

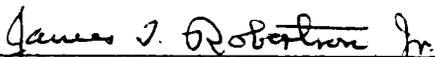
BELLE ISLE; PRISON IN THE JAMES, 1862-1865

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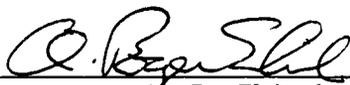
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Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
in
History

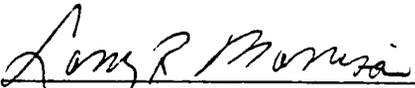
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August, 1980

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FOREWORD

The countless horrors of Southern Civil War prisons, particularly at Andersonville, have been told and retold. Numerous prisoner-of-war diaries, prisoner testimonies and Federal Government publications, speak of the system's dark and infamous history. Following the war, the Southern prisoner-of-war system received a disproportionate amount of Northern news coverage. Hundreds of prisoner accounts, as well as several Federal Government publications, flooded the market. According to these accounts, the blame for Southern atrocities was clear. Southern leaders had constructed a prison system to reduce systematically the number of men held in captivity. Starvation, exposure to the elements, and harsh and cruel punishment were all part of a deliberate Southern plot. Civil War historians of the past century have, of course, reexamined and reevaluated the Southern prisoner-of-war effort. This belief in the systematic and deliberate atrocities of the South has given way to more impartial and insightful explanation.

The Southern attempt to deal with its Northern prisoners was not marked by a systematic endeavor. On the contrary, a lack of any coherent systematic approach existed. Eight volumes of the War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies tell not of a deliberate destruction of men, but of the futile efforts on the part of Southern leaders to deal with a problem that continued to escalate as the war progressed. Lack of organization, planning and foresight were possibly the leading factors that led to such an

ill-fated prisoner system. For example, the Confederacy did not appoint a commissary-general of prisoners (John H. Winder) until November 21, 1864. In those last few months of the war, it was all but impossible to bring about an orderly prison system.¹

The Southern attempt to deal with prisoners was also marked from the outset by indecisive action. In a sense, Southern leaders desperately grasped for solutions that never came to be. As William B. Hesselstine, the most noted authority on Civil War prisons, has stated: "In the South . . . the prisons came into existence, without definite plans, to meet the exigencies of the moment."²

The Federal government was also caught unprepared. However, in October 1861, Lieutenant Colonel William Hoffman received appointment as commissary-general of prisoners. Hoffman served in this position until the end of the war. What success the North had in dealing with prisoners was due largely to the efforts of this officer and his staff. All correspondence in regard to prisoners passed through his office. Furthermore, he provided rules for the guidance of the various Northern compounds. An elaborate system of inspections, complete with detailed reports, was established. Unfortunately, not all Northern prison commandants adhered to his policies.³

¹United States War Dept. (comp.) War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. II, VIII, 346. Hereafter cited as O.R.; and unless otherwise stated, all references are to Ser. II.

²William Best Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons; a Study in War Psychology (New York, 1930), IX.

³O.R., III, 32, 48-49; Holland Thompson, "Prisoners of War," The Photographic History of the Civil War in Ten Volumes. (New York, 1911), VII, 38-40.

The Belle Isle prison cannot be viewed as a separate entity. Its use and history is intertwined with that of the Richmond prison system and, hence, with the Confederate prison system in general. Against the wishes of both the Confederate government and the citizens of Richmond, the city became the center for the confinement and transfer of Federal prisoners of war for the first three years of the war. Early in the conflict, Confederate authorities wisely envisioned Richmond as a receiving depot. As such, Richmond served two vital functions in the transfer of prisoners. From the very outset of the war, the Confederate authorities hoped for a rapid exchange of prisoners. Richmond, with its proximity to the enemy lines and its position on the James River, was a natural location for the confinement of prisoners. It was hoped that the transfer or exchange of men could be easily accomodated by Richmond's central location. Richmond was also used as a depot to dispatch prisoners to locations farther south, away from the fighting front. If a cartel of exchange could not be realized, Richmond could be used as a depot to dispatch captives of war farther South, away from the war zone.⁴

Throughout the war, Richmond served as such a depot. At times, Federal soldiers were sent from prisons all over the Confederacy to Richmond. There they were exchanged and passed over to Union authorities. At other times, all Federals captured were sent immediately to Richmond. From the city they were dispatched to other, more

⁴Richmond Enquirer, Nov. 19, 1861; Richmond Dispatch, Nov. 4, 1861, Dec. 6, 1861, Jan. 13, 1862.

southern prison sites. During a portion of the war, Richmond efficiently functioned as a depot. However, this depot system failed intermittently. Such failures generally occurred at times of a great increase in the number of prisoners because of a large battle. Similarly, the breakdown of the exchange system caused the depot system to fail. In both cases, inadequate preparations and the lack of skilled administrators plagued the Confederate cause.

The first major conflict of the war found the Confederate authorities completely unprepared for prisoners of war. Over 1,000 prisoners were captured at First Manassas. Approximately 2,700 prisoners arrived in Richmond during the first three months following the battle. The Confederacy lacked both the necessary prison sites and administrative personnel to deal with such a situation. These first prisoners were lodged in various converted tobacco warehouses and factories in the lower part of Richmond known as Rocketts. Although these prisons sufficed for the first few months, they soon became inadequate. New locations were selected to house the ever increasing number of prisoners. As soon as new prison sites were located and converted, they became for all practical purposes obsolete. Throughout the war, the South continuously employed such insufficient "stop-gap" measures.⁵

Belle Isle Prison was such a stop-gap measure. Only after all the other available Richmond sites had been taxed to their limits did Confederate authorities place prisoners on the island. Seen in

⁵Richmond Dispatch, Nov. 4, 1861; Richmond Enquirer, July 2, Sept. 24, Oct. 22 and 25, 1861; William H. Jeffrey, Richmond Prisons 1861-1862, (St. Johnsbury, Vt., 1893), 3, 9.

this light, Belle Isle served as a "fill-over" location. It was only used in times of extreme excess of captives. Owing to this position, Belle Isle went through three distinct periods of use and growth.

On July 10, 1862, Belle Isle Prison came into being. The Seven Days battles on the Peninsula, and General Thomas Jackson's Valley campaign, led to the over-taxation of Richmond prison sites. By July 19, 1862 over 5,000 Federals were on the island. For the most part, these prisoners were well cared for. They were lodged in large Sibley tents. On July 22, Confederate and Federal authorities signed a cartel of exchange. All prisoners of war were to be sent to Richmond for exchange. Belle Isle continued to house these prisoners until September 15, 1862, when only 700 prisoners remained in Richmond.⁶

Early May, 1863, marked the beginning of the second major period of Belle Isle Prison as thousands of prisoners arrived from the battle of Chancellorsville. By March, 1864, the prison was again vacant as most Richmond prisoners had been forwarded to other, more southern locations. It was during this period May, 1863-March, 1864, that conditions on Belle Isle deteriorated. As the numbers of prisoners arrived from major battles such as Chancellorsville, Gettysburg and Vicksburg, the conditions on Belle Isle worsened. Lack of shelter, supplies, rations, clothing, plus over-crowding, plagued the inmates.

⁶Richmond Enquirer, July 11, 1862; Richmond Examiner, July 16 and Sept. 24, 1862; Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 9, Sept. 15, 17 and 30, 1862; Roll Call Book, National Archives Record Group 249, Ser. 47, Misc. Book No. 122; O.R., IV, 226-68.

It was also during this period that Belle Isle achieved its infamous spot in history.⁷

By June 1864, Belle Isle Prison again was being used to confine prisoners. The Southern system became overtaxed, this time by the heavy volume of prisoners taken around Petersburg. Andersonville, Florence, Macon and other Southern prison sites were packed. This necessitated the use of the Richmond prisons once again. By the middle of September, over 7,500 prisoners had accumulated on the island. This situation was only alleviated when the prison authorities transferred their captured Federals to Salisbury, N. C. Most new prisoners were sent to this new location, yet the use of Belle Isle as a prison lingered until February, 1865. However, from September, 1864, to February, 1865, only a few prisoners were held on the island.⁸

In the last few months of the war, the Southern prisoner-of-war system was in shambles. Simply put, the system lacked all that was needed to guarantee success. In many respects, the failure of the Southern prison system paralleled the failure of the Confederacy as a whole. At the heart of this failure lay lack of organization, foresight and central authority. Other factors, such as the breakdown in the Southern transportation and supply systems as well as a faulty financial system, compounded the organizational blunders.

On the other side of the coin, the Federal attempts to relieve the suffering of their own soldiers held in confinement in the South were

⁷Richmond Daily Dispatch, May 13 and 18, June 27, 1863.

⁸O.R., VII, 870-72, 986; Richmond Enquirer, June 7, 1864; Richmond Daily Dispatch, June 4, 5 and 27, 1864; Feb. 17, 1865.

in many respects revolting and unexcusable. While Federal prisoners literally rotted in Southern prisons, Northern politicians and generals argued with their Southern counterparts over relatively meaningless issues. This is particularly true in regards to the efforts to exchange prisoners. Moreover, the Northern policy of "total war" or complete destruction of the South's ability to wage war, took a frightful toll on both the South and her prisoners. While General U. S. Grant was securing his grip on the Richmond-Petersburg area, and while General W. T. Sherman was burning his way through Georgia and the Carolinas, thousands of Northern soldiers lay dying in Southern prisons.

Overexposure to harsh climatic conditions, plus dietary deficiencies, were two of the major causes of a wide variety of disease and ailments that affected the prisoners at Belle Isle. Large Sibley tents were used to house the prisoners on the island. Plans to construct permanent barracks never came to be. Until late 1863, these Sibley tents proved adequate. However, as the numbers of prisoners continued to increase, and as the number of tents available to the Confederacy decreased, prisoners were forced to provide shelter for themselves. Lack of shelter forced prisoners to lie on barren sand without cover. Others dug trenches and covered themselves with brush and old rags. Owing to these poor housing conditions, prisoners suffered from a number of respiratory ailments; the most common was pneumonia.

Malnutrition and dietary deficiencies also plagued the prisoners at Belle Isle. During most of the war, the basic ingredient of each

meal was corn meal. In many cases this corn meal was unbolted, with the husk and cob often being ground in with the meal. Diarrhea and dysentery were the inevitable result of such a diet. Scarcity of fresh fruit, vegetables and meat, as well as a general lack of medicine and medical attention, further aggravated intestinal disorders.

These physical factors were detrimental to the prisoners' constitutions. However, the psychological stress of being a prisoner was possibly more damaging to the captive. In many respects, physical and psychological factors combined to devastate a prisoner's well-being. Isolation, inhumane treatment by prison guards and fellow inmates, and a general despair about the future, created extreme psychological stress. This stress, in combination with the physical factors of exposure and malnutrition, in many cases caused a fatal apathy toward or withdrawal from life. In turn, this apathy lessened the prisoners' resistance to other diseases. In many cases, prisoners became so apathetic that they ceased to eat, exercise or cleanse themselves. Many prisoners retreated further and further; and with all hope gone many lay down and died.⁹

⁹Eugene Kinikead, In Every War But One (New York, 1959), 114-20; Albert D. Diderman, March to Calumny: The Story of American P.O.W.s in the Korean War (New York, 1963), 21; Edgar H. Schein, "Reaction Patterns to Severe, Chronic Stress in American Army Prisoners of the War of the Chinese," Journal of Social Issues, XIII (1957), 23. Hereafter cited as Schein, "Reaction Patterns."

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
FOREWORD	ii
CHAPTERS	
I. Background of a Prison	1
II. Prison Mismanagement	14
III. Prison Conditions	33
IV. Prison Life	60
V. Medical Aspects	77
VI. Evacuation and Re-use	92
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY	104
VITA	113
ABSTRACT	

CHAPTER I
BACKGROUND OF A PRISON

One of the interesting and yet ironic aspects of the American Civil War is that the most picturesque and serene locations became the sites of such great destruction and violence. When one visits Manassas, Sharpsburg or Shiloh, his immediate impression is not one of death and destruction. On the contrary, one immediately notices the green rolling hills and the subdued, almost remorseful atmosphere. Only with a vivid imagination can one picture the clamor of two opposing forces. The massive slaughter of men and animals is no more than a subdued remembrance in comparison to the locations' natural beauty.

Belle Isle, an eighty-acre, dome-crested island located approximately a quarter of a mile up the James River from Richmond, is such a Civil War site. The origin of the island's name, "Belle," is the Latin-based word meaning beautiful. Indeed, throughout its long history the island has been known as a place of peace, recreation and beauty. In January, 1798, famous traveler, architect and scientist Benjamin Latrobe visited the island. With the hope of purchasing the island, Latrobe wrote of it as being a "beautiful, fertile and romantic spot . . . its scenery would not disgrace the magic rivers of Italy." He further stated that his moderate living expenses had been all but depleted by the costly city of Richmond. He therefore hoped to "become independent, and shutting myself up in my island to devote my hours

to literature, agriculture, and friendship, and the education of my children . . ."¹

Previous to this, in September, 1732, William Byrd II noted the natural tranquility of the island. Though in search of iron ore, he concluded that "this island would make an agreeable hermitage for any good christian who had a mind to retire from the world." He further added that there was great prospect for the island, for the murmur of the river tumbling over the rocks was "loud enough to drown the notes of a scolding wife."²

The old axiom that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder never had a more fitting example than Belle Isle. During the Civil War, the intrinsic beauty and tranquility of the island gave way to pitiful states of human distress. The thousands of wartime visitors compared Belle Isle not to the majestic scenery of Italy, but to the ill-fated settlement of Jamestown. Sergeant Morgan Dowling of the 17th Michigan pictured the island as a low, damp and sandy desert that was continuously swept with winds and wrapped in fog. His comrade, Andrew James, portrayed the island as a barren wasteland and a death trap for all of those who were unlucky enough to have ventured to the spot. Perhaps Alfred Seelye Roe of the 9th New York Heavy Artillery summed

¹Edward C. Carter II (ed.), The Virginia Journals of Benjamin Latrobe 1795-1798 (New Haven and London, 1977), 340-41. Hereafter cited as Labrobe, Virginia Journals.

²Louis B. Wright (ed.), William Byrd of Virginia: The Loudon Diary (1717-1721) and other Writings (New York, 1958), 622-23. Hereafter cited as Byrd, The Loudon Diary.

it up best. To him, the island was the "most infamous bit of land in the natural geography."³

Belle Isle during the Civil War was not the site of a tremendous struggle between two opposing armies. Instead, the island became the central location for the confinement and then transfer of Federal enlisted men captured by Confederate forces. Prior to mid-1864 and the use of Andersonville Prison, the Belle Isle prison camp was considered the most notorious of all Southern compounds. Its history as a prisoner-of-war camp stretched from early July, 1862, to February 10, 1865. No other Southern prison camp for enlisted men had a longer life. During its existence, over 20,000 Federals were confined intermittently at Belle Isle.⁴

The geographical features of Belle Isle are worth noting. The island is situated in the bend of the James River, just upstream from Virginia's capital. Today the Robert E. Lee Bridge passes directly over the island. Belle Isle is the largest, highest and most valuable of all the islands that mark the fall line of the James. At this point, the river is approximately a half-mile in width and quite deep on the northeastern end of the island. The river passing between Richmond and the island is nearly a third wider than it is between the island and the Chesterfield shore. On the southern, or Chesterfield County,

³Morgan E. Dowling, Southern Prisons; or Josie the Heroine of Florence: Four Years of Battles and Imprisonment (Detroit, 1870), 53; Richard F. Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners of the Civil War (Boston, 1934), 33; Alfred Seelye Roe, The Ninth New York Heavy Artillery (Worcester, Mass., 1899), 251.

⁴O.R., VIII, 346.

side of the island, the river is broken and diverged by numerous rocks and small islands. As one views it from some eminence, Belle Isle presents the appearance of a vast Indian mound. The high point of the island is 75-100 feet above the waterline.

In 1732, William Byrd II christened the island "Broad Rock." He derived this name from an immense flat rock on the northern shore. Before this rock was quarried in the late nineteenth century, it extended both in width and in length for over 100 feet without a fissure. A rich carpet of moss covered this huge rock of granite. Trees and plant life surrounded three sides of the rock. The western end of the island appears to have been originally attached to the Chesterfield shore. However, years of violent erosion tore large boulders from the cliff. These rocks now rest at the base of the western shore. As a result, the upper extremity of the island rises abruptly into a rocky bluff. During the Civil War, this bluff was crowned by strong fortifications which commanded both the prison and the river. Skirted around the eastern edge of the rock are approximately fifteen acres of gently sloping sand. It was at this spot, facing the Richmond shore, that the Belle Isle prison camp stood.⁵

In the 1860's the summit of Belle Isle offered a splendid panoramic view of Richmond and its surrounding countryside. By looking upstream,

⁵Byrd, The Loudon Diary, 91-92; The Richmond State, Feb. 15, 1877; Gilbert E. Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner of War (New York, 1865), 23-24; Lee Warren Goss, The Soldier's Story of his Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and Other Rebel Prisons (Boston, 1866), 32-33; Frederick F. Cavada, Libby Life: Experiences of a Prisoner of War in Richmond, Virginia, 1863-1864 (Philadelphia, 1865), 141.

one could follow the path of the river as it cut its way through low hills and cultivated land. On the left (southern) bank were Confederate earthworks. These commanded the approach to Richmond along the river. On the opposite bank the most prominent feature was Hollywood Cemetery. Below the cemetery and along the edge of the river were the water works that supplied the city. Looking downstream, one had a full view of Richmond. The Capitol was plainly visible, as were many government buildings, hospitals and prisons along the wharf area. The state penitentiary was due north on another bluff. Below it was the Tredegar Iron Works. On the south bank of the river lay the village of Manchester. Three long bridges spanned the river near the capital. The closest to Belle Isle was that of the Petersburg railroad.⁶

On the extreme right, or Manchester side, of the island, stood the buildings of the Old Dominion Iron and Nail Company. One reached the island from the Manchester side of the river by an old railroad bridge. This bridge was constructed for the purpose of carrying iron ore and finished products to and from the Old Dominion Iron and Nail location. On the left, or Richmond side, of the island, was the prison graveyard.⁷

Possibly no site in or near Richmond has had a more romantic background than Belle Isle. Its proximity to the city caused their histories to be intertwined. Belle Isle (also known as Belle Island

⁶Ibid., 142-43; George W. Darby, Incidents and Adventures in Rebel-dom: Libby, Belle Isle, Salisbury (Pittsburgh, 1899), 105.

