, pp. 506-507.

³⁵ O.R., Series II, Vol. VI, p. 663.



Courtesy of Rock Island Arsenal

Roll Call of the Guard at Rock Island Prison, along the dead line ditch. The foremost figure is that of Father Dunham, the prison Chaplain. The men grouped around the barracks are the prisoners.

The first soldiers to be assigned as guards reported on November 2, 1863.³⁶ On December 3, 1863, Rock Island prison received its initial body of ex-Confederate fighting men; they had been captured at the battles of Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge.³⁷ By February, 1864, there were 7,149 of them, guarded by 1,361 Yankees of the Invalid Corps.³⁸

In keeping with international law and the regulations of the United States Army, the prisoners were to be issued the same food in quality and quantity as was given to Union soldiers. The regulation ration which the prisoners were to receive consisted of three-fourths of a pound of bacon or one and one-quarter pounds of beef, one and one-third pounds white or one and one-quarter pounds of corn bread, one-tenth pound of green coffee, one and one-half ounces of rice or hominy, one-sixth pound of sugar, a gill of vinegar, one Star candle, a tablespoon of salt, and beans, potatoes, and molasses in reduced amounts.³⁹

The most immediate need of the men imprisoned for the duration was proper clothing. On their arrival their uniforms were commonly in tatters, and their blankets, often as not, were but bundles of rags. The few photographs which exist of the Rock Island inmates make it appear that they, like so many other captured Confederates, were provided with rejected grey Northern state uniforms. Early in the conflict these state uniforms, made of good material had been replaced by the Union blue. Ironically, Johnny Reb was thereby provided with a fine new Confederate uniform as he entered a stockade hundreds of miles from Dixieland.⁴⁰

³⁶ Newton Bateman and Paul Selby (eds.), *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of Rock Island County*, II (2 vols.; Chicago: Munsell Pub. Co., 1914) p. 839.

³⁷ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VIII, p. 202.

³⁸ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VI, p. 939.

³⁹ After April 20, 1864, this was reduced by about 20% in reprisal for the alleged inhuman treatment of Union prisoners. Rhodes, *op. cit.*, p. 505.

⁴⁰ Asa Brainerd Isham, et al., *Prisoners of War and Military Prisoners* (Cincinnati: Lyman and Cushing, 1890), p. 134.

The Rock Island prison had been in operation for hardly more than a month when the two river towns which flanked it began to stir uneasily. Dame rumor had begun to cause raised eyebrows in Davenport, and its Illinois counterpart, Rock Island, over the "shockingly high number of deaths out on the Island." Alarmed at these tales, the slow wheels of bureaucratic investigation began to turn. On January 18, 1864, a medical inspector reported that suffering among the prisoners was "for the most part untrue or greatly exaggerated."⁴¹ However, the grim fact remains that for the period from January through May of 1864, the Rock Island prison had the highest number of deaths of any Union prison then in operation.⁴²

A perusal of the *Official Records* strongly indicates that neither criminal negligence nor filthy living conditions brought on the tragedy. The number of excessive deaths seems to have resulted from two major factors: the introduction of virulent smallpox by infected prisoners during the Camp's first month of existence; and a failure of the Camp administration to act quickly to meet this threat. The fact should not be overlooked that the 1,968 Southern fighting men who eventually died at Rock Island prison never equalled the death totals which were unhappily reached at such larger Union prisons as Camp Chase, Ohio, or Point Lookout, Maryland.⁴³ Certainly the living accommodations at Rock Island prison were as different from the squalid Andersonville prison as day from night.

There is some evidence of negligence in medical preparation at the Rock Island Prison. However, it only tends to indicate that no one in authority had visualized the likelihood of a smallpox epidemic in the prison. As late as a few weeks before the Island accepted its first charges, no medical officer had been appointed.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VI, p. 848.

⁴² *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VIII, pp. 993-1003.

⁴³ For comparisons with other Union prison camps see: *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VIII, p. 986 ff.

