

The Salisbury Confederate Prison

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Six weeks after North Carolina seceded from the Union, the Confederate government asked North Carolina to provide a place to hold Northern prisoners of war. The site selected was an empty cotton factory in Salisbury. The building, constructed of brick, stood three stories high. It had a center, monitor-like attic, and—most important—was located near a railroad line. The trains could easily transport prisoners in and out of town. Several smaller cottages, designed to house factory workers, and a few outbuildings surrounded the main building. Scattered about the site were large oak trees and a well.

The Confederate government quickly built a rough plank stockade (fence) around the edge of the compound. Attached to the outside of these flimsy walls was a raised platform where guards walked. Cannon sat in two of the prison walls' corners, and a "deadline" was marked inside the walls. The guards warned that any prisoner who crossed the line would be shot.

The first Union prisoners arrived in Salisbury on December 9, 1861. Forty-six of them had been captured at the First Battle of Manassas. They had been held at the Raleigh Fairgrounds until the prison could be completed. Joining them were seventy-three Federal sailors who were captured when their ship, the *Union*, ran aground on North Carolina's Bogue Island. These prisoners of war soon found themselves outnumbered in the prison by deserters from the Union and Confederate armies, Confederate criminals, Southern unionists (supporters of the United States), and other Southern dissenters. Not until near the end of the war did soldiers captured in battle make up the majority at the prison.

During its first few months, the prison was a relatively comfortable place. One soldier held there called it "more endurable than any other part of rebeldom." The prison chaplain described the institution in Salisbury as almost college-like. Prisoners passed the time making trinkets to trade with local residents, playing baseball, and even performing plays for each other. In some cases, prisoners could sign out of the prison and walk about the town.

Captured Union soldiers did not plan to stay in Salisbury long. They expected to be exchanged, or traded, for captured Confederate soldiers. During the first part of the war, soldiers were regularly exchanged. This exchange system broke down following President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863. Then the number of prisoners in Salisbury began to grow. The prison, designed to hold 2,500 men at a time, eventually held more than 10,000. Men packed the cotton mill shoulder to shoulder. In time, any place with a roof became a hospital of sorts. To get out of the rain and cold, prisoners dug holes in the ground, called bean pots because of their shape. Two or three men per hole curled together to stay warm.

Food began to run low. Southern farmers were away fighting, and much of what could be raised on the farms went to the Confederate armies. There was little left for the prisoners to eat. One captured Iowan described his food in Salisbury as “coarse corn meal, cob and all ground together, and so musty that a decent hog would not eat it.” With almost no firewood for cook fires, this prisoner had to swallow the food raw.

The sanitary conditions also got out of hand. The prisoners dug latrines (toilets) near their water supply, causing the disease dysentery. The sick became sicker and more numerous. To make matters worse, the North’s successful naval blockade of Southern ports caused a shortage of medicine and medical supplies in Salisbury. Prisoners began to die by the wagonload. The dead were collected daily, taken to a former blacksmith shop called the deadhouse, and then carried to burial trenches on the back of the dead wagon. There, along the stubbled rows of an old cornfield, the prisoners were buried in mass graves.

Local citizens in Salisbury petitioned the Confederacy to remove the prisoners of war from the local prison to ease their suffering, but there was nowhere else for them to go. Some citizens carried food to the prison, but as the war slogged on, they too had little to spare. One local man even loaned books from his library to the prisoners. But few people did as much as “Old Mrs. Johnston.” Sarah Johnston nursed the soldiers as best she could, even taking one, Hugh Berry, into her own home. When he passed away, she buried him in her garden.

The horrible conditions in the prison led many of the men to attempt escape. Some simply ran for the woods while on firewood or water detail (duty). One resourceful crew pricked their skins with hot pins, pretending to have the highly feared and contagious disease smallpox, which caused them to be taken from the prison. Most, however, dug tunnels. Using spoons, sharp sticks, pocketknives, and their bare hands, the soldiers riddled the ground beneath the prison with shoulder-wide escape routes. The citizens of Salisbury were still uncovering these tunnels as late as the 1960s. Whether by tunnel or by sudden dash, a steady trickle of prisoners did manage to escape. Local citizens and guards recaptured most of them and returned them to the prison.

General George Stoneman, a Union cavalry officer, attempted to liberate the prisoners held in Salisbury on April 12, 1865. When his men finally rode into town, he found the prison empty. The prisoners had been shipped away for exchange before Stoneman’s raid. The general ordered the burning of the prison, along with every other Confederate government installation in Salisbury. The old cotton mill and the shaky walls that surrounded it darkened the sky with their smoke.

After the war, a United States investigator estimated that the dead buried in the Salisbury Confederate Prison trenches numbered more than 11,000. More in-depth research now seems to indicate that the mass graves hold closer to four or five thousand men. Even so, the National Cemetery in Salisbury, the site of the prison trenches, holds more unidentified Union soldiers than any other burial site in the nation.

**At the time of this article's publication, Kevin Cherry served as the consultant for special collections at the State Library of North Carolina. Before joining the library staff, he was local history librarian at Rowan Public Library in Salisbury.*