⁷Cavade, Libby Life, 141-43; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 23-24.

and Broad Rock) had a number of distinguished colonial and revolutionary owners. The first three William Byrds, Bushrod Washington, Henry "Lighthouse Harry" Lee, and others at various times owned the island. More importantly, Belle Isle played a significant role in the economy of the area. The booming fishing industry of the falls during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was based at the island. In the early eighteenth century the island became the spot of an infant iron works. Known by different names, this facility enjoyed a tremendous growth. It also played a significant factor in the birth of other Richmond industries, including the famous Tredegar Iron Works. The island was also important as a place of recreation and vacation. Throughout most of its history, it served as a place to forget one's troubles and spend a nice relaxing day.

The granting and inheritance of the estate which included Belle Isle followed a winding path. William Byrd II, as a future owner of Belle Isle, wrote considerably on the initial founding of Richmond. In "Evidence Relating to the Land at the Falls" he stated that this land was first sold to John Smith of the Virginia Company by Powhatan. This Powhatan was not the leader of the great Indian confederation, but a local subordinate chieftan. From 1608 until the massacre of 1622, the area remained sparsely settled. From the massacre to 1634, the land lay deserted as potential settlers feared local Monocan Indians.⁸

⁸William Byrd II, "Evidence Relating to the Land at the Falls" Byrd Title Book, cited in Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, XXXV (1927), 226. Hereafter cited as Byrd, Byrd Title Book; Richmond News Leader, Mar. 22, 1945.

In 1634, George Menefry received a grant of land at the falls. Over the next twenty-five years this tract changed hands four times. Its successive owners included Mathew Gough, John White, Fleetwood Dormer and Robert Lesley. On October 28, 1659, Robert Lesley sold the property to Thomas Stegge of Charles City County. This tract of land, 1,800 acres in all, extended from the present site of Hull Street in South Richmond (Manchester) to Goode's Creek. Included in the tract were three small islands, the largest of which was known as "My Lord's Island."⁹

The owner of the falls property, Thomas Stegge, Sr., was both a merchant and a planter, and at various times he resided either in London or Virginia. As a Burgess of Charles City County, he wielded great power. In the 1642-1643 session of the House of Burgess, he was elected Speaker of the House. On June 23, 1650, he was appointed to the Virginia Council. Soon afterwards, Thomas Stegge, Sr. lost his life at sea. He left all of his Virginia property to his son, Colonel Thomas Stegge, the uncle of William Byrd I.

Colonel Thomas Stegge was a very prominent man in colonial Virginia. He was both a member of the Council and Auditor General. Acquiring more land, he greatly added to the Virginia estate of his father. Colonel Stegge, in turn, left the bulk of his property to his nephew, William Byrd I.¹⁰

⁹Byrd, Byrd Title Book, 226; Richmond News Leader, Mar. 22, 1945.

¹⁰Byrd, Byrd Title Book, 227-28; Richmond News Leader, Mar. 22, 1945.

In 1670, William Byrd I first arrived in Virginia with his uncle and soon settled on the estate at the falls. He gained both success and influence as a planter, merchant and Indian trader. In 1676 he was appointed Captain of the Henrico militia. Three years later, the Assembly granted him a huge tract of land. It extended from one and one-half miles below the falls on the south side of the river, to five miles above the falls. The width of the property varied from one to two miles. This land was granted to him on the condition that he keep fifty well-armed men in the vicinity. This plan was part of an overall defense system of forts, as sanctioned by the governor. Although this act was vetoed in England, it nevertheless established William Byrd's claim to the property. By a patent dated February 20, 1687, Byrd was officially granted 5,075 acres near the falls. Included in this was the old grant of 1,800 acres. Upon his death in 1704, Byrd owned as much as 26,000 acres. In accordance to his will all of his land, houses, and wares passed to his son, William Byrd II.¹¹

William Byrd II was a man of prestige and wealth. He was appointed Auditor-General and Receiver-General of the Colony and served for thirty-seven years as a member of the King's Council. His industrious nature led him to exploit the area which he inherited. In September 1732, seeking iron, he inspected "My Lord's Island" and renamed it "Broad Rock." His inspection was a disappointment, the soil being spongy and poor. In 1733 he laid out plans for the town of Richmond.

¹¹William Waller Hening, The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619 (New York, 1823), II, 453-54; Byrd, Byrd Title Book, 227, 232-36; Richmond News Leader, Mar. 22, 1945.

In April, 1737, the town was officially divided into thirty-seven squares. Each lot sold for seven pounds of Virginia currency. On May 15, 1742 the town of Richmond officially received its charter from the Virginia General Assembly.¹²

At the death of William Byrd II, his land holdings passed to his son William Byrd III. Included in these holdings was Broad Rock Island. In 1768 Byrd's financial situation was critical because of his extravagant life style and an addiction to gambling. He decided to sell most of his land near and in Richmond by lottery. One prize in the lottery was Broad Rock. James Overton was the winner of the island. It remained in his hands unimproved until 1796, when Bushrod Washington bought the island.¹³

In April, 1796, Benjamin Latrobe visited Richmond and wrote a considerable amount of material on the area. He provided an excellent description of both the natural beauty of the island as well as the economy the island provided for the city. The economy was based on the fisheries that existed upon the island and its surrounding rock. These fisheries, noted Latrobe, employed over 100 men. Shad, rockfish and striped bass started running in early March and continued until the middle of May. English perch, yellow-bellied perch, chubs, mullets, hornheads and carp were available year around.

The best fishing was located between Belle Isle and the Manchester side of the river. It was called Deep Skim after the manner in which

¹²Ibid.; James K. Sanford, Richmond: Her Triumphs, Tragedies and Growth (Richmond, 1975), 12-13.

¹³Ibid.; Richmond News Leader, Mar. 22, 1945.

the fish were caught in skim or spoon nets. With these long skim nets, a man could catch with each scoop as many as sixteen chad, each fourteen to eighteen inches in length. This booming fishing enterprise offered not only wealth to the proprietors of the shore line, but also offered employment that greatly stimulated the economy of the city.¹⁴

In 1799 Bushrod Washington sold Belle Isle to Henry "Lighthouse Harry" Lee, who soon conveyed it to John Harvie. On Harvie's death the property passed to his son, General Jacquelin B. Harvie. The new owner used the island for several purposes. He cultivated it as a farm and bred his best horses there. He even used the flatter or lower portion of the island as a race track. However, Harvie's main interest was in the making of iron. General Harvie soon sold part interest of the island to Dr. John Brockenbrough, the builder of the house that became the White House of the Confederacy. In 1815 General Harvie and Dr. Brockenbrough founded the Belle Isle Rolling and Slitting Mill and Nail Manufactory. They employed a young Scotsman by the name of Bell to erect the first iron works on the island. So popular did this young man become that the citizens of Richmond began calling the island Belle's Isle--a corruption of the name Bell.¹⁵

This first iron works was immediately successful. Much of the machinery for the first tobacco factories of Richmond was made at the Belle Isle works. By 1818, Harvie and Brockenbrough advertised nails

¹⁴Latrobe, The Virginia Journals, 91-95; Richmond State, Feb. 15, 1877.

¹⁵Ibid.; Richmond State, Feb. 15, 1877; Richmond News Leader, Mar. 22, 1945; Richmond Dispatch, Jan. 1, 1901; Sanford, Richmond, Her Triumphs, 50; Richmond Times Dispatch, June 9, 1968.

which they guaranteed to be better and as cheap as any Northern producer could sell. They also operated a general store which sold not only iron goods but also clothes, glasses and carpeting.

In the 1830's the Belle Isle iron works, situated on the same spot where William Byrd II had dug iron ore, greatly expanded. The General Assembly's act creating the James River and Kanowha Canal Company stimulated the Belle Isle iron works as well as other local manufacturers. Soon afterwards, Harvie and Brockenbrough incorporated the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company as the successor to the Belle Isle Rolling and Slitting Mill and Nail Manufactory. Reev Davis, the man who became instrumental in the building of the Tredegar Iron Works, was employed as construction engineer. Methods, new to Virginia as well as to America, were utilized at the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company. The process of puddling, heating and then rolling the iron was incorporated. Other iron companies in the area, including the Tredegar factory, soon adopted this same procedure.¹⁶

The establishment of the Belle Isle and Tredegar factories significantly affected the economy of Richmond. These iron works were instrumental in stimulating both subsidiary iron works and manufacturers, as well as the colliers of bituminous coal upon which these

¹⁶Richmond Courier and Daily Compiler, Nov. 10, 1836; Kathleen Bruce, "Slave Labor in the Virginia Iron Industry," William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine, VI (1926), 292; Richmond Compiler, Feb. 6, 1838; Sanford, Richmond, Her Triumphs, 50; Kathleen Bruce, Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era (New York and London, 1931), 151.

mills depended. A stable banking system also developed. This helped free the community from the worst of the Panic of 1837.¹⁷

The Belle Isle Manufacturing Company continued to operate throughout the late 1830's. In July, 1839, management of the company shifted to agents John R. Triplett and Son. Soon they were advertising that they could supply nails of all sizes and descriptions. Bar iron from one to five inches wide, boiler plates and band iron were also available. However, in 1843 the iron works began to flounder. The company continued to operate at a loss until it was sold at public auction on January 30, 1852, to William H. Macfarland and B. W. Haxall. By May, 1854, ownership of the company had passed to Hugh W. Fry.¹⁸

Fry conceived the idea of uniting the company by rail to the Richmond and Danville Railroad Company. A bridge, laid with tracks, was constructed and linked the island to the Manchester shore. This strategic move guaranteed the future success of the Belle Isle works. With the completion of the bridge a train could haul coal directly to the furnace doors of the company. In turn, the output of the company could be easily returned to Richmond. This new system of transportation replaced the slower and more expensive hauling of ore by barge. Within a few years, thanks to the new bridge, the annual production of the

¹⁷Ibid., 263.

¹⁸Richmond Courier and Daily Compiler, Nov. 10, 1836; Richmond Compiler, July 12, 1839; Richmond Times and Compiler, Aug. 12, 1845; Bruce, Virginia Iron Manufacture, 290-91; J. D. B. DeBow, DeBow's Review and Industrial Resources Statistics, XXVIII (1860), 190-91.

company tripled. During the Civil War, the prison officials would use this bridge for marching prisoners to and from the island.¹⁹

By 1856 the company (renamed Old Dominion Nail Works) included seven puddling and three heating furnaces, one train of rolls, forty-eight nail machines, and one water-driven hammer. Annual production of nails exceeded one thousand tons. The Old Dominion brand name gained a solid reputation for toughness in both North and South. In 1858, Fry incorporated the business, renaming it Old Dominion Iron and Nail Company.

By 1860, the profit of the company exceeded \$1,000 a day. Owning approximately one-quarter of the island, the company employed 175 workers. Many laborers elected to live on the island. These residents founded a peaceful village which included a church, school and store. A year later, the company mustered its strength to help supply the Confederacy with nails. The firm continued operating throughout the war. Although the company did no work directly for the Confederate government, it nevertheless proved indispensable to the blockaded South. Then, in July, 1862, the Confederacy began to use the island for another purpose: the confinement of prisoners of war.²⁰

¹⁹ Richmond Daily Dispatch, May 13, 1854; DeBow, DeBow's Review, XXVIII (1860), 191-92; Sanford, Richmond, Her Triumphs, 50; Bruce, Virginia Iron Manufacture, 292-93.

²⁰ Ibid.; Richmond Daily Dispatch, May 13, 1854; Mar. 2 and 3, 1858; DeBow, DeBow's Review, XXVIII (1860), 191-92; Peter J. Lesley, The Iron Manufacture's Guide to Furnaces, Forges, and Rolling Mills in the United States (New York, 1859), 244; James H. Baily, Henrico Home Front 1861-1864 (Richmond, 1963), 36.

CHAPTER II
PRISON MISMANAGEMENT

On October 25, 1861, in referring to prisoners of war in the capital, the Richmond Dispatch amusingly stated: "We are in a situation not unlike a man who got the elephant as a prize in a lottery--but didn't know what to do with it." Perhaps this statement best described the predicament that confronted Confederate authorities and Richmond citizens.

The battle of First Manassas had occurred three months earlier. Confederate forces had captured over 50 officers and 1,000 non-commissioned officers and privates. The citizens of Richmond were extremely proud of their prisoners. During the first few months following First Manassas, curiosity seekers gathered at the train depot and in front of the improvised prisons to view and make fun of their Federals. The prisoners were reminded that their "On to Richmond" drive had been accomplished. However, by late October, the Confederacy had captured and delivered to Richmond over 2,700 prisoners. Richmond papers, local citizens and government officials alike clamored for all prisoners to be sent farther south.¹

The Southern prisoner-of-war system in general, and the Richmond prison depot system in particular, developed in piecemeal fashion. Although Confederate authorities had anticipated the capture of enemy

¹Richmond Dispatch, Oct. 25 and Nov. 4, 1861; Justus Scheibert, Seven Months in the Rebel States During the North American War, 1863 (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1958), 101.

forces, they had failed to make adequate preparations for their arrival. In order to confine the ever-increasing number of captives, prison authorities improvised "stop-gap" measures. They continually selected new prison sites, only to find them inadequate to deal with the escalating number of prisoners. Belle Isle Prison was such a stop-gap measure. The island prison came into existence in July, 1862, to help relieve the over-congested prisons in Richmond. Owing to lack of foresight and planning, prisoners at Belle Isle and elsewhere in the Confederacy suffered dearly. Confederate prison officials employed this same improvised course of action throughout the Civil War. By the end of the conflict, the Confederate prison system was in shambles.

Contrary to popular belief, Confederate authorities had envisioned the capture and confinement of Federal prisoners. They had devised army and government regulations concerning prisoners and had selected various prison sites. However, these impromptu provisions were inadequate in dealing with the thousands of prisoners who would be confined in the South.

Confederate army regulations, which deviated little from Federal military rules, provided for the capture of enemy forces. Upon surrender, the capturing party was to disarm and send to the rear of the lines all prisoners of war. The prisoners' private property was to be respected and each prisoner was to be treated with the regard due his rank. For subsistence, one ration a day was to be provided without regard to rank. Wounded prisoners were to receive the same care as the wounded of the Confederate army. The distribution of other

rations, supplies and provisions were to depend upon the conventions with the enemy.²

On May 21, 1861, the Confederate Congress enacted a number of rules with respect to the treatment of prisoners of war. All prisoners taken (whether on land or at sea) were to be transferred to the custody of the Secretary of War. It was the duty of the Secretary, with the approval of the President, to issue instructions to the Quartermaster-General. This officer and his subordinates were to provide for the safe custody and sustenance of captured soldiers. Rations received by the prisoners were to be the same in quantity and quality as those furnished to the enlisted men of the Confederate army.³

Before the battle of First Manassas, Confederate officials also attempted to secure prison sites for the confinement of eventual captives. On June 8, 1861, Secretary of War Leroy P. Walker consulted with Governor Henry T. Clark of North Carolina. Walker hoped to establish a prison near Allemanee, N. C., as the more desirable site since railroad communications ran north, south and west from this location. Clark reported that he could purchase a commodious building for \$15,000 and that this structure could easily be secured to accommodate 1,500-2,000 prisoners. Walker approved the governor's

²O.R., III, 691.

³James M. Matthews (ed.), Confederate States of America Laws, Status, etc.: The Status at Large of the Provisional Government of the Confederate States of America (Richmond, 1864), 154; "The Treatment of Prisoners During the War Between the States." Southern Historical Society Papers I (1876), 142; cited hereafter as SHSP.

report and authorized the purchase and necessary repairs to the building.⁴

In Richmond, Confederate officials also made provisions for the temporary confinement of prisoners. They selected Harwoods Factory, a large, well-ventilated tobacco warehouse located in the lower section of Richmond known as Rocketts. Here they confined the few prisoners taken before the battle at Manassas. Other prisoners, mostly officers, roamed throughout Richmond at their own will as provided by their parole.⁵

Soon over 1,000 prisoners of war from the battle of First Manassas poured into Richmond. The Salisbury prison was not anywhere near completion, and Harwood's Factory proved totally inadequate. Confederate authorities had made no preparations for such a large number of prisoners. Captured Federals were therefore subjected to an improvised prisoner-of-war system. This system lacked a commanding staff and commissariat, as well as guards and clerks. General John H. Winder, Inspector-General of camps near Richmond, took charge of all prisoners as authorized by the Secretary of War.⁶

Winder confined the first prisoners in a makeshift prison formerly owned by Liggon and Sons. Like Harwood's Factory, this building was located in Rocketts and had previously been a tobacco warehouse. It

⁴O.R., III, 681-82, 693, 696.