⁴⁴ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VI, p. 635.

Further, by mid-January of 1864, medical supplies were still inadequate.⁴⁵ During these first months hundreds of prisoners-of-war were being interned on the Island, camp facilities were being improved, but no real sense of urgency in the face of the smallpox outbreak is evident.

The *Official Records* do not tell us all that we would like to know. It seems inescapably clear, however, that lethargy evaporated with the arrival during the first weeks of February of Dr. A. M. Clark, acting Medical Inspector of Prisoners of War. Clark was unafraid to label incompetency and to take upon his own shoulders the responsibility for building a genuine isolation hospital. Clark praised the prison camp's Acting Surgeon who, although "inexperienced," was trying to do well with assistants who, "with one or two exceptions, are utterly inefficient." The Medical Inspector was glad to find smallpox vaccination finally being employed; but pointed an accusing finger at the Louisville, Kentucky officers who had originally forwarded the diseased captives— "some even who had broken out."⁴⁶

The following month the outspoken Dr. Clark was satisfied to report that all those who suffered from smallpox were now properly isolated. As before he did not hesitate to label inefficiency—this time an Iowa Volunteer body—for their unmilitary performance. He also observed that the proximity of the cemetery was unhealthy and he directed that it be moved.⁴⁷ Inspector Clark apparently was able to get along well enough with the prison commander, Col. A. J. Johnson. Once the proportions of the smallpox curse began to be felt, the Camp Commander was probably grateful for the outspoken physician.

In early March, Commander Johnson was notified to halt work on the prison hospital.⁴⁸ Colonel Hoffman,

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 848.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 938-940. Also *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VII, p. 13.

⁴⁷ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VI, p. 1002.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1021, 1022, 1047.

Commissary General of Prisoners, after consulting with the Secretary of War, had issued the orders, erroneously believing that the prisoners' sickness was "of a temporary character."⁴⁹ A March report from William Watson, Volunteer Surgeon to Charles S. Tripler, Army Medical Director, brushed away any foggy notions about health conditions at the four month old prison.

I found the morning report of sick in quarters 350, in hospital 715, of whom 420 were in the variola hospital. . . I found a great want of cleanliness among the patients and attendants which is disappearing under stringent regulations. . . the impression seemed to prevail that it was injurious to wash, which resulted in an accumulation of filth. . .

Watson also enclosed a written copy of a report that he had made to the prison's commander, Colonel A. J. Johnson:

If more evidence of the urgent necessity of the new buildings was requisite it could be found in the startling ratio of the late weekly and monthly reports; 104.66 was the ratio of deaths per 1000 for the week ending March 5, and 330 deaths among 1,664 cases treated for the month ending February 9. . .⁵⁰

A few days later orders were issued to Colonel Johnson from his economy-minded superior, Colonel Hoffman, to go ahead and finish the needed hospital facilities.⁵¹

Actually the backbone of the smallpox threat had been broken in February of 1864. In that month death had reaped a pathetic harvest of 346 men among the 7600 then incarcerated.⁵² Unquestionably the bitterly cold January of 1864 had helped to weaken men already suffering from smallpox and such secondary ills as diarrhea, dysentery and pneumonia. Recall also, that the captured Confederates continued to arrive at Rock Island from St. Louis and Louisville dirty and weak—prime targets for camp contagions. Nevertheless, by October

⁴⁹ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VII, p. 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13, 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵² For the monthly abstracts of the Rock Island prison see: *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VIII, pp. 993-1003. Unfortunately there is a single omission in the abstracts, December, 1864.

of 1864, the Prison Abstract reported only 52 deaths out of a current prison body of 8181 men. As may be deduced, a stringent policing of body, barracks, and grounds, plus an increasingly effective medical program, had won the prison health battle.