⁵Richmond Enquirer, July 2, 1861; Richmond Dispatch, July 3, 1861.

⁶J. L. Burrows, "Recollection of Libby Prison," SHSP, XI (1883), 83-84; O.R., III, 683; John Beauchamp Jones, A Rebel War Clerk's Diary at the Confederate State Capital (New York, 1935), I, 59-60.

was a large, three-story building with barred lower windows and heavy plank floors. Each story, approximately 75 by 50 feet in area, served as a single room. The outside and the inside of the prison were entirely without ornament. This style of building exemplified the usual type of prison found in Richmond. At first, General Winder confined both officers and enlisted men together at Liggon's. Included with these prisoners was Alfred Ely, a member of Congress from Rochester, N. Y.⁷

On July 24, owing to the crowded conditions at Liggon's Warehouse, Confederate authorities transferred a portion of the prisoners to Atkinson's adjoining warehouse.⁸

The treatment of these first captives was far superior to the treatment received by prisoners at Belle Isle and other Confederate prisons in the latter part of the Civil War. Rations included boiled beef, dry bread, potatoes and coffee. To supplement these rations, the officers were able to send out for vegetables and other foodstuffs. For bedding, officers used straw while enlisted men slept on hard floors with blankets as their only cushion. All prisoners had smoking privileges and received rations and other provisions from families and friends in the North.

As a means of passing away the endless hours of captivity, Federal officers formed the Richmond Prison Association. This association set

⁷Jeffery, Richmond Prisons, 1861-1862, 7-10, 89; Michael Corcoran, The Captivity of General Corcoran (Philadelphia, 1862), 27.

⁸Jeffery, Richmond Prisons, 1861-1862, 12; Richmond Dispatch, Aug. 2, 1861; Richmond Enquirer, Sept. 20, 1861.

rules and provided entertainment for all of the prisoners. Its motto was "Bite and Be Damned." The members elected Congressman Ely as their first president. Reading material, cards and dice also helped shorten the dreary prison hours.⁹

Overcrowding created the greatest inconvenience for these first prisoners of war. On August 1, 1861, the acting surgeon-general of the Confederacy, Samuel P. Moore, inspected the two main prisons at Rocketts. He found both to be crammed with Federals. At Atkinson's prison, 52 officers were confined on the first floor. The third floor contained 261 non-commissioned officers and privates. Liggon's held 551 enlisted men. Surgeon Moore reported the policing of the two buildings to be very bad, especially at Liggon's. Because of the crowded state of the prisoners, he feared that a pestilence might appear. If an outbreak should occur, the surgeon-general stressed that the citizens of Richmond, as well as the prisoners, would be in danger. He therefore recommended that an additional building be selected to effect a more proper distribution of prisoners.¹⁰

In October, Winder sought to relieve the unhealthy conditions at Atkinson's and Liggon's by transferring a portion of the prisoners to Pemberton Warehouse, at Cary and 21st streets, and to Mayo's Factory, at Byrd and 15th streets. Also by this date, the general military hospital on the corner of 25th and Cary, and Ross Hospital,

⁹ Jeffery, Richmond Prisons, 1861-1862, 14, 18-19, 98, 100; SHSP, XI (1883), 101; William Harris, Prison Life in the Tobacco Warehouse at Richmond (Philadelphia, 1862), 31; O.R., III, 694, 725.

¹⁰ Ibid., 698; Richmond Enquirer, Aug. 16, 1861.

located in Rocketts, held several hundred convalescing prisoners. Castle Godwin (also known as McDaniel's Negro Jail) contained recaptured Federal prisoners, Southern deserters and common criminals.¹¹

By late 1861, a chain of command within the Richmond prison system had developed into a distinct bureau within the War Department. It was responsible for the organization and management of all prisoners of war in the Confederacy. Five permanent secretaries of war headed this department at various times during the Civil War. Leroy "Slow Coach" Walker served as the first Confederate war secretary. In September, 1861, Judah P. Benjamin succeeded Walker for seven strife-ridden months. General George W. Randolph followed Benjamin. On November 20, 1862, James A. Seddon began the single longest term of duty as Secretary of War. Major Gen. John C. Breckinridge replaced Seddon for the last months of the war.¹²

The immediate responsibility for the care and safe confinement of the Federal prisoners rested on the shoulders of Gen. John H. Winder. No other Civil War prison figure, with the possible exception of Capt. Henry Wirz, has more notoriety than Winder. Born in Maryland, he was the son of Gen. William H. Winder, whose militia forces failed to stop the British advance on Washington in 1814. John Winder graduated

¹¹O.R., III, 700-1; Jeffery, Richmond Prisons, 1861-1862, 112; Richmond Enquirer, Aug. 16, Sept. 20, Oct. 22 and 25, 1861; Richmond Dispatch, Aug. 2, 1861; Aug. 19, 1862.

¹²Charles C. Jones, Jr. "A Roster of General Officers, Heads of Departments, Senators, Representatives," SHSP, I (1876), I, A6; Asa B. Isham et al., Prisoners of War and Military Prisons (Cincinnati, 1890), 459-60.

from West Point in 1820 and reached the rank of major in the regular army in 1860.

On April 27, 1861, Winder resigned from the Federal army and accepted a brigadier's commission in the Confederate forces. He assumed the post of inspector-general of all military camps in and about Richmond. During the first few months of the war, this position included supervision of the Richmond prisons. Later, Winder was commander of the Department of Henrico, and also served as provost-marshal-general of Richmond. In 1864, he assumed command of all Confederate prisons and prisoners of war in Alabama and Georgia. Finally, on November 21, 1864, the Secretary of War appointed Winder commissary-general of all prisoners east of the Mississippi River. On February 7, 1865, Winder succumbed to a respiratory disease that he contracted while visiting the prison stockade at Florence, S. C.¹³

To most Confederate authorities and captured Federal officers alike, Winder was known as a responsible and caring prison officer. Secretary of War Seddon stated that Winder "always expressed sympathy and manifested a strong desire to provide for the wants and comforts of the prisoners under his charge." Samuel Cooper, adjutant and inspector-general of the Confederacy, had a similar opinion of Winder. Cooper described him as being "an honest, upright and humane gentleman [who] had the reputation in the Confederacy of treating the prisoners

¹³Col. Henry Lorno to Gen. Samuel Cooper, Feb. 8, 1865, John H. Winder Papers, Duke University; O.R., VII, 501-2, 1150, 1121; John L. Wakelyn, Biographical Dictionary of the Confederacy (Westport, Conn., 1977), 442-43.

confined to his general supervision with great kindness and consideration."¹⁴

However flattering these reports may have been, the enlisted prisoners and citizens of Richmond saw Gen. Winder in a completely different light. Prisoners at Belle Isle and the citizens of the capital alike tended to judge Winder not on his personality but on the merits of the various systems which he commanded. An Illinois private, Morgan Dowling, portrayed Winder as "corrupt, avaricious, and treacherous." Private Charles Fosdick of the 5th Iowa described Winder as being "abusive, tyrannical and cruel." Many Richmond citizens voiced similar opinions. They condemned Winder, along with his provost department detectives--known as "plug uglies"--for their "malfeasance, corruption, bribery, and incompetence." Some citizens even accused Winder of "collusion with the prison undertaker and of speculation in the burial of the dead."¹⁵

Assisting Winder, and in direct charge of the Richmond prisons, was Capt. George C. Gibbs. In November, 1861, Maj. J. T. Hairston replaced Gibbs and remained in command until March, 1862. Lieutenant David H. Todd, a half-brother of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, also saw a considerable amount of prison duty while under the command of Winder.¹⁶

¹⁴SHSP, I (1876), 206-7.

¹⁵Dowling, Southern Prisons, 81; Charles Fosdick, Five Hundred Days in Rebel Prisons (Bethany, Mo., 1887), 105; Jones, A Rebel War Clerk's Diary, I, 71, 91, 93; Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, 58.

¹⁶Jeffery, Richmond Prisons, 1861-1862, 14, 85-88, 90-91; Richmond Enquirer, Oct. 22, 1861; O.R., III, 703, 711.

As prisoners continued to arrive, and as the crowded conditions worsened, Richmond began to function as a depot for Federal prisoners. The Richmond depot system facilitated both the exchange of prisoners and their transfer to other Southern prisons. Prison authorities intended to confine their captives at the Richmond prisons and, after mid-summer 1862, to Belle Isle for brief periods only. If Confederate authorities could secure a general exchange, they intended to deliver all prisoners of war to the Federal government. If an exchange agreement could not be secured, Confederate officials planned to transfer all Federal prisoners to prison sites farther south. At first the use of Richmond as a depot was an unintentional move. Its sole purpose was to reduce the crowded prison conditions in the city. However, by November, 1861, Confederate officials as well as the citizens of the city fully understood the burden of confining and providing for a large number of prisoners. Beginning in November, newspapers referred to Richmond as a depot sanctioned by Gen. Winder. The Confederate officials continued to seek a general exchange of prisoners. Until this could be accommodated, prison authorities began shipping most of the prisoners to more southern locations.¹⁷

In the last week of July, the first shipment of prisoners left for Salisbury, N. C. On September 10, 1861, to relieve further the congested conditions at Richmond, Winder dispatched 156 prisoners to Castle Pinkney at Charleston Harbor. Two weeks later, Winder ordered

¹⁷Richmond Enquirer, Nov. 19 and 22, 1861; Richmond Dispatch, Nov. 4 and Dec. 6, 1861; Jan. 13, 1862.

250 additional prisoners sent from Richmond to the Paris prison in New Orleans. However, such stop-gap measures proved insufficient in handling the continuously escalating numbers of prisoners at Richmond.¹⁸

In September, Judah Benjamin replaced Leroy Walker as Secretary of War. Benjamin found the provisions for the confinement of prisoners highly inadequate. After consulting with the governors of Alabama, Georgia and the Carolinas, Benjamin decided to use an old abandoned paper mill at Tuscaloosa, Ala. Two months later, Confederate authorities also put into use the original prison site at Salisbury. It was hoped that the Salisbury prison could accommodate all the Federal prisoners. However, this too proved to be a false hope. At Salisbury the prisoners found many of the Richmond conditions merely repeated.¹⁹

In December, 1861, Confederate and Federal authorities agreed upon an informal or "special" exchange of prisoners. With this special exchange in operation, Confederate authorities began sending all prisoners held in the South to Richmond. Hence, Richmond again served to facilitate the exchange of prisoners to the North rather than their dispersal to other Southern prisons. From late February to late April, prisoners continuously arrived at Richmond from prison sites throughout the Confederacy. At Richmond, Confederate authorities

¹⁸Jeffery, Richmond Prisons, 1861-1862, 17-18, 20-21, 88; Richmond Enquirer, Sept. 24, Nov. 19 and 22, 1861; Richmond Dispatch, Nov. 4 and Dec. 6, 1861.

¹⁹O.R., III, 533-34, 730-33; Jeffery, Richmond Prisons, 1861-1862, 42-43, 89, 149; Richmond Enquirer, Nov. 22 and 26, 1861; Richmond Dispatch, Jan. 9, 13 and 30, 1862.

paroled the prisoners and delivered them to Federal officials at Newport News.²⁰

Early in March, 1862, authorities in Richmond shifted prisoners from the tobacco warehouses of Rocketts to a large four-story building owned by Libby and Sons. Officials took this step in order to secure more privacy for the prisoners and prison officials. Furthermore, only half the number of former guards was needed to guard prisoners at Libby. Lieutenant Thomas P. Turner assumed command of the prison. Richmond prison authorities also used Libby as headquarters for the Richmond prison depot system. All prisoners arriving in Richmond went directly to Libby, were searched and then went to other prisons in the city.²¹

Throughout April and May, more and more prisoners accumulated in Richmond. The special exchanges continued and, on May 12, prison authorities delivered approximately 900 prisoners to Newport News. However, by early June the special exchanges became less effective because of the increase in the number of prisoners. Without a general cartel of exchange, prison authorities could not deliver enough Federals across the enemy lines. In consequence of the high numbers of prisoners and the expectation of thousands more, the Secretary of War authorized the selection of new prison sites in Richmond.

²⁰O.R., III, 175; Richmond Enquirer, Jan. 3 and 17, 1862; Richmond Dispatch, Jan. 4 and 17, Feb. 24 and 27, Mar. 3 and 26, 1862.

²¹Richmond Daily Dispatch, Feb. 24, Mar. 7, 20 and 31, Apr. 10, 1862; Jeffery, Richmond Prisons, 1861-1862, 89.

General Winder selected two large tobacco warehouses, Crew's and Pemberton's.²²

During May 31-June 1, Confederate and Union forces battled at Seven Pines. This engagement, plus Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson's Valley Campaign, sent 1,800 Federal prisoners into Richmond. In order to make room for the constant arrival of Federals, prison authorities delivered 560 Union soldiers to Salisbury. Yet the increasing number of prisoners overtaxed the Salisbury prison as well as the various Richmond compounds. When Gen. Winder issued orders to stop further shipments of Jackson's prisoners, Lynchburg officials retained captured Federals in stables at the local fairgrounds.²³

During the last weeks of June, Confederate and Union forces fought a series of engagements known as the Seven Days' Battles. The close proximity of Richmond to the engagements greatly stressed the Richmond prison system. In order to accommodate all captured Federal soldiers, prison officials decided to remove most captured enlisted men to Belle Isle in the James River. It was thought that this location would be ideal for prisoners of war. The contiguity of the river rendered the policing of prison camp easy. Fewer men would be needed to guard a larger number of prisoners. The swiftness of the

²²Richmond Daily Dispatch, Apr. 21 and 26, May 2, 12, 13 and 14, June 2, 6 and 30, 1862.

²³Richmond Daily Dispatch, June 3 and 4, July 19, 1862; O.R., IV, 777, 779, 788-789; Richmond Examiner, June 16, 1862.

James between the island and Richmond, and the high bluff on the opposite side of the island, made escape practically impossible.²⁴

On July 10, 1862, prison authorities transferred the first group of prisoners--some 1,000 in number--to Belle Isle. By July 19, over 5,000 prisoners were confined on the island. During this first period of the prison's use, conditions were less than enjoyable. However, they were sufficient to insure the survival of the prisoners. It is difficult to determine the exact rations distributed to the Federals. By most reports, the prisoners ate just as well as Confederate soldiers. Daily rations basically consisted of 4-8 ounces of meat, a half-loaf of flour bread and bean soup. In these early days of the prison's use, inmates received salt, molasses and sugar. The prisoners could also purchase potatoes, onions and other vegetables from the prison sutler. At times there were shortages of meat, but authorities generally compensated with larger quantities of other foodstuffs.²⁵

Large Sibley tents housed the prisoners; no Federals went without shelter. Confederate authorities provided clothing, bedding and other provisions. Similarly, Federal authorities shipped additional supplies and rations to the prisoners. In order to provide fresh drinking water the prisoners dug wells at various locations throughout the camp. Most

²⁴ Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 1, 9, 17 and 19, 1862; Richmond Enquirer, July 11, 1862; Richmond Examiner, July 16, 1862; Andrew Roy, Recollections of a Prisoner of War (Columbus, O., 1909), 16; O.R., VI, 545.

²⁵ George W. Lambert to John Lambert, July 16, 1862, Museum of the Confederacy; Goss, The Soldier's Story, 36, 45; Richmond Examiner, July 16, 1862; J. J. Marks, The Peninsular Campaign in Virginia (Philadelphia, 1884), 396.

of the prisoners, determined to make the most of a bad situation, seemed delighted with their new, open-air compound. This was especially true with men who had been confined in one of the tobacco warehouses. Generally speaking, prisoners' physical condition and mental outlook remained excellent. Most of them expected to be exchanged shortly.²⁶

Captain Norris Montgomery was then in charge of the Belle Isle prison. He reported directly to Capt. Thomas P. Turner, commander of all prison sites in Richmond. Lieutenant Richard Turner (no relation to Capt. Turner) served as inspector of camps and prison sites in the capital. All Confederate officers were under the central command of Gen. Winder.²⁷

Less than two weeks after the first prisoners arrived at Belle Isle, Confederate and Federal authorities signed a cartel of exchange. By the terms of the cartel, all prisoners of war were to be discharged within ten days of their capture. If one side held a surplus of prisoners, they were not exchanged but released under parole not to take up arms again. Confederate authorities were responsible for transporting all prisoners of war to either Vicksburg, Miss., in the Western theater, or to City Point, Va., in the Eastern theater. To carry into effect the provisions of the cartel, both sides appointed

²⁶Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 17, 19 and 26, 1862; Goss, The Soldier's Story, 45; Roy, Recollections of a Prisoner of War, 16; O.R., IV, 868.

²⁷U. S. House of Representatives, Special Committee on the Treatment of Prisoners of War by the Rebel Authorities During the War of the Rebellion (Washington, 1869), 170; Richmond Examiner, Aug. 20, 1862; O.R., IV, 865, 928.

an agent of exchange. The Confederate agent was the Hon. Robert Ould; his Federal counterpart was Gen. Lorenzo Thomas.²⁸

The cartel of exchange remained in force for approximately a year. During this period, a regular trading of captured soldiers occurred. However, shortly after the signing of the cartel, obstacles arose that led to its breakdown. In December, 1862, President Davis ordered the discontinuation of exchange of captured Federal officers in retaliation for crimes committed by Gen. Benjamin Bulter in New Orleans. The refusal of the Confederate government to exchange Negro troops was also instrumental in the breakdown of the cartel. Furthermore, in July, 1863, General U. S. Grant charged Confederate authorities with violation of the cartel for returning paroled prisoners (captured at Vicksburg and Port Hudson) to active duty. Confederate officials countered this charge by stating that these paroles were irregular and invalid. In mid-summer, 1863, the exchange of prisoners collapsed because of these and other charges of bad faith and violation of the cartel.

Prison authorities for the next year permitted only special exchanges. However, the number of soldiers captured far offset the number of prisoners exchanged. Then, on April 17, 1864, Gen. Grant, with the backing of the Lincoln administration, ordered an end to all exchanges. Grant's position of non-exchange was part of his policy

²⁸Ibid., 265-68; U. S. War Department, Message of the President of the U. S. Communicating in Answer to a Resolution of the Senate of the 26th Ultimo, 38th Congress, 1st Session, Senate Executive Document No. 17, 64-66; Frank E. Moran, Bastiles of the Confederacy (Baltimore, 1890), 1-2.

of bringing total war to the beleaguered South. Not until January, 1865, did Grant consent to a new exchange. It was during this period (from the breakdown of the cartel in 1863 to January, 1865) that conditions in Southern prisons drastically deteriorated.²⁹

The instigation of the general cartel of exchange had brought relief to the overtaxed Confederate prisoner-of-war system. However, at Richmond this relief was not immediately noticeable. By terms of the cartel, Confederate authorities were to deliver all prisoners to either Vicksburg or City Point. This necessitated and gave official sanction to the use of Richmond as a depot for holding prisoners for exchange. Confederate officials concentrated prisoners in Richmond before transporting them to City Point. Non-commissioned officers and privates were placed on Belle Isle or in Pemberton and Crew's. Libby served as the central location for the confinement of Federal officers.³⁰

On the signing of the cartel of exchange, Richmond prison authorities immediately began shipping prisoners to City Point. Five to eight hundred Federals were sent daily to be exchanged. However, as soon as the authorities had delivered a group of prisoners to City Point, Federal soldiers from other Southern compounds took their place. By August 6, the prison authorities had delivered all the prisoners

²⁹O.R., IV, 673; V, 128, VII, 62-63; Frank Moore (ed.), The Rebellion Record (Doc.) VI, 291-93; Moran, Bastiles of the Confederacy, 2-3; James G. Randall and David H. Donald, The Civil War and Reconstruction (Lexington, Mass., 1969), 335-36.

³⁰O.R., IV, 433; Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 25, 1862; Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, 114-15.

held in Richmond at the date of the signing of the cartel. However, on August 11, over 2,500 prisoners arrived from Lynchburg and, on August 15, over 600 of the Salisbury prisoners arrived in Richmond. More prisoners were reported en route to the city. During the later months of 1862, Richmond continued to function efficiently as a depot. From the signing of the cartel until September, an average of 7,000 prisoners were confined in Richmond. Of these, approximately 5,000 were on Belle Isle.³¹

The battle of Second Manassas took place in late August. Over 2,000 prisoners arrived at Richmond from this contest. The number of prisoners on Belle Isle swelled to over 7,000 men. Captain Henry Wirz, temporarily in command of the Richmond prisons, directed Capt. Montgomery to extend the boundary of the Belle Isle compound. Wirz also ordered more tents sent to the island and increased the number of guards by 100 men. However, by September 18, prison authorities had exchanged nearly all of their inmates. On September 24, local papers announced the evacuation of all prisoners from Belle Isle. Confederate officials ordered the removal of the prisoner tents and the thorough cleaning of the camp. This ended the first period of use for Belle Isle Prison.³²

Throughout the later months of 1862 and early months of 1863, Confederate authorities continued to ship captured Federals to Richmond.

³¹Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 25, 26 and 30, Aug. 4, 6 and 14, 1862; Richmond Enquirer, Aug. 9 and 15, 1862; Roll Call Book, National Archives Record Group, 249, Ser. 47, Misc. Book No. 122.

³²Richmond Daily Dispatch, Sept. 1, 4, 8 and 15, 1862; O.R., IV, 868; V, 72; Richmond Examiner, Sept. 15, 18 and 24, Oct. 9, 1862.

They confined these prisoners at Libby and Pemberton. Belle Isle remained vacant. Although the Confederate armies took large numbers of prisoners at the battles of Sharpsburg, Fredericksburg and Murfreesboro, the Richmond depot system functioned smoothly. However, in early May, 1863, occurred the battle of Chancellorsville. Lee's army delivered over 6,000 prisoners to Richmond. This large number of captured Federals again necessitated the use of the Belle Isle. On May 13, Confederate officials reopened the prison gates on the island. This began the second period of use for the island prison--a period marked by sickness, starvation and death on a large scale.³³

³³Richmond Daily Dispatch, May 4, 5, 14, 18 and 23, 1863.

CHAPTER III
PRISON CONDITIONS

Belle Isle Prison's second period of use lasted from early May, 1863, to late March, 1864. Generally speaking, the conditions on the island prison worsened with each passing month and reached the lowest point during the winter. In this time-span, Confederate and Union forces fought several major engagements. The battles of Chancellorsville, Winchester and Gettysburg dominated the Eastern theater. In the West occurred Chickamauga and Chattanooga. Thousands of prisoners of war subsequently streamed into Richmond. As in the first two years of the Civil War, the prison arrangements at Richmond and elsewhere in the Confederacy proved inadequate to accommodate such large numbers of prisoners. Also during this period occurred the breakdown of the general exchange. Confederate authorities were left with thousands of prisoners and no viable means of providing for them. Prison authorities continued to do all possible for captured Federals, but their piecemeal approach proved as inadequate as it had during the first two years of the conflict.

The officer in charge of Belle Isle from May, 1863, to February, 1865, was Lt. Virginius Bossieux, a Frenchman by birth. He was of slight build and stood five feet, eight inches tall. Raised in Virginia, his dialect and mannerisms were closer to those of a Louisiana Creole. According to both officers and enlisted men, Lt. Bossieux did everything within his power to render the prison habitable. The Rev.

W. H. Bellows, president of the U. S. Sanitary Commission and a man known for few words of kindness for Confederate officials, stated in regard to Lt. Bossieux: "His humanity, his kindness of heart and untiring effort to secure the comfort and well-being of those placed in his keeping, entitled him to our highest respect and thanks."¹

The Belle Isle prison camp stood on the lower (eastern) end of the island. This section of the island was wet and sandy; it lacked foliage to provide needed shelter from the summer sun and freezing winter winds. The prison camp was in two sections which joined together to form a ninety-degree angle at the northeastern extremity of the island. The entire camp comprised an area of 4-5 acres, the larger section being approximately twice the area of the smaller. Surrounding each section were earthworks, with excavations on both sides. These ditches were approximately 8 feet wide and 3 feet deep. The inner ditch served as the "dead line." Guards had standing orders to shoot any prisoner who crossed over this line. The dirt from the ditches served as a crude earthworks or breastworks. The earthworks stood about five feet above the surface of the island. Guards patrolled at intervals of forty feet all along the outer ditch.²

The interior of the prison looked much like any army encampment. Sixty streets of tents branched out at right angles from a central

¹Louis Palma Di Cesnola, Ten Months in Libby Prison (n. p., 1866), 3; James M. Sanderson, My Record in Rebellion (New York, 1865), 144.

²Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons, 416-17; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 23-28; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 376.

avenue. Prison authorities numbered the streets and designed each to accommodate a squad of fifty prisoners. Located outside the camp, on a hill on the Richmond side of the island, were the officers' and guards' quarters, cookhouse and camp hospital. The bake house, completed in late December, 1863, was also at this location. The graveyard was located on a slight elevation, close to the edge of the water and just north of the camp hospital. An alleyway, approximately twenty feet wide and skirted on both sides with eight-foot board fencing, led from the rear gate of the camp to the Manchester (southeast) shore of the island. Located at the end of the alleyway were the sinks (latrines). Prison officials reserved about 150 feet of river front for this purpose. For washing, prisoners used about thirty feet of riverbed which joined the upper end of the sinks. In a ten-foot section above the washing area, prisoners obtained their drinking water. A heavy gate closed this alleyway at night thereby shutting off all access to the river.³

Belle Isle authorities used the extreme lower (northeast) end of the island as the site for counting prisoners. Here they assembled all prisoners as often as every other day. A roll-call sergeant counted the prisoners as they returned to the prison camp. When the officials first used this area as a corral, it contained tall grass, shrubs and

³U. S. Sanitary Commission, Narrative of Privations and Sufferings of United States Officers and Soldiers while Prisoners of War (Philadelphia, 1864), 45-46; John D. Billings, The History of the Tenth Massachusetts Battery of Light Artillery During the War of the Rebellion (Boston, 1909), 459-60; Richmond Examiner, Sept. 24, 1862; Cavoda, Libby Life, 26; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 378.

roots. However, after a few roll calls prisoners uprooted all vegetation, and the region became as barren as the rest of the prison camp.

To deliver prisoners from Richmond to the island, officials had first to march captives to the Manchester shore by way of Mayo's Bridge. After a short walk upstream, prisoners crossed over to the island by means of an extension line of the Richmond and Danville Railroad bed. Known by the prisoners as the "Bridge of Signs," this bridge served to facilitate the business of the Old Dominion Nail Works Company.⁴

Possibly the greatest hardship facing the prisoners on Belle Isle was exposure to climatic elements. This was essentially due to the general lack of tents and other types of shelter. In this respect, Belle Isle was the worst prison camp in all of the Confederacy. The prison stood in the northernmost--and hence coldest--latitude of all Southern prisons. Furthermore, since the prisoners occupied the lowlands of the island, they were susceptible to freezing winds that blew across the James during the winter months. In May and June, 1863, Confederate officials supplied prisoners on the island with Sibley tents. However, the increase in the number of prisoners soon exceeded the available supply of tents. In late October, Richmond papers announced that prison officials had decided to alleviate this lack of tenting by constructing permanent barracks on the island. According

⁴Darby, Incidents and Adventures, 107; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 377, 388-89; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 22, 28.

to newspapers, these barracks would be sufficient to accommodate about 20,000 prisoners. Unfortunately, these plans never materialized.⁵

During the late fall and winter months of 1863-1864, the prisoners' housing conditions on the island grew critical. Early in November, Federal Gen. Neal Dow, a prisoner of war confined at Libby, visited the island. He reported that nearly half the prisoners were without tents, slept without cover, and were exposed to the winter elements. Furthermore, Dow reported that prisoners were dying at a rate of 8-10 per day because of overexposure, overcrowding and lack of rations. He feared that by January 1, 1864, over 100 prisoners a day would die. Later in this same month, Confederate medical director William A. Carrington visited the prison camp. He found the camp as well managed as possible under the circumstances but extremely overcrowded. Over 6,300 Federals were confined to an area originally designed to accommodate 3,000 prisoners. Finding the inmates to be without sufficient quantities of blankets, tents or fuel supply, Carrington reported that many prisoners slept on the ground, exposing themselves to the vicissitudes of local climate. As with Gen. Dow, Dr. Carrington foresaw a high death rate unless prison officials corrected prevailing conditions on the island.⁶

To help alleviate this lack of shelter, prison authorities found and then issued a new allotment of tents. (However, at no time during the winter was there an adequate supply of shelter for all prisoners.)

⁵Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 23, 1863; Richmond Examiner, Oct. 27, 1863; Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, 126; Cesnola, Libby Prison, 4.

⁶O.R., VI, 482, 587-88, 1088.

Most of these tents were old, worn out and leaky. For flooring, prison authorities provided straw and boards. However, the insufficient supply of these materials compelled many prisoners to lie on damp sand. Oftentimes prisoners constructed furnaces with chimneys made of gravel and sand in order to economize on the heat and scanty supply of fuel. For heating purposes, officials allowed the prisoners to gather wood from the island. Generally, the guard sergeant selected five men from each 100 prisoners for wood-gathering purposes, yet the wood supply usually did not exceed one-eighth of a cord per 400 men. Throughout the winter, prisoners continued to construct furnaces inside their tents; but Belle Isle authorities soon ordered this practice discontinued after it tended to deteriorate further the already dilapidated tents.⁷

Prisoners improvised as best they could. All forms of tents and other shelters sprang up throughout the camp. Federal soldiers took their blankets, raised the center with two sticks, and fastened down the corners. This allowed enough room for one or two men to slide under horizontally. To economize on material, many prisoners dug underneath their tents, then packed the loose dirt against the tent to give added strength and protection against the weather. Accommodations inside these makeshift tents were of the rudest character, with

⁷Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 26; O.R., VI, 545; VII, 80; Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons, 417-18; Diary of Louis R. Fortescue (1864), University of North Carolina.

only a board, straw or a piece of blanket to raise a man off the damp ground.⁸

By mid-January, 1864, over 8,000 Federal prisoners were packed on Belle Isle. Many new arrivals lacked shelter of any kind. To keep from freezing, the prisoners would lie "spoon fashioned" with as many as fourteen men compressed together as tightly as possible. Some prisoners merely burrowed in the sand to escape the freezing winds. Others scooped out a shallow ditch long and wide enough to receive their bodies. As a cover, they would throw old rags and bushes on themselves. When it rained, these unlucky prisoners had to abandon their improvised refuge. During the coldest nights, men without shelter or protection would run through the camp in an effort to keep warm. Federal Lt. Gilbert Sabre noted: "At times the whole camp was crowded with men dashing about, jumping, stamping their feet and swinging their arms in an effort to remain warm."⁹

Throughout a large period of their captivity, many of the prisoners were without sufficient clothing, blankets and bedding. The laws of the Confederacy stipulated that prisoners of war be furnished with clothing, blankets and other necessary supplies. However, prison authorities failed to make provision for the issuing of these supplies. Federal captives depended on shipments from the North for their needed supplies. However, owing to false reports circulating in the North,

⁸Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 26; O.R., VI, 545; VII, 80.

⁹Roll Call Book, National Archives Record Group 249, Ser. 47, Misc. Book No. 126; Darby, Incidents and Adventures, 198-99; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 45-46.

plus the misrepresentation of facts among exchange agents, shipments of Northern supplies ceased.¹⁰

In November, 1861, Northern authorities had instigated the practice of sending clothing, rations and other supplies to Richmond and other Southern prison locations. In January, 1862, the Federal Military Committee of the House of Representatives had authorized the Secretary of War to furnish Federal prisoners in the South with supplies necessary to insure their health. Edwin M. Stanton, in one of his first acts as Secretary of War, had appointed Rev. Bishop Ames and Hamilton Fish as agents. As agents, they had assumed responsibility for distributing supplies to Federal prisoners held in the South. Furthermore, Secretary Stanton had ordered the Quartermaster-General and the Surgeon-General to establish a depot for the reception of supplies bound for the South. Northern officials continued to deliver supplies to the South until the signing of the cartel of exchange in July, 1862. With the rapid exchange of prisoners after this date, the shipment of supplies was discontinued.¹¹

In October, 1863, Northern authorities reestablished supply shipments to the South. Unable to provide sufficient supplies for Federal prisoners, Confederate authorities allowed captive Federal officers to

¹⁰Henry H. Ely, Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prison (Mendota, Ill., 1910), 204-5; Samuel S. Boggs, Eighteen Months a Prisoner Under the Rebel Flag (Lovington, Ill., 1887), 31-36; O.R., III, 704; VI, 1087-88.

¹¹O.R., III, 125, 129-30, 149, 221-24, 749; Moore, Rebellion Records, IV, 12; Robert Ould, "Captain Irving and the 'Steamer Convoy'--Supplies for Prisoners," SHSP, X (1882), 321-22.

distribute supplies to the prisoners at Richmond. Northern agents immediately forwarded 1,000 suits of clothing and 2,000 blankets. General Neal Dow of Maine, as ranking officer confined at Libby, took the lead in the distribution of Northern supplies. After rationing supplies to the prisoners of Belle Isle, Dow sent a full report to Northern officials on the prevailing conditions of the compound.

He declared that the prisoners were suffering beyond endurance. Over 5,400 prisoners were on the island, which Dow termed low and unhealthy. The prisoners lacked sufficient tenting, and over half of their number slept on the bare ground. All prisoners lacked at least one essential article of clothing--either trousers, shirts, coats or shoes. Dow charged Confederate authorities with issuing only half rations. To alleviate these conditions, Dow suggested that Northern authorities send him \$100,000 sealed in tin cans and packed with other cans containing jellies, solidified milk and molasses.¹²

Northern authorities rejected Gen. Dow's request; but on November 12, they did send additional supplies to Richmond. A board of prisoners, all of whom were Federal officers at Libby, received these supplies. Apparently, Gen. Dow had proved inefficient in distributing the goods and had not confined himself exclusively to the work that he had been paroled to do. Colonel A. Von Schrader, Inspector-General of the XIV Army Corps, Col. Louis Cesnola of the 4th New York Cavalry, Lt. Col. I. F. Boyd, Quartermaster, XX Army Corps and Lt. Col.

¹²O.R., VI, 328-29, 354, 384, 482-83; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 21, 1863; Richmond Enquirer, Nov. 3, 1863.