Aside from their daily roll calls and the cleaning of their quarters, the duties of the prison population were few. Visitors were rarely allowed. Outside, censored mail, however, was permitted the men.⁵³ Camp Commander Johnson was alert to the slow agony of boredom which gnawed on each of his charges. Although not required to labor about the Camp, the men were provided with an opportunity to earn five to ten cents per day, depending on their skill.⁵⁴ This income they quickly exhausted with the purchase of such items as pies, candies, bologna, stamps, and surprisingly enough, pen knives, from the Camp sutler.⁵⁵ With the knives the more enterprising Southerners carved rings, breast pins, and miscellaneous trinkets; the sale of these handicrafts enlarged their diminutive purchasing power. One cannot help but speculate if their knick knacks were ever undersold by the redskin merchandise from across the river at Camp Kearney.

One of the projects chosen by Colonel Johnson to improve the prison compound and keep many inmates occupied was a major expansion of the Camp's sewer system.⁵⁶ The resultant blasting and digging evidently inspired the more ambitious of the prisoners to go into business for themselves. On the night of June 14, 1864, ten of them made their escape by tunnelling from a barracks directly under the parapet. Just as the last two were emerging they were hailed by the sentry who immediately gave the alarm. Three were soon taken on the Island, and four were captured near Rock River, four miles distant, one was drowned attempt-

⁵³ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. IV, p. 153.

⁵⁴ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VII, p. 180.

⁵⁵ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VI, pp. 1014-1015.

⁵⁶ *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VII, p. 180.

ing to cross the slough, and two apparently gained their freedom.⁵⁷

Behind the twelve-foot fence surrounding the Rock Island prison a ditch had been dug; along its ridge and set a few yards back from it, stood a row of stakes. This line of stakes was called the "dead line," and meant exactly that for any prisoner who risked crossing it.⁵⁸ The 23rd of September must have been a bad day for the soldiers from the Land of Cotton, for on that day a new body of soldier guards arrived—the 108th Regiment of Colored Infantry.⁵⁹

One month later as Private Cowhers of that unit walked his guard he noticed a shadowy figure "slipping across the ditch; then when I got close enough. . . crept right up over him. . . and fired at him while he was scratching under the fence."⁶⁰ Yet despite the easy prospect of meeting a deadly lead ball, 41 Johnnies succeeded in their gamble for freedom and home. Possibly this tenacity may have had something to do with the strange request of the usually parsimonious Colonel Hoffman. On August 4, 1864, he ordered a "barge to be purchased and fitted up for the accommodation of a guard of thirty-five men, armed with a 6-pound field piece and a 24-pound howitzer, to be anchored in the Mississippi river off Rock Island, as additional security. . ."⁶¹

The Commissary General of Prisoners' caution was never put to the test. Once the sands began to run out for the Confederacy in 1864, they did so with increasing momentum. During the latter part of that year public pressure in both the North and South secured a program of sick and invalid prisoner exchange.⁶²

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1037-1040.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 880.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1037-1040.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 537.

⁶² William Best Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1930), pp. 226-228. This remains the best work of its type.

A complication arose over what to do with the Southern prisoners who did not wish to be sent South. Many prisoners, particularly those from the border states, preferred to take the oath of allegiance in accordance with the terms of Lincoln's amnesty proclamation.

On January 16, 1865, Colonel Johnson reported that two hundred and eighty-one prisoners left for exchange via Cairo, Illinois. Although only 23 "accepted the privilege of taking the oath," he could rejoice that "nearly all alleging that as soon as they were exchanged they would desert and go home."⁶³ The following month, however, some 1,330 of the Camp's inmates refused to be sent in exchange.⁶⁴ In the *Official Records* there is a letter to Jefferson Davis from five of the Camp's zealous Southerners who opposed this and who did their best to re-enlist the back-sliders.⁶⁵ One can imagine the deep rancour which split these two divergent bodies as the war shuddered to a stop.