H. B. Hunter of the 123rd Ohio Infantry assumed charge of the distribution of supplies. Colonel J. M. Sanderson soon replaced Cesnola. These officers proved more efficient than Dow and went about their work in a systematic and organized manner. They reported that Confederate prison authorities had facilitated both the inspection of the prisoners and the distribution of clothing. On December 3, the board of officers announced that it was nearing completion of its work.¹³

The delivery of Northern supplies to Ft. Monroe, thence to Richmond, continued until two released Federal surgeons reported that half the supplies were going to the Army of Northern Virginia. Union authorities decided to withhold additional supplies until they could ascertain the validity of the surgeons' statement. Meanwhile, Northern papers circulated stories of Richmond prison guards dressed in new Federal uniforms. Prisoners in Richmond, almost to a man, believed that Confederate authorities were stealing their supplies. However, Federal officers in charge of distributing the supplies reported that Confederate authorities were delivering and signing for all supplies.¹⁴

Undoubtedly, members of the City Battalion and citizens of Richmond did steal a portion of the Federal supplies. Richmond papers announced that city detectives were doing everything possible to

¹³O.R., VII, 503, 523, 526, 657-58, 642-43; SHSP, X (1882), 321-22; Sanderson, My Record, 46, 48.

¹⁴O.R., VI, 70-71, 569, 642-43; SHSP, X (1882), 321-22; Boggs, Eighteen Months a Prisoner, 12-13; Dowling, Southern Prisons, 61-62.

alleviate further losses. The detectives arrested several soldiers and citizens found to be in possession of Federal supplies. However, in the North, stories continued to circulate that large quantities of supplies had been either stolen or never issued. Finally, on December 11, Ould informed Northern authorities that the matter of supplies had been the occasion of such misconstruction, misrepresentation and abuse that he would no longer receive Federal supplies. Ould stated that he would distribute the supplies already received but that "when that supply is exhausted they [the prisoners] will receive the same provisions as our soldiers in the field."¹⁵

From mid-December, 1863 until early February, 1864, Confederate officials refused to accept Federal supplies. On January 21, Ould wrote Northern authorities in an attempt to relieve the prevailing conditions at Richmond prisons. He proposed that Federal surgeons should visit Richmond and take charge of the prisoners' health and comfort. He further proposed that these surgeons should act as commissaries, with authority to receive and distribute Federal food, clothing and medicines. Ould received no reply. From early February to October, 1864, Confederate authorities allowed Federal prisoners to receive supplies on an individual basis only. This eight-month delay bore heavily upon the prisoners in the South.¹⁶

That captives at Belle Isle were destitute of clothing, blankets and other supplies can be partially attributed to a general lack of

¹⁵ Richmond Enquirer, Nov. 18, 1863; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Jan. 1, 1864; Richmond Examiner, Jan. 7, 1864; Cesnola, Libby Prison, 11; O.R., VI, 686.

¹⁶ SHSP, X (1882), 324-27; O.R., VII, 871-72.

rations and to the contraband trade between prisoners and guards. Lieutenant Bossieux had issued strict orders forbidding such trade. Yet these orders were blatantly ignored. Hungry prisoners traded their uniforms, blankets and other supplies to the guards for food, or for money with which to obtain food. As soon as Federal officers had completed the distribution of the supplies, prisoners and guards began their contraband trade. Many Federals traded entire uniforms for ragged and filthy Confederate suits and a few loaves of bread or a handful of Confederate dollars. It was not long before many Confederate guards were partly or wholly clothed in new blue uniforms. Federal officers in charge of distributing clothing remonstrated several times to Lt. Bossieux. Although the commander placed several of the prison guards in irons for possessing Federal clothing, the contraband trade persisted.¹⁷

As with shelter and supplies, rations furnished to the prisoners on Belle Isle decreased in quality and quantity with each passing month. Federal captives in Richmond, the prisoners on Belle Isle in particular, suffered from lack of food for a number of reasons. During the Civil War, the population of Richmond increased from 38,000 to over 100,000 people. Refugees, government and army officials, and members of their families swelled the population of the city. The C.S. Quartermaster Department, which by law was responsible for the sustenance of prisoners of war, had to compete for available food. Often this competition took place on the open market, where prices were exorbitantly high.

¹⁷O.R., VII, 81; Cesnola, Libby Prison, 5; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 383; Goss, Soldier's Story, 46.

In addition, and until October, 1863, the Quartermaster competed with the Commissary Department. This conflict of interest was especially severe during times when the Army of Northern Virginia was engaged in battle.

Shortages of food also occurred because of Richmond's close proximity to the Union Lines. The city was susceptible to raids by Union cavalry. Oftentimes these raids disrupted railroad communications, destroyed tracks and depots, and either wrecked or captured trains loaded with supplies destined for the inhabitants and prisoners of Richmond.¹⁸

When Belle Isle Prison reopened in 1863, rations were issued twice daily and consisted of one-half loaf of good flour bread, one-quarter to one-half pound of salted beef or pork and one-half pint of rice or bean soup (called cow pea soup). The prisoners also purchased other foodstuffs from the camp sutler, (but at enormous profits to the entrepreneur). Prison officials periodically issued sweet potatoes, molasses and vinegar.¹⁹

In August, 1863, Col. Lucius B. Northrop, the Commissary-General, urged the diminution of rations for all Federal prisoners of war. He justified his action by citing the unfair treatment that Union authorities were giving Confederate prisoners. He also cited the destruction of Southern crops and agricultural implements by the invading enemy. In

¹⁸O.R., IV, 44; Matthews, Status at Large, 154; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 377.

¹⁹U.S. Congress, Treatment of Prisoners, 85-86; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 27-28.

retaliation, Northrop urged that prison officials no longer issue meat to the prisoners, and that oat and corn meal gruel, pea soup, hominy and bread be substituted. Fortunately, Secretary of War Seddon vetoed such action, for Confederate law permitted prisoners of war to receive the same rations, in quantity and quality, as Confederate soldiers.²⁰

Throughout the autumn and winter, prison officials were desperately short of meat rations. On October 28, 1863, Gen. Winder informed Seddon that the quartermaster had not issued meat to the prisoners that day, and that this marked the fourth occasion he had failed to do so. Winder further stated that unless authorities could make available a constant supply of meat, no force under his command could control the estimated 13,000 prisoners then in Richmond. A prompt issuance of meat, even if the rations should be minimal, would insure discipline and prevent violence.

Secretary Seddon attempted to alleviate the meat shortage by directing that henceforth only the Commissary-General would furnish all rations to the prisoners of war. He discharged the Quartermaster-General of all obligations concerning prisoners. Seddon further ordered that as long as the Commissary Department could maintain a steady supply of meat, prisoners should be provided as were Confederate soldiers. If owing to scanty supplies made it necessary to differentiate between rations furnished to the soldiers in the field and food doled out to soldiers at posts, the prisoners were to receive the same rations as

²⁰Jones, Rebel Clerk's Diary, II, 11; Matthews, Status at Large, 154.

the latter. If it should become impossible to furnish even reduced rations of meat to both soldiers and prisoners, soldiers should have preference.²¹

Captain Jackson Warner, an assistant quartermaster, had been directly responsible for providing rations to prisoners. Under these new orders, Secretary Seddon ordered Capt. F. T. Forbes of the Commissary Department to take responsibility for the sustenance of all prisoners of war in Richmond. Captain Warner continued his duties, but filed all ration requests through Capt. Forbes. According to the understanding between the two men, the rations of meat should be of fresh beef whenever possible. When fresh beef was not available, the Commissary Department should supply bacon, bulk pork or salt beef as a substitute.²²

Less than two weeks after Seddon placed the Commissary-General in charge of prisoners' rations, Capt. Turner informed Gen. Winder that not an ounce of meat was available for the prisoners. Furthermore, Turner stated that the Commissary Department would be able to furnish only 2,500 pounds of beef for the estimated 13,000 prisoners in Richmond. This, he believed, placed Richmond citizens in a critical situation for Turner believed that it would be impossible to contain the prisoners if they should riot. Prison officials were able to

²¹O.R., VI, 339-40, 821, 950-51, 1020; Jones, Rebel War Clerk's Diary, II, 84.

²²O.R., VI, 951.

overcome the shortage of meat only after Federal authorities heard of the dire situation and began to send needed rations.²³

On November 12, Federal authorities sent 24,000 rations to Richmond. Confederate authorities appointed Capt. James M. Sanderson, a prisoner at Libby, to deliver the rations to the inmates at Belle Isle. In addition, Gen. Sullivan Meredith, the new Federal agent of exchange, stated in a letter to Ould that Northern prison officials were supplying all the needed shelter, rations, supplies and medical care for Southern prisoners. Meredith asked Ould to submit a similar report of prevailing conditions at the Richmond prisons.²⁴

On receiving Meredith's request, Ould ordered Maj. Isaac H. Carrington to conduct a thorough investigation of all Richmond military prisons. Carrington found that of 11,650 prisoners of war in Richmond, 6,300 were on Belle Isle. Over 1,000 Federal officers were at Libby, while the remainder of the prisoners were scattered at various other locations. Between July 1 and September 30, Carrington learned, the prison quartermaster had issued over 450,000 rations to the prisoners on Belle Isle. These issues consisted of beef, bacon, flour, beans, rice, vinegar and salt. Furthermore, Maj. Carrington reported that the rations after September 30 were of the same quantity and quality as those rations issued during the three preceding months. He found the bakeries in Richmond and the cook house on Belle Isle to be well-managed. Each day prisoners had soup, made from the water in

²³Ibid., VI, 497-99; Jones, Rebel War Clerk's Diary, II, 94; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 29.

²⁴O.R., VI, 503.

which the meat was boiled, with the addition of rice and beans. On November 18 (the date of Carrington's report), the rations consisted of a pound of bread, one-half pound of meat and potatoes, soup, salt and vinegar.²⁵

However, other reports on the amount of rations issued to the prisoners on Belle Isle tended to contradict Carrington's statements. A group of surgeons, released from confinement by special exchange, presented a far different view on conditions at Belle Isle. They stated that prison authorities had issued three-fourths pound of wheat bread, one-quarter pound of fresh beef and two ounces of beans. Subsequently, the same quantity of cornbread, made of unbolted meal, replaced the wheat bread. Prison authorities, they reported, issued two or three small potatoes when the supply of fresh beef was deficient. Prisoner reports emanating from this same period substantiated the surgeons' report.²⁶

"Something to eat" was the most mentioned and all-absorbing topic among prisoners at Belle Isle. Throughout the long dreary days, groups of Federals gathered together to exchange stories of delicious feasts they had once enjoyed. Private Charles Fosdick of the 5th Iowa recalled: "We would talk of good things to eat all day and be visited by tantalizing dreams of the same at night. I never slept, day or night, for the first four months of my imprisonment without dreams of

²⁵O.R., VI, 544-48.

²⁶O.R., VI, 572-74; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 27; U. S. Congress, Treatment of Prisoners, 856.

home and friends and something to eat only to wake and find myself in almost a starving condition."²⁷

For the prisoners on the island, the beating of a drum announced that prison authorities were issuing rations. Hungry prisoners always greeted this sound with wild enthusiasm and demonstrations of joy. They would cheer, yell and clap their hands as they ran toward the cook house. The authorities issued rations twice a day, at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. In order to facilitate the issuing of rations, prison officials divided the men into squads of 100, with a sergeant in charge of each. In turn, the sergeant subdivided his squad into five "messes" of twenty men each. A non-commissioned officer was in charge of each mess.²⁸

A sergeant of the guard was directly responsible for the issuing of the prisoners' rations. He detailed 10-12 prisoners daily to work in the cook house. Even though the preparation of the rations took all day, prisoners delighted in the assignment. For them, it meant a day outside the encampment, plus an extra allowance of rations. More than once, fights broke out as the prisoners competed for favors with the sergeant of the guard.

Upon the beating of the drum, the detailed prisoners would weigh out and then place on a blanket the necessary rations for each squad of 100 men. The squad sergeant and his helpers would then carry the

²⁷Fosdick, Five Hundred Days, 14; James J. Heslin (ed.), "The Diary of a Union Soldier in Confederate Prisons," The New York Historical Society Quarterly, XLI (1957), 44.

²⁸Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 380-81; O.R., VI, 545; Fosdick, Five Hundred Days, 53.

blanket into the encampment. Once inside, mess sergeants divided the rations into five equal shares. The half-famished prisoners always watched this process with the greatest interest and stood ready to fight be there the least sign of uneven division or "shananigans." The sergeant then issued the rations to each member of his mess, and for his services he received an extra ration.²⁹

In late December, 1863, prison authorities completed a bake house on Belle Isle. Thenceforth, all cooked rations emanated from the island. Most prisoners never adjusted to the texture of unbolted cornmeal in their bread. The detailed prisoners filled pans' 12 by 8 by 2 inches with batter made from unsifted and unseasoned cornmeal. After baking, the prisoners called these loaves of bread either cards, sections, or corn dogs. Prisoner Edward George stated that the sections were usually the consistency of mush, but that on several occasions they were baked hard enough to "knock a man's brain out with." Nevertheless, George added, he "soaked and then ate it."³⁰

The increasing number of new prisoners on Belle Isle rendered the bake house inadequate as soon as it was completed. Instead of enlarging the bakery, prison officials decided to issue raw rations to some of the prisoners. This proved to be a great disadvantage, for most prisoners were without cooking utensils. Raw rations usually consisted of green peas and cornmeal and occasionally a bit of bacon or salt

²⁹Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 380; Richard F. Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners of the Civil War (Boston, 1934), 53.

³⁰Fosdick, Five Hundred Days, 13-15; Heslin, "Diary of a Union Soldier," 247; Solon Hyde, A Captive of War (New York, 1900), 62.

beef. With the scanty supply of wood, the prisoners in most cases ate these rations half cooked. This produced fearful stomach cramps and overtaxed the prisoners' digestive systems. Furthermore, the unbolted cornmeal caused dysentery and diarrhea, the two major illnesses on the island.³¹

Prisoners at Belle Isle supplemented their rations in a number of ways. Some were fortunate enough to possess a small amount of money. However, most prisoners were destitute. Prison authorities searched Federals at Libby Prison before they transferred them to various Richmond prisons. In general, the prisoners could retain small amounts of money. Yet Confederate authorities confiscated large sums lest prisoners use the funds to bribe guards. The authorities held all confiscated money and rationed it out monthly to its owners. The prisoner collected the remainder of his funds upon exchange. Richmond prison officials also permitted prisoners to carry small amounts of gold, but the Confederacy did not recognize Federal currency as legal tender. However, prisoners could convert both gold and Federal currency into Confederate notes. Secretary Seddon directed Gen. Winder to handle all such transactions.³²

The fortunate prisoners who possessed sufficient funds could purchase a number of food commodities from prison guards or a camp

³¹U. S. Sanitary Commission, Narrative of Privations, 13-15; Heslin, "Diary of a Union Soldier," 243, 249.

³²Goss, Soldier's Story, 29; Darby, Incidents and Adventures, 104-5; Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons, 411-12; O.R., VI, 292.

sutler. However, both guards and sutlers sold their items at enormous profits. In December, the asking price of wheat bread was a dollar for a six-ounce loaf, forty-five dollars for a bushel of onions, sixty dollars for a bushel of potatoes, eight dollars for a pound of sugar and fourteen dollars for a pound of butter. Other foodstuffs such as eggs, crackers, molasses and salted meat sold for similarly high prices.³³

For those prisoners without money, supplementary food items were difficult to obtain. A number of horror stories emerged. Many prisoners dug in the ground for roots or ate the bark from scanty wood supplies. One prisoner doubtless exaggerated when he reported remaining healthy during his confinement at Belle Isle by eating small amounts of dirt with his daily catch of insects. Mice were considered a delicacy, and prisoners spent much time capturing them. Some inmates made a "fine mice soup" out of these captured rodents. Other prisoners made a savory soup dish by crushing old bones and boiling them in water. A few prisoners allegedly discovered a barrel into which the guards had thrown their offal. After obtaining permission to talk to the commandant, they supposedly dipped their hats into the filthy mass of meat, rinds and bones and returned to their quarters to enjoy the feast. One day a cow, carrying an unborn calf, died outside the encampment. The guards permitted the prisoners to retrieve the carcass which they

³³Dowling, Southern Prisons, 58; U. S. Congress, Treatment of Prisoners, 856; Michael Dougherty, Prison Diary of Michael Dougherty (Bristol, Pa., 1908), 23.

reportedly ate "with as good as relish as if it had been a prize beef."³⁴

Many prisoners repeated a humorous story concerning the capture of a pet poodle belonging to the prison's commandant, Lt. Bossieux. One day the poodle accompanied his owner to the island. By a little engineering, the prisoners captured the poodle and had skinned and cleaned the animal before being discovered. On learning who the guilty men were, Lt. Bossieux compelled them to eat the raw dog meat for the next two days, "a punishment which would [have been] gladly shared by every man on the island."³⁵

During December, 1863, and the early months of 1864, the allotted rations diminished. This shortage of food resulted from the cutoff of Federal supplies and the general shortage of food in Richmond. On Christmas Day, prison officials had no rations to distribute to the prisoners in Richmond. During January another meat shortage occurred. On January 14 and 15 the Commissary-Sergeant delivered to Capt. Warner only 3,000 pounds of salt beef for an estimated 14,000 Richmond prisoners. January 16, 17 and 18 saw neither beef nor its usual substitute furnished to the prisoners. On January 21, the Quartermaster-General, relying no longer on Commissary-General Northrop, ordered Capt. Warner to purchase meat at the city markets for the prisoners.

³⁴ Ibid.; John L. Ransom, Andersonville Diary (Auburn, N. Y., 1881), 25; Heslin, "Diary of a Union Soldier," 247; Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons, 432.

³⁵ Henry M. Davidson, Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons (Milwaukee, 1865), 129-30; Ely, Observations of an Illinois Boy, 205; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 396.

However, Secretary Seddon ordered Capt. Warner to stop all purchases, as Southern soldiers stationed in Richmond were also without meat.

Confederate authorities were fearful that the starving prisoners might plan a massive escape. If an outbreak did occur, they feared that many impoverished residents in the city would join the prisoners. They also believed that the City Battalion could not be depended upon to squelch such an uprising. Meanwhile, the Commissary Department reported over a million pounds of bacon and pork in Chowan and two other nearby North Carolina counties. However, owing to inadequate transportation facilities and the fear of enemy raids, the Commissary Department could not deliver this meat to Richmond. Early in March, 1864, prison officials reported that rations on Belle Isle consisted entirely of corn bread, rice and peas or beans.³⁶

Belle Isle prisoners had three different ways of obtaining their daily water supply. Prison officials set aside approximately ten feet at the upper end of the sinks for this purpose. However, the close proximity of the sinks to the shore front reserved for drinking purposes oftentimes made the water from the latter unfit for use. The prisoners could also obtain drinking water from any of the wells that they had sunk inside the prison. These wells furnished pure water to a depth of three feet. Old barrels served as inner linings and the prisoners cut steps in the side of the wells. On these steps they descended to dip up water in cups and half canteens. For awhile, these wells

³⁶SHSP, X (1882), 323-24; O.R., VI, 851-52; Jones, Rebel War Clerk's Diary, 131-32, 134-36; James Madison Page, The True Story of Andersonville (New York, 1908), 151-52.

adequately served the prisoners. However, as more and more prisoners arrived, and since the guards closed the gates leading to the sinks at night, sick men soon impregnated the sand with excrement and urine. This human waste found its way into the camp wells and undoubtedly introduced and intensified the diseases to which the prisoners were exposed.³⁷

In late November, 1863, Lt. Bossieux ordered the construction of a small semicircular canal in order to provide a purer source of drinking water. Emanating on the Richmond side of the island, the canal passed through the camp and emptied on the side of the island facing Manchester. Lieutenant Bossieux ordered the prisoners to use the canal water for drinking purposes only. However, the prisoners violated these orders, often rendering the water unfit for human consumption.

Belle Isle officials allowed the prisoners to bathe under guard along the designated riverfront. Groups of 50-75 prisoners passed through the alleyway which led to the river. There they washed themselves and their clothing. However, no regular order prevailed and the strongest at the gate always had first access to the washing area. Hence, many sick and weak men went for long periods without bathing.³⁸

The sanitary conditions on Belle Isle were also less than desirable. This can be attributed to the overcrowding of the prison and to a lack

³⁷Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons, 418; U. S. Congress, Treatment of Prisoners, 1023; Goss, Soldier's Story, 45.

³⁸Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons, 418, 432; U. S. Congress, Treatment of Prisoners, 210, 1023.

of personal hygiene by inmates. During the second period of its use, Belle Isle Prison was extremely overcrowded. At times, over 9,000 captives were in a compound designed to accommodate 3,000 men. This crowded condition overtaxed all prison facilities and confined Federals to such a small area that diseases spread easily. Aggravating this condition were the prisoners themselves, many of whom gave no thought to cleanliness. Oftentimes fellow prisoners had literally to drag filthy men to the water front and administer a proper cleaning.

Lice were in all quarters, and dirt and vermin encrusted the bodies of the filthy captives. When it rained, as it did often during the fall and winter of 1863-1864, the sanitary conditions worsened significantly. Sergeant T. P. Meyer of the 148th Pennsylvania dramatically stated: "Hundreds of other emaciated, cadaverous-looking men and boys splashed hither and thither through the mud covered with mud and dirt, filth and lice, while here and there in filth and rags, lone soldiers were standing like statues, in a state of dementia."³⁹

The lack of proper sanitation on Belle Isle also affected the inhabitants of Richmond. When the wind blew from the west, citizens of the city complained that they could smell the horrible stench of the prison camp. Early in September, 1863, the Richmond Examiner suggested to the commander of Belle Isle that conditions be improved because Richmond residents were suffering badly. Furthermore, the editor suggested that prison officials select a more secluded portion

³⁹ Dougherty, Diary of Michael Dougherty, 24; Darby, Incidents and Adventures, 62; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 374.

of the island than that facing the Petersburg railroad bridge for the prisoners to perform their "obligations and other necessary operations. Passengers on the cars are daily insulted by exhibitions that would disgrace Hottentots."⁴⁰

On March 6, 1864, Surgeon William Semple inspected Belle Isle Prison Camp. His report was disheartening and revealed how conditions on the island had deteriorated. Semple discovered that prison authorities had crowded between 6,000 to 10,000 prisoners in an area sufficient to accommodate no more than 3,000 men. To prevent escapes, officials refused to allow prisoners to visit the sinks at night. Hence, deposits of excrement appeared between the streets and small vacant spaces between the tents. Prisoners reported that they could not walk five yards without meeting a fellow prisoner "answering the call of nature." Semple further described the streets as being so greatly crowded during the day as to interfere with working police parties. These parties consumed nearly their whole day in the imperfect removal of the filthy accumulations of the previous night. The whole surface of the camp became saturated with putrid matter.

Inspector Semple further reported that many of the prisoners were poorly clad, destitute of blankets and totally careless of personal cleanliness. Rations were inadequate. The bread was made of unbolted and unsifted cornmeal which caused fifty percent of the prisoners to suffer from diarrhea and dysentery. Because of the filthy condition

⁴⁰Richmond Daily Dispatch, Nov. 18 and Dec. 6, 1863; Richmond Examiner, Sept. 4, 1863.

of the camp, the absence of personal cleanliness of the prisoners, the meager rations, the effects of the cold, and the depressing effects of long confinement, Semple found over a fourth of the prisoners to be in dire need of medical care.⁴¹

In March the prison officials were able to relieve these prevailing conditions on the island by sending a large number of prisoners to Camp Sumter Prison at Andersonville, Ga. Yet at Andersonville, the prisoners found the frightful conditions of Belle Isle repeated and in most respects far more severe.

⁴¹O.R., VI, 1087-88.

CHAPTER IV
PRISON LIFE

Writing in late 1863, Pvt. Charles C. Nott facetiously commented that he enjoyed his prison captivity. "Doesn't matter how you dress, . . . what you eat or drink. You have but few cares and responsibilities. No nagging wife problems or children to feed. No engagements, worries by clients or customers . . . You have no fear of failure and may laugh at bankruptcy. And yet with all the advantages, no man ever seeks to stay in this unreasonable paradise."

Turning to the serious side of his confinement, Nott stated that there was a terrible sense of being a prisoner of war and having someone else possess and control you. There was a dependency, he declared, on those who were the very last persons on whom you are willing to be dependent. "There was a dreary sense of constraint in your freest hours of being shut from all the world and having all the world shut from you."¹

The deprivation of freedom fell heavily upon men who were accustomed to life with but few restrictions. Prisoners' minds were always in a constant state of anxiety and torment. According to New York's William Glazier, scarcely an hour passed in which anxiety about distant friends, suspense regarding the future, and a general despair and hopelessness regarding life, love, affection, kindness and

¹Charles C. Nott, Sketches in Prison Camps (New York, 1865), 94.

friendship were first deadened and then rooted from the heart, leaving the prisoner in a most woeful condition.²

To help overcome these feelings of helplessness, depression and anxiety, many prisoners engaged in one or more prison activities. Inmates at Belle Isle Prison represented a broad cross section of various professions, trades and crafts. Students, teachers, barbers, mechanics, machinists, cobblers and farriers engaged in the work they loved best to pass the long hours of prison confinement.

Of all the professional laborers on the island, craftsmen were the most prolific. They were able to substitute imagination and improvisation for lack of materials and tools. They used pocket knives as carving tools; lead pencils served as useful art instruments; table knives became saws; files and flat pieces of iron served as working tables for the craftsmen. With these few instruments, they shaped bits of wood and bone into trinkets and devices of all kinds, both useful and decorative. They made finely carved smoking pipes from pieces of hard wood. Other prisoners manufactured rings, toothpicks and stiletos out of beef bones. Carvings of wood, ivory and bones, elegant in design and workmanship, appeared throughout the encampment. Still other craftsmen drew pictures depicting prison life or famous battle scenes. Caricatures of prison officials and guards were extremely popular among prisoners and brought a small but well-deserved profit to the craftsmen.

²Willard W. Glazier, The Capture, the Prison Pen, and the Escape (New York, 1870), 384.

Craftsmen sold their goods along the central avenue of the prison, which was known by the prisoners as Market Street. Everyday, from morning until night, ragged Federals would meet to sell or trade handcrafted goods. Market Street included a number of tents that served as store fronts. The common stores advertised toys, relics, handcrafted goods and prison momentos. In addition, other prisoners set up barber shops, shoe stores, jewelry stores and restaurants along the central avenue. Prisoners would stand in front of their tents and extol the merits of their goods. The best of the storekeepers were able to diversify their wares, engage successfully in trading, and at the end of the day show a neat profit.³

Early in January, 1864, Confederate authorities sought to take advantage of the Federal craftsmen on Belle Isle. Southern officials proposed to establish on the island one or more shops for the manufacture of shoes. Some 400 prisoners could be detailed and paid wages equivalent to those received by general laborers in Richmond. However, Federal Col. Cesnola, temporarily in charge of delivering Northern supplies to the prisoners on the island, interfered with the Confederate plans. Cesnola informed the prisoners that they could be court-martialed for such collaboration with the Confederacy. This put an end to plans of using Union soldiers on work details. However, prison officials were able to persuade many prisoners to enlist in the Confederate service, or sign oaths of allegiance to the Confederacy.

³ Sabre, *Nineteen Months a Prisoner*, 59; Hemmerlein, *Prisons and Prisoners*, 95; Muffly, *The Story of Our Regiment*, 390-91; W. W. Day, *Fifteen Months in Dixie* (Owatonna, Minn., 1889), 18.

Inmates later reported that at each roll call Confederate officers would attempt to persuade them to aid the Confederate cause. Each time, some prisoners would accept these offers. Most of the Federals who did enlist in Confederate service did so in order to escape prison life or because they had relatives serving in the Southern army.⁴

Cards, checkers, chess, dice and similar games were popular among the prisoners. They also spent hours reading books, magazines and Confederate papers provided by prison officials, families and friends. A reading circle or circulating library, in which all reading material was traded, was quite popular among the Federals. In order to become a member of the reading circle, a prisoner had only to own a book or magazine.

Gambling proved to be another favorite form of amusement among prisoners. Federals called the most popular type of gambling "louse racing." After leaving a tin plate or half-canteen in the sun until hot, players would secure their bets and then place lice on the hot platter. The first louse off the platter was the winner. Lice which had won a number of races for the men "with whom they boarded" were pitted against each other. Oftentimes prisoners waged hundreds of Confederate dollars and days' rations on the outcome of these "championship matches." A crowd of prisoners would always gather around to

⁴Richmond Examiner, Jan. 11, 1865; Cesnola, Libby Prison, 6; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 63-64; Pvt. Charles Alexander to unknown addressee, Nov. 13, 1863; John Heinsroth to James A. Seddon, Feb. 10, 1864, C.S.A. Army Dept. of Henrico Collection, Virginia Historical Society.

watch the outcome. More than once, these races ended in fights between the owners of the parasites, as the best of friends would quarrel over which louse had actually won. Prisoners might exchange blows, but the fights were generally short-lived because hungry prisoners became exhausted quite easily.⁵

Federal inmates spent much time with lice, known also as "gray-backs." The vermin were a source of great discomfort. They swarmed upon the men, penetrated all seams of clothing and explored all parts of bodies. In order to rid themselves temporarily of the parasites, the prisoners would engage in a process called "skirmishing." On every mild day, hundreds of half-dressed prisoners would sit on the ground, their shirts or pants turned inside-out and spread over their knees while they searched for the graybacks. Soldiers killed the lice by squashing them between their thumb nails. This was such a common sight at Belle Isle that it attracted little attention.⁶

Other Federals passed the gloomy prison hours writing stories, letters, diaries, poetry and songs. General sayings were popular among the men. Although probably not originating at Belle Isle, the following was one of the most slang sequences among the men on the island.

"During the first six months of prison life one was called a 'fresh fish,' the next four months a 'sucker,' the next two a 'dry cod,' and

⁵Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 387; Roy, Recollections, 90-92; Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners, 50-51.

⁶Ely, Observations of an Illinois Boy, 146-48; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 383-84; James J. Heslin (ed.) "The Diary of a Union Soldier," 241.

the balance of his time a 'dried herring.' After exchange he became known as a 'pickled sardine.'"⁷

Daniel Finch, an Illinois private, composed several songs full of local color. In one composition, he rationalized that "Johnnie" was doing the best he could, and that his rations were little better than his own. "A fact," Finch would sing, "that is often neglected but nevertheless true." With a loud, barritone voice, Finch always attracted a crowd. Guards as well as prisoners enjoyed his songs, and he would sing for them at the slightest request. A verse of his most popular Belle Isle song--a parody on "Ho, Bob Ridley, Ho"--went:

"The Johnnie Reb is a funny man
He feeds us on the Southern plan.
Our tent is open behind and before,
And a 'grayback' guards us at the door.
Ho, Belle Island, ho; and ho Belle Island ho."⁸

Prisoners at Belle Isle, as was the case generally with all soldiers of the Civil War, delighted in singing. "Home, Sweet Home," "Swanee River" and "Annie Louise" were favorites among the men. Often-times the homesick guards would join the prisoners. However, if Federals began to sing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," "Battly Cry of Freedom" or other songs that originated in the North during the Civil War, the guards became restless.⁹

⁷A. O. Abbott, Prison Life in the South (New York, 1865), 58.

⁸James Madison Page, The True Story of Andersonville (New York, 1908), 53.

⁹Roy, Recollections, 95-96; Day, Fifteen Months, 18; Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners, 95.

A favorite pastime of prisoners at Belle Isle was to meet in organized debating clubs or informal group meetings. The subjects of these meetings concentrated on home, family, military events, and personnel, camp discipline, rations and various other topics. The most popular and largest meeting took place every Sunday morning. Church service proved to be not only a time of prayer and giving thanks but also a time for forgetting. However, the topic that brought the most bitter response was the exchange question. A prisoner had only to whisper the word exchange and instantly a crowd of fellow soldiers would gather around him, "convassing the subject with as much interest and energy as though it were newly broached."¹⁰

Every rumor of exchange raised the hopes of prisoners although they had been deceived scores of times previously. Prisoners professed not to believe the rumor, but the greatest excitement prevailed until the rumor was run down and proven false. This strange "disease," as the prisoners called it, was known as "exchange on the brain." Prisoners declared it contagious, and it was as certain to affect every prisoner "as measles are children." The disease's premanitory symptoms were a remembrance of home, family or friends. If no remedies were applied to the "diseased" patient, he would advance to its second stage. The sufferer would talk about going home, express his opinions openly and use the harshest language. If the "disease" continued its course uninterrupted, the prisoner advanced to the third and chronic

¹⁰Roy, Recollections, 98; C. B. Fairchild, History of the 27th Regiment New York Vols. (Binghamton, N. Y., 1888), 206; Abbott, Prison Life, 71-72, 92, 97.

stage. During this period, the prisoner would usually denounce his government, curse the two secretaries of war and Presidents Lincoln and Davis until "finally, the fire exhausts itself, and the patient goes off and takes a nap, after which he feels better."¹¹

Trading between a few "speculator" prisoners and the guards was a permanent institution at Belle Isle, even though it was strictly prohibited by camp rules. Commandant Bossieux ordered that there should be no conversation between prisoners and guards, and prisoners were not to cross over the deadline. However, both inmates and guards blatantly ignored the restrictions. A common way for a prisoner to open negotiations with a guard was, at a reasonably safe distance, to hold up an article of a tempting nature. Federals used articles of clothing, prisoner-made art pieces, watches, boots and jackknives to lure the guards. After establishing a lookout to give warning of approaching officers, prisoners and guards would commence their trade. In return for prison goods, the guards offered tobacco, Confederate scripts, hoecakes, apples, bread, pies, potatoes and sometimes small portions of salted meat. Oftentimes the trade would spread from sentinel to sentinel, thus insuring the guards' silence. Confederate officers from Richmond would occasionally visit Belle Isle in hope of securing a pair of boots or jackknife. The most brisk trading took place after Federal officers from Libby had issued supplies to the prisoners.¹²

¹¹Ibid., 169-70; Goss, Soldier's Story, 45.

¹²Goss, Soldier's Story, 33-34; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 59; Cesnola, Libby Prison, 5; U. S. Congress, Treatment of Prisoners, 170.

During most of the Civil War, the 25th Virginia Battalion, known as the City Battalion, guarded the prisoners in Richmond. In late May, 1862, the Richmond City Council had directed that a battalion of 500 soldiers be organized to preserve public order and to guard public property, bridges and military prisons. Three months later, the 25th Virginia Battalion, its ranks complete, commenced its duties. Colonel Wyatt M. Elliott commanded the battalion, which consisted of five companies. The City Council later authorized three additional companies, and in 1863, the City Battalion was "re-mustered for the War."¹³

Three companies numbering 300 men rotated guard duty at Belle Isle. They came to the island with two days' cooked rations. They were on duty for forty hours, then off for seventy hours. This was considered to be very heavy duty. As the Civil War dragged on, disabled soldiers and youngsters barely over fourteen years of age filled the depleting ranks of the Battalion. The troops represented anything but an organized unit. Their appearance was that of an armed mob. Few of the guards possessed regulation uniforms, and most were dressed in various combinations of Federal blue and old rags. Many of the guards were untrained and ignorant of military duty, discipline and courtesy. However, all seemed heartily sick of "soldiering;" they wanted to go home as badly as the prisoners. At times, other battalions and

¹³Louis H. Manarin (ed.) Richmond at War; The Minutes of the City Council 1861-1865 (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1966), 185-87; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Aug. 21, 1862; Mar. 31, 1864; Hally Turner to his wife, Mar. 7, 1864, Duke University. Hereafter cited as Turner, "Letter."

regiments, mostly from North Carolina, Georgia and Alabama, replaced the City Battalion on guard duty at Belle Isle.