In the weeks following Appomattox, the activity about the Rock Island prison rapidly receded. In March there had been 5,000 men languishing in the stockade; a month after the war had ended approximately 2,664 remained. During July the last two prisoners were released.⁶⁶ On the 6th of that month a military inspector reported that the grounds, barracks, hospitals, and records all showed great care and attention on the part of the commanding officer, Colonel Johnson.⁶⁷

Throughout its operation the Rock Island prison had confined 12,215 prisoners. Among them occurred 1,968 deaths, some 500 perishing from the effects of small-pox.⁶⁸ From its days of actual existence to this, the Rock Island prison has been maligned for harboring

⁶³ O.R., Series II, Vol. VIII, p. 82.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1003.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 704.

⁶⁸ Bateman and Selby, *op. cit.*, p. 839. Letter from T. R. Walker, Curator, Rock Island Arsenal Museum to author, December 11, 1957.

"poor starving creatures."⁶⁹ The facts do not confirm this indictment. The number of deaths was grievous, and some administrative incompetency did occur. That the men were "ravenous" and deliberately allowed to die is an old wives' tale. Once the unfortunate health circumstances were recognized for the peril which they genuinely held, great exertions were made to overcome them. Belated though these efforts may have been, the *Official Records* attest to their efficacy once they were applied.

Just as Lee's surrender concluded the prison role of the Government's Island, so did it signal the eclipse of the Davenport military posts. Indeed, the Camp McClellan hospital had proved more useful during the closing month of the War than had its empty training facilities.⁷⁰ The summer of 1865 saw these Camps assisting with the general army demobilization, most particularly the paying and discharging of the Hawkeye veterans of Scott county, Iowa. From this county, of which Davenport was the important population center, 4,117 men had gone forth to serve their nation. Of this number 222 had died in battle and in Southern prisons.⁷¹ County historian, Harry E. Downer, later asserted that Scott county men were in every regiment which Iowa sent to the front.⁷²

Camp Kinsman, second in size to Camp McClellan, was the only one of the five Davenport training encampments to be retained for peacetime employment. It was partially rebuilt and emerged as an Orphans Home; the others were razed and their lumber sold.⁷³ What about the redmen? Unwanted and utterly incongruous in their Davenport setting, their lot would surely have been a life absent of hope except for their

⁶⁹ For example see the indictment of the Rock Island *Argus* and the defense of Col. A. J. Johnson. *O.R.*, Series II, Vol. VII, p. 1284; and Vol. VIII, pp. 16-18, 38-39.

⁷⁰ *Gazette*, March 30, 1865.

⁷¹ Federal Writers', *Scott County*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁷² Downer, *op. cit.*, p. 670.

⁷³ *Democrat and Gazette*, August-October, 1865.

faithful friend and spiritual guide, Dr. Williamson of the Methodist Church. In 1864, at his urging, some forty were pardoned, and in 1866, the remaining two hundred and forty-seven were pardoned by President Johnson.⁷⁴ Almost a year after the termination of the national conflict, the "red devils" were loaded on a steamboat and removed to Fort Randall, Dakota Territory, and final reunion with their fellows.⁷⁵

The role of the Davenport community in the Civil war was important. It fused strong strands of war-time strength for the Northern war effort. Clearly, the totality of America's great North-South upheaval could not have existed but for the vast, interdependent war efforts undertaken by such areas as this Mississippi river community.

⁷⁴ Folwell, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

⁷⁵ William J. Petersen, "Indians and Steamboats," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XXX (April, 1932), p. 181.

Reduction of postage

One of the questions now agitated and which will be brought before Congress at its present session, is the enormous tax now paid in postage upon letters. Mr. Wickliffe, Postmaster General, recommends a reduction of postage to ten and five cents, provided the Department be left to lean upon its own resources.

There is no question that calls louder upon Congress for action than that of reduction of postage. It is an unjust and unnecessary taxation. It has been proved by the soundest logic that the increase of correspondence, resulting from a reduction of postage, will counter-balance the decrease of revenue, so that this Department will not have to depend upon the Government for support.

—BLOOMINGTON HERALD, January 3, 1845.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.