As can be expected, no set relationship existed between Confederate guards and Federal prisoners. Both were under the stress of prison life and exhibited a wide degree of behavioral patterns. Many guards were brutal, cruel and hateful toward their captives. Others sympathized with the prisoners' existence and did everything possible to alleviate their conditions. Only two Confederate soldiers, Sgt. Haight and Sgt. Marks, were universally hated by all prisoners. The prisoners reported that these two men were the "greatest tyrants of all" as they unmercifully used clubs and bayonets to keep prisoners in line.¹⁴

Guards did shoot and kill several of the prisoners on the island. By most reports, however, these shootings were infrequent. Although reliable material concerning this matter is scanty, it appears that shootings usually occurred after verbal confrontations between a prisoner and a guard. The guards also fired on men who attempted to escape, stole guard supplies or crossed over the deadline. Reports that the guards shot randomly at prisoners, or that Lt. Bossieux offered thirty-day passes for those guards who killed prisoners, were nothing more than Northern propaganda.¹⁵

¹⁴Le Grand James Wilson, The Confederate Soldier (Memphis, 1973), 93; O.R., VII, 81, 870; Confederate Veteran, XXVI (1918), 486-87; Ransom, Andersonville Diary, 11; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 389-400.

¹⁵John Latouche to W. S. Winder, Aug. 15, 1863, National Archives Record Group 249, Entry 107, Roll 647; Turner, "Letter;" U. S. Congress, Treatment of Prisoners, 799. Cf. Ibid., 863-64, 874-75.

Prisoners at Belle Isle dwelled upon the idea of escape. Despite repeated failures and the constant risk of death, the subject was a means of speeding away the dreary prison hours. Above all, the hope of freedom through escape kept many prisoners active, thinking and alert.

Federals at Belle Isle never attempted a large-scale breakout. All escapes were by individuals or by groups of two or three prisoners. The plan of escape was generally the same. In order to count prisoners, officials marched their captives out of the encampment to a small clearing. Here the prisoner attempting to escape would bury himself in the sand. When night came, he would slip into the James River and swim for either shore. If the prisoner was lucky enough to make it to land, he had an even chance of getting through safely. He could depend on many of the citizens and Negroes of the surrounding communities for help. Throughout the autumn and winter of 1863-1864, Richmond papers told of unlucky prisoners who were either shot by prison guards or found dead, lodged in fishnets downriver. Yet periodically a prisoner would be successful. When news arrived at the camp that a fellow prisoner had made it through to the Union lines, the men would break into enthusiastic cheers and sing-alongs would commence.¹⁶

Early in November, 1863, Cols. Cesnola and Streight, Federal officers confined at Libby, designed a plan to free the 1,000 officers

¹⁶ Darby, Incidents and Adventures, 108; John D. Billings, The History of the Tenth Massachusetts Battery of Light Artillery in the War of the Rebellion (Boston, 1909), 460-61; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 390; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Aug. 27 and 28, Oct. 23, 1863; Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners, 94-95.

in Richmond and the 10,000 enlisted men at Belle Isle and other Richmond compounds. On a fixed night, the officers planned to break out of Libby by overpowering the guards. If strong enough, they were to release the prisoners held in Richmond and then burn the city. However, guards overheard the officers plotting and informed prison officials. Authorities immediately increased the number of guards at all military prisons in the city. Lieutenant Bossieux ordered five additional cannon placed so as to rake the camp from every direction. These precautionary measures persuaded the prisoners to rethink the risks of escape.¹⁷

Inmates at Belle Isle faced many different forms of punishment for crimes they committed and camp rules they broke. Guards would usually bestow light punishment for first-time offenders. They might tie the prisoner to a post for half-day, or force the guilty man to carry a large stick upon his shoulders for several hours. Another form of light punishment was to have the prisoner stand on a barrel with both his hands tied behind his back for six hours. Oftentimes the guards would place large shackles around the ankles of a recalcitrant prisoner. An iron bar driven into the ground and fastened to the shackles restricted the prisoner's motion.¹⁸

A more severe form of punishment was "bucking and gagging." To "buck" meant to tie a prisoner's wrists together and then to draw his

¹⁷ Richmond Examiner, Nov. 7, 1863; Jones, Rebel War Clerk's Diary, II, 91; Sanderson, My Record, 36.

¹⁸ Dowling, Southern Prisons, 59; Fairchild, 27th Regiment New York Vols., 225.

hands out and downward over his knees. The guards would then pass a stick under the knees and over the arms. This left the prisoner in a most uncomfortable and awkward position. If the prisoner complained of his predicament, the guards would then gag him by putting a stick or a bayonet crosswise in his mouth and securing this with a rope placed around his head. If the men inflicting such punishment were not careful, the fastened stick or bayonet would rip open the prisoner's mouth and cause him greater anguish.

Riding the "wooden horse," or the "Jack" as the prisoners called it, was the most severe form of punishment at Belle Isle Prison. The Jack consisted of two posts, six feet apart, driven into the ground. Guards would fasten a thin plank of wood to each post, then place the prisoner astride the plank with his hands tied together behind his back. Two ropes, secured to the prisoner's ankles, led to the ground. This prevented the punished man from losing his balance while at the same time pinning him tightly to the plank. The guards would then wedge a piece of wood the size of a railroad tie lengthwise between the prisoner's legs, thus stretching them wide apart. Left in this unbecoming position for more than an hour, a prisoner became faint or collapsed from exhaustion.¹⁹

Crime and acts of violence between prisoners were part of prison life at Belle Isle. Theft was a common occurrence. Prisoners had

¹⁹Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 50; S. M. Dufur, Over the Dead Line; or Tracked by Blood Hounds (Burlington, Vt., 1902), 55; Darby, Incidents and Adventures, 108; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 396-97.

either to carry all their personal property or to leave it with a reliable friend, as prisoners stole any unprotected items. Anxious and frustrated men fought over meaningless issues. Oftentimes fights between prisoners turned into free-for-alls in which several hundred men would be engaged. Several prisoners were killed during these "battle royals." On December 27, 1863, over 500 Federals engaged in an all-out riot at Belle Isle. The prisoners believed a rumor that agents of exchange had agreed on a new cartel. When the Federals learned that they were destined for a new prison site at Danville, Va., they rioted. Only after Lt. Bossieux ordered the guards to fire over the heads of the crowd did the uprising end. Several of the men reported that five fellow prisoners were killed.²⁰

Large-scale violence also existed at Belle Island Prison. A gang of villains, captured by the Confederate army during the Bristoe campaign, infested Belle Isle and added greatly to the unpleasantness of prison life. Most of these ruffians were from the slums of New York and Baltimore and had enlisted in the Union army solely to receive large bounties. However, before these bounty-jumpers were able to desert, Confederate forces took them prisoner. The majority of these "Raiders," as the prisoners called them, were of Irish background. Their leader, Pvt. William Collins of the 88th Pennsylvania, bore the pseudonym "Captain Mosby," after the famous Confederate ranger. The Raiders began their plunder aboard the prison train shortly after their

²⁰Richard D. Stewart, "Fourteen Months in Prison" (manuscript), Virginia Historical Society; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 377-78, 399; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 94.

capture. They continued to organize while confined at Libby Prison; and by the time prison authorities transferred them to Belle Isle, they numbered over 100 strong. While on Belle Isle their numbers swelled as formerly honest but now destitute prisoners joined their ranks.²¹

Unrestrained by human law and unfettered by principles of honor or patriotism, the Raiders struck terror into the hearts of their fellow prisoners. On reaching Belle Isle, their first act of violence was to take control of the best Sibley tent. Frail and emaciated prisoners occupied this tent until that time. Robbing prisoners of shelter, blankets and supplies, the Raiders compelled these unlucky men to seek other, unavailable accommodations. If prisoners remonstrated, the Raiders beat them with sticks and clubs. A prisoner who informed the authorities of such activities was committing suicide.

The Raiders robbed their fellow prisoners of the few valuable articles that they possessed. Much of their plunder consisted of shoes, clothing and trinkets stripped from sick and dying inmates. New prisoners, unaccustomed to life on the island, were also favorite victims of the Raiders. However, as Col. Sanderson declared, "Old men and young, the strong and the weak, the hearty and the sick were alike the sufferers. No place was sacred and no refuge secure, and day and night were equally auspicious."²²

²¹Ibid., 54; Heslin, "The Diary of a Union Soldier," 246; A. C. Leonard, The Boys in Blue of 1861-1865 (Landcaster, Pa., 1904), 82.

²²Ibid., Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 385; Ransom, Andersonville Diary, 24; Sanderson, My Record, 40, 67.

The first group of prisoners to organize for mutual self-protection was approximately 500 members of the 1st Kentucky and 2nd Tennessee. On December 15, the Raiders devised a plan to steal blankets and other articles from members of these two regiments. What followed was an immense brawl, with both sides using fists, knives, clubs and stones. Two of the Raiders died from wounds received during the melee, while approximately 100 men on both sides were injured. However, the gang of hoodlums continued to thrive and to terrorize the prison.

Soon after this fight, several prisoners approached Col. Sanderson, who was in charge of delivering Federal supplies to the prisoners on the island. He in turn appealed to Lt. Bossieux to institute measures to prevent further violence. Bossieux informed him that the remedy to such violence lay in the hands of the prisoners. All the prison commander could do with his limited guard force was to prevent escape.

Unable to secure the help of the Confederates, Sanderson took matters into his own hands. He promised every prisoner who could identify members of the Raiders new coats and blankets. Furthermore, under the surveillance of Lt. Bossieux, Sanderson organized two companies of police--one known as "Camp Regulators," and the other known as "Safety Guard." He gave both of these groups unlimited authority in dealing with the Raiders. The "Belle Island Police" quickly responded by catching a large number of Raiders while in the act of stealing.

Punishment consisted of clubbing and kicking. Oftentimes the police shaved the heads of Raiders and made them wear large signs around their necks which stated who they were. Camp guards also captured several of the group's leaders, including "Capt. Mosby." After obtaining permission from Bossieux to inflict limited punishment, Col. Sanderson had these leaders bucked and gagged. He also posted on their backs the word "Raider" for the whole camp to see. During the next few weeks, the police delivered the majority of the Raiders to Sanderson. In this manner, the prisoners were able to bring under control the mass violence that had so disrupted prison life.²³

In the spring of 1864, when Southern authorities transferred Belle Isle prisoners to Andersonville, Ga., the Raiders reorganized. At Andersonville they carried out the same type of violence but on a larger scale. However, the Raiders met their just reward when a jury of twelve prisoners, with the backing of the Confederate government, found six of the Raider leaders guilty of murder and sentenced them to hang. On July 11, 1864, the prisoners at Andersonville carried out the verdict.²⁴

²³ Ibid., 40-43; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 385-86; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 54.

²⁴ Ransom, Andersonville Diary, 82-85; John McElroy, Andersonville: A Story of Rebel Military Prisons (Toledo, 1879), 244; Eugene Forbes, Diary of a Soldier, and Prisoner of War in Rebel Prisons (Trenton, 1865), 29. For an excellent article on the Raiders at Andersonville, see Ovid Futch, "Andersonville Raiders," Civil War History, II (1956), 47-60.

CHAPTER V

MEDICAL ASPECTS

On November 2, 1863, Federal Surgeon S. J. Radcliffe reported the horrid condition of 181 prisoners exchanged from Richmond hospitals. All of these men had been prisoners at Belle Isle Prison. Dr. Radcliffe stated: "Every case wore upon it the visage of hunger, the expression of despair, and exhibited the ravages of some preying disease within . . . Their hair was disheveled, their beards long and matted with dirt, their skin blakened and caked with the most loathsome filth, and their bodies and clothing covered with vermin." Dr. Radcliffe further reported that most of these exchanged Federals were little more than skeletons. Many of them could not muster the strength to stand on their own. "Their dangling, long attenuated arms and legs, sharp pinched features, ghastly cadaveric countenances, deep sepulchral eyes . . . presented a picture which could not be looked upon with[~~out~~] its drawing out the strongest of emotions of pity." Some of the prisoners, Radcliffe continued, had large ulcers and sores principally on the hips and shoulders, the effects of lying upon hard ground. The men were suffering from either diarrhea, dysentery, pneumonia, scurvy or high fevers caused by a number of different diseases.¹

It is important to emphasize that Dr. Radcliffe's report concerned the most disabled, emaciated and disease-ridden of all the Belle Isle

¹O.R., VI, 475-76.

prisoners. Agents of exchange agreed to swap these prisoners because of their destitute condition. However, these exchanged prisoners bore the same diseases and illnesses that affected, to lesser degrees, most of the inmates at Belle Isle.

A number of diseases and illnesses affected Belle Isle's inhabitants. Diarrhea, dysentery and pneumonia were the most prevalent. Medical authorities at the time of the Civil War considered diarrhea to be a distinct disease rather than a symptom of various maladies. They distinguished dysentery from diarrhea by the presence of blood in the stool. Scurvy, pellagra, jaundice, gangrene, minor cases of gonorrhea and syphilis (first and second stages), nephritis, typhoid and rheumatic fever, catarrh, langagites and constipation affected, in various degrees, almost all of the prisoners.²

That such a wide variety of diseases existed at Belle Isle can be attributed to a number of factors. First, it must be remembered that many of the men were already sick or wounded at the time of their capture. Indeed, this may have been the reason they were seized in battle. Many of these men had been lying for days in field hospitals with only the slightest amount of attention being paid to their illnesses or wounds. Once captured, their condition inevitably worsened. In the Confederacy there was a crying need for both skilled physicians and medical stores. With both in scarce supply, it was impossible for

²Morning Report of Sick: Belle Isle, Virginia, Sept. 4, 1864, National Archives Record Group 249, Entry 51. Hereafter cited as Morning Report of Sick; O.R., VI, 1089; H. H. Cunningham, Doctors in Gray (Gloucester, Mass., 1970), 184, 186.

Confederate authorities to administer properly to the needs of incapacitated prisoners. Confederate guards oftentimes stripped newly captured prisoners of coats, blankets, shoes and other provisions. These prisoners then faced either a long march or a filthy, crowded train ride to Richmond. Upon arrival, many of the prisoners were literally on their death beds.³

The prevailing conditions at Belle Isle led to further outbreaks of diseases among the prisoners. As noted, the inmates suffered acutely because of a lack of shelter, blankets and clothing. Over-exposure to climatic elements was the rule on Belle Isle, not the exception. Consequently, respiratory ailments such as pneumonia, catarrh and common colds were quite prevalent and, in many cases, proved to be chronic. The overcrowding and unsanitary conditions at Belle Isle also led to and fostered the spread of diseases. Human feces, urine, foodscraps and other debris saturated the ground and at times polluted the water supply. Disease-carrying vermin encrusted many of the prisoners and were prevalent throughout the camp. It was more a matter of luck, rather than personal care, for a prisoner to remain healthy under these circumstances.

The poor quantity and quality of rations greatly affected the prisoners. The effects of farinaceous foods with little or no fresh vegetables or fruit caused scurvy to become widespread. Prisoners feared scurvy more than any other disease, for its effects were frightening. Boil-like ulcers would appear, followed by a stiffening

³Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners, 16-19; Dowling, Southern Prisons, 54; Goss, Soldier's Story, 219.

and swelling of the limbs. If not checked, the whole body became infected and the flesh, in severe cases, literally rotted off prisoners' bones. Furthermore, the unsifted corn meal the men ate regularly produced diarrhea and predisposed the sufferer to other bowel infections.

Another cause of illness at Belle Isle Prison was the depressing morale influence under which prisoners labored. Many Federals became apathetic, indifferent, refused to eat or to cleanse themselves. This mental stress also rendered prisoners highly susceptible to a number of diseases and infections. Furthermore, mental depression combined with the effects of malnourishment to produce a fatal apathy toward life; and this apathy in turn invited other diseases by lowering prisoners' resistance.⁴

That inmates at Belle Isle were low in spirit can be shown by their own reports and by Confederate medical statements. The average day of confinement for the prisoners at Belle Isle was long and extremely depressing. Personal conditions, filthy surroundings, the constant sight of suffering and death, the effects of brutality by fellow prisoners and guards alike and most importantly, despair concerning future exchange, sapped the spirits of prisoners. Sergeant T. P. Meyer of the 148th Pennsylvania noted the mental and physical degradation of a fellow prisoner, Pvt. Brooks. Like many Federals at Belle Isle, Brooks was a rugged individual but unable to face the psychological

⁴O.R., VII, 587-88, 1087-89; Randolph R. Stevenson, The Southern Side; or Andersonville Prison (Baltimore, 1876), 28; John D. Fernstrom and Loy D. Little, "Corn Malnutrition, Brain Serotonin and Behavior," Nutrition Review, XXXIV (1976), 257-58.

strain of confinement. With all hopes gone of seeing family and friends again, Brooks became apathetic and indifferent to his own condition. Meyer stated: "He always was broken in spirits and could not be cheered up. He did not sleep or eat or rest. He was not sick, he simply gave up, broke down and died at the end of the first week. Hundreds, in the same way, gave up and died of despondency alone."⁵

The isolation of prison life and pessimism concerning future exchange were two of the leading causes of mental anguish among Belle Isle prisoners. After directing an extensive investigation of the diseases afflicting Federal prisoners of war, Confederate surgeon Joseph Jones stated: "Disappointment and despondency in regard to exchange seemed to have been the most potent cause of lowering the vitality of mind and body and predisposing the men to diseases." The postponement of exchange and the constantly receding hopes of deliverance "depressed the already desponding spirits and destroyed those mental and moral energies so necessary for a successful struggle against diseases and its agents." Jones added that "the daily longings for an apparently hopeless release, appeared to be as potent agencies in the destruction of the prisoners as the physical causes of the actual diseases."⁶

Prisoners at Belle Isle responded to these depression effects in several different ways. Many became psychotic and displayed illusion

⁵Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners, 94-95; Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 374-75.

⁶O.R., VII, 557, 559, 977; Stevenson, The Southern Side, 28.

of plenty by distributing imaginary gifts of food to fellow prisoners. Others reverted to the behavior patterns of children. Still others became aggressive, stealing from and brutalizing their fellow inmates. However, most prisoners became dejected and apathetic, refused to eat or take care for themselves. Randolph Stevenson, the surgeon in charge at Andersonville Prison hospital, noted the effects of depression on prisoners' appetites and personal well-being. These effects were manifested not only in the slow, feeble motion of the prisoners, but also in "such lethargic, listlessness and torpor of the mental facilities as rendered these unfortunate men . . . indifferent to their afflicted condition." Stevenson concluded this report by stating that many prisoners reached a state in which they showed no anxiety or distress concerning their own privations or the future. "They lay in a listless and lethargic, uncomplaining state, taking no notice either of their own distressed condition, or of the gigantic [sic] mass of human misery by which they are surrounded." Confederate surgeons reached these same conclusions of the effects of depression on prisoners of war.⁷

In many instances, the high rate of illness at Belle Isle and other Southern prison camps stemmed from a combination of psychological factors and malnutrition. However, recent medical studies have demonstrated that many of the symptoms that Civil War prisoners and medical authorities thought to be psychological were in fact symptoms

⁷ Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners, 94-95; Goss, Soldier's Story, 45-46, 49-50; Abbott, Prison Life, 101; Stevenson, The Southern Side, 78; O.R., VI, 588.

of nutritional deficiency diseases. Captured Federals in the South suffered from pellegra and scurvy. Medical studies have shown that a relatively unsupplemented corn diet is pellegra-producing, as corn is deficient in both niacin and protein.

It had been known for years that scurvy was the product of a diet high in farinaceous grains and low in acidic foods. What is important is that the sufferers of these diseases demonstrate symptoms which appear to be purely psychological in nature: anorexia, indifference and apathy. Furthermore, men afflicted with these diseases complained of aching joints and pain in the extremities. To alleviate the discomfort, the patients wished to lie down. Medical authorities and prisoners alike during the Civil War may have interpreted this as a sign that the men were giving up on life. Recent medical studies also have shown that both pellagra and scurvy predispose the sufferer to various infections. This is important for in Southern prisoner-of-war camps the slightest scratch or insect bite led to infections, followed in many cases by extensive gangrene.⁸

Prisoners at Belle Isle and elsewhere in the Confederacy also suffered from protein-calorie malnutrition. As with pellagra and

⁸C. Gopalan and Kumala S. Jaya Roo, "Pellagra and Amino Acid Imbalance," cited in Paul L. Munson, et al., (eds.), Vitamins and Monomes: Advances in Research and Applications, XXXIII (1975), 505-7, 517-18; Harold H. Sandstead, "Clinical Manifestations of Certain Vitamin Deficiencies," cited in Robert S. Goodhart (ed.) Modern Nutrition in Health and Disease: Dietotherapy (Philadelphia, 1973), 594; C. E. Taylor and Cecile DeSweemer, "Nutrition and Infection," cited in Miloslav Racheigl (ed.) Food, Nutrition and Health (Basel, Switzerland, 1973), 212-13; O.R., VII, 1013. I am indebted to Karen O. Kupperman, "Apathy and Death in Early Jamestown," The Journal of American History, LXVI (1979), 24-41, for the idea and references concerning nutritional-deficiency diseases of prisoners of war.

scurvy victims, men with malnutrition experienced anorexia, indifference, a decrease in the function of the nervous system and a lowering of resistance to infection.

The psychological stress of being a prisoner of war evolved from the prisoner's lack of control over his own destiny, a sense of isolation, and an indifference on the part of fellow prisoners and guards. Physically, the stress of being in confinement stemmed from malnutrition, which led to pellagra, scurvy and protein-calorie malnutrition. These diseases not only produced symptoms that appear psychological in nature but also lowered the resistance of prisoners to infections and other diseases. More importantly, these nutritional deficiency diseases interacted with the psychological stress of confinement. In turn, each intensified the other, producing a fatal withdrawal from life.⁹

Hospital accommodations at Belle Isle Prison were minimal. Authorities had hoped to establish a permanent hospital on the island, but they were unable to secure the needed building material. Instead, officials pitched five hospital tents close to the officer and guards quarters. Here medical officers treated the prisoners' minor illnesses, wounds and diseases. If further treatment were necessary, surgeons transferred their patients to hospitals in Richmond.

Belle Isle hospital tents resembled most of the other tents on the island. When straw or boards were available, they served as bedding.

⁹Fernando E. Viteri and Guillermo Arroyorve, "Protein-Calorie Malnutrition," cited Goodhart, Modern Nutrition, 609-10, 613; Taylor, Food, Nutrition and Health, 212-13, 216.

At other times, owing to the scarcity of materials, sick and wounded prisoners lay on cold, damp floors. Four physicians, two present for duty at all times, were responsible for administering to the needs of the prisoners. Fifteen detailed inmates served as nurses and assisted the medical staff in its daily tasks.¹⁰

Surgeons at the island hospital experienced difficulties in procuring regular visitation by the sickest and most disabled prisoners. Dr. William Semple, in charge of the hospital at Belle Isle, stated that oftentimes hospital attendants would bring out emaciated prisoners who had never before attended sick call. Semple further reported that several deaths occurred in the encampment because Federal soldiers had never sought medical help. He blamed this on the sergeants in charge of the squads. In turn, the sergeants alleged that they could not attend regularly to the duty of bringing the most seriously ill patients to sick call. They claimed to be overtaxed with the duties of drawing and distributing rations and had little time to care for the sick. To alleviate this problem, Lt. Bossieux appointed an additional sergeant from each squad to perform medical duties only. Thenceforth, sergeants delivered 200-300 patients per day to the island hospital. However, seriously ill prisoners continued to suffer because of the habit of fellow prisoners who feigned illness to get temporary escape from their surroundings.¹¹

¹⁰O.R., VI, 1087-88; U. S. Congress, Treatment of Prisoners, 901, 972; Dowling, Southern Prisons, 61.

¹¹O.R., III, 1087-88; Ransom, Andersonville Diary, 13-14; Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner, 32, 35.

The Confederate authorities used three specific hospitals in Richmond, excluding the hospital ward at Libby, to accommodate sick and wounded Federal soldiers. General Hospital No. 21 at Cary and 25th streets, Second Alabama Hospital at Franklin and 26th streets, and General Hospital No. 22 (Howards Factory) at Main and 26th streets, were all converted warehouses. All were constructed of brick and stood three stories high. The buildings were well adapted to their use as hospitals, being well-ventilated and easily cleaned. They were supposed to accommodate a total of 500 patients by allowing 800 cubic feet of space per man. Each building had its own kitchen and laundry. However, all three lacked properly placed latrines. The medical purveyor issued beds, bedding and medical supplies. Five surgeons and twelve assistant surgeons comprised the medical staff. Fifty-two detailed prisoners served as nurses, clerks, cooks and washers, while over 100 soldiers of the City Battalions performed guard duty at the three hospitals.¹²

By law, the Confederate authorities placed the hospitals for prisoners of war on the same footing as hospitals for Confederate soldiers. Furthermore, they fixed hospital rations at the same rates as those issued to Confederates in the field. On November 17, 1863, Dr. John Wilkins, surgeon in charge of General Hospital No. 21, reported that rations consisted of one pound of fresh beef and eighteen ounces of bread. In addition, Capt. Warner furnished various food items to be issued by the medical authorities at their own discretion. These

¹²O.R., VI, 1048-50; Richmond Enquirer, May 26, 1864.

included sugar, rice, vinegar, salt, meal and sweet potatoes. Such rations were of far better quality and quantity than those issued to the prisoners at Belle Isle.¹³

Although well supplied with rations, prisoners in Richmond hospitals suffered from lack of medical provisions as well as from overcrowding. Several prisoners reported that Medical Director William A. Carrington and his staff treated them with kindness and consideration. The staff was disposed to make the best use of scanty medical supplies. However, Southern chemical factories producing medicines were neither numerous nor large, and the Confederacy lacked efficient medical personnel. Federal authorities must bear some of the responsibility for the lack of medical provisions available to Federal prisoners. The Union government declared medicines "contraband of war" and sanctioned the policy of the soldiers destroying every drug supply that they could reach. The strict naval blockage of the coast prevented all but the smallest amount of medical supplies to enter the South. In January, 1864, as previously noted, the Federal government turned down Ould's request to have Union surgeons administer medicine and distribute supplies to the prisoners of the Confederacy. Furthermore, in August, 1864, Ould offered to purchase medical provisions from Federal authorities to be used exclusively for the relief of Northern prisoners. He stood ready to pay gold, tobacco or cotton for the supplies and to allow Federal surgeons to administer the medical

¹³O.R., VI, 548, 647, 1048-50; SHSP, I (1876), 173.

provisions to the prisoners. Ould never received a reply concerning either of these requests.¹⁴

Faulty medical practices on the part of Federal surgeons confined at Libby caused many prisoners at Belle Isle to suffer and led to a minor outbreak of syphilis. In September, 1863, smallpox threatened the Federals at the Richmond prisons and hospitals. Contrary to the advice of Confederate Surgeon John Wilkinson, a number of captive Federal surgeons decided to vaccinate their fellow prisoners. Because of faulty judgement, the Federal surgeons used puss instead of lymph for the vaccine. They compounded their mistake by selecting a virus from a prisoner who was afflicted with secondary syphilis.¹⁵

On occasion, smallpox threatend to become an epidemic at Belle Isle. Early in December, 1863, because of a rising number of smallpox cases, Confederate authorities accelerated plans for the construction of a smallpox hospital. They hoped to locate this facility well outside the Richmond city limits. For humane considerations, and to prevent spread of the disease, Federal Gen. Benjamin Butler at Ft. Monroe forwarded serum sufficient to vaccinate 6,000 prisoners. Uncertain of the legality of such a transfer, Gen. Butler asked Ould to consider the vaccine either official or unofficial, so long as the drug was accepted and distributed among Federal inmates. Butler guaranteed that if the prisoners were in need of more vaccine he would

¹⁴Glazier, The Capture, 53; SHSP, I (1876), 129, 181; Cunningham, Doctors in Gray, 284-87; O.R., VI, 871-72.

¹⁵O.R., VI, 262-63.

furnish all that was needed. Ould accepted the vaccine as an unofficial action and cordially thanked the Northern commander.¹⁶

In March, 1864, Col. George Brent and Dr. T. G. Richardson inspected the three prison hospitals in Richmond. They found 1,127 sick and wounded prisoners crowded into wards sufficient in size to accommodate 500 patients. In most instances, two men shared beds designed to hold one. Furthermore, they reported that many medical provisions were not on hand and that the hospital medical team was understaffed. They observed that the medical purveyor did not furnish the necessary medical supplies nor did the commanding general supply flour for the patients. The consequence of the state of affairs was manifested, the inspectors declared, in the severe mortality rate in the January-March period. In January, the average number of deaths per day was 10; in February, 18; in March, 22; and on the day previous to the inspection, 26. The inspectors feared that the death rate would continue to increase until authorities could procure additional medical supplies and relieve the congested conditions of the hospitals. Although Confederate officials exchanged the most seriously ill and wounded patients, their vacancies were instantly filled from the ranks of sick prisoners on Belle Isle and other Richmond prisons.¹⁷

The number of deaths that occurred at Belle Isle during its three periods of use is impossible to ascertain. One must remember that the volume of prisoners and the conditions at Belle Isle fluctuated

¹⁶O.R., VI, 658-59, 683.

¹⁷O.R., VI, 512, 535-36, 1048-51, 1086.

throughout the Civil War. Moreover, a large percentage of the prisoners at Belle Isle died from diseases and wounds contracted before they were incarcerated on the island. Lieutenant Bossieux stated that only 164 deaths occurred during the prison's use. Federal Col. Sanderson supported this statement and reported that the average number of deaths was between two and five per month. These figures can be correct only if it is taken into account that medical officials transferred the seriously ill and wounded prisoners to the Richmond hospitals. Federal Gen. Dow, in his report on the conditions at Belle Isle, stated that the inmates were dying at a rate of eight to ten per day. However, no other reports substantiate Dow's figures.¹⁸

Information on the number of deaths that occurred at Belle Isle is scanty. Only for March, 1864, are records complete. Medical Director Carrington reported that 590 Belle Isle prisoners died that month. This figure included deaths on the island as well as Belle Isle prisoners in Richmond hospitals. Of these fatalities, 265 were the result of chronic diarrhea. Other official reports concerning the number of deaths at Belle Isle were destroyed in the fires that swept through Richmond at the capital's evacuation in April, 1865.

One must remember too an additional fact. In the spring of 1864, Confederate authorities transferred the majority of Belle Isle inmates to Andersonville. There the mortality rate was the highest of any

¹⁸Sanderson, My Record, 141; O.R., VI, 482; VIII, 622.

Southern prisoner-of-war camp. Dozens among the first of Andersonville's prisoners to die were Federals who had been confined at Belle Isle.¹⁹

¹⁹O.R., VI, 1048, 1089; Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons, 472.

CHAPTER VI
EVACUATION AND RE-USE

During the Civil War the Confederacy confined an estimated 214,000 prisoners of war. So large a number of prisoners resulted from the general large-scale nature of the military conflict as well as to the Federal government's position of nonexchange. This extreme number of prisoners greatly hindered the ability of the Confederacy to wage war and to care for its citizens; it was instrumental in denying the South its independence. Furthermore, Confederate authorities had to redirect, and hence deplete, their vital foodstuffs, railroad facilities, military equipment, guards and general labor to provide for prisoners of war. Several years after the end of the conflict, Judah P. Benjamin, a man who at different times headed three different departments in the Confederacy, wrote on the confinement of prisoners of war. He concluded, as did many of his contemporaries, that the Federal policy of nonexchange, and hence the confinement of a large number of prisoners in the South, "was one of the most fatal blows dealt us during the war, and contributed to our overthrow more, perhaps, than any single measure."¹

In Richmond the effects of confining prisoners of war were disastrous. The prisoners consumed a large portion of the capital's limited food supply, raised market prices and, as the Richmond

¹Thompson, Photographic History of the Civil War, VIII, 186; Judah P. Benjamin and Benjamin F. Butler, "Two Witnesses on the Treatment of Prisoners," SHSP, VI (1878), 186.

Examiner stated: "Every ounce of food the Yankees eat . . . robs the city and brings the Capital nearer to exhaustion."

The confinement of prisoners in Richmond also made the city more susceptible to Union raids, as well as prisoner uprisings. Over 400 paroled Federal officers were located throughout the city. Citizens remonstrated to the Confederate officials and to the city council to stop such a practice, but it was of no use. By late 1863, Gen. Winder admitted that it was impossible to confine all Federal officers because of a lack of suitable buildings. The inadequacy of the guards at the prisons increased the fears of the citizens. Early in January, 1864, it was reported that the prisoners on Belle Isle had concealed 600 stands of arms and that the officers at Libby had made preparations to escape as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Upon hearing these reports, prison officials immediately doubled the guard at all Richmond prisons and placed additional cannon to sweep the grounds at Belle Isle. Although these rumors proved to be false, the citizens and the Richmond papers demanded that the prisoners be sent farther south.²

The overcrowding in the Richmond prisons became critical as early as the first months of 1863. To help accommodate the overflow, Winder rented several buildings. All of these new prison sites--Mayo's, Smith's (the eastern half of the Pemberton building), Scott's and Palmer's--stood close to Libby. All were converted warehouses and were

²Richmond Examiner, Jan. 4 and 9, Feb. 16, 1864; Manarin, Richmond at War, 433-34; Jones, Rebel War Clerk's Diary, II, 92, 121; Ransom, Andersonville Diary, 24-25; Sanderson, My Record, 31; Richmond Dispatch, Feb. 17, 1864.

directly commanded by Maj. Turner. The increasing number of Confederate deserters, recaptured Federal prisoners and common criminals led Winder to transfer these inmates from Castle Goodwin to Castle Thunder. Winder continued to search for additional prison sites. He went before the Richmond City Council in hopes of obtaining the Alms House and the new city theater, Metropolitan Hill, but to no avail. Winder stated that he had procured every building in the city at all suited for prison use, and that there was nowhere else to move or keep the estimated 14,000 prisoners then in Richmond.³

As early as October, 1863, Gen. Robert E. Lee had foreseen the consequences of confining large number of prisoners in the Virginia capital. After learning that Federal authorities had decided to make no further exchanges, Lee suggested to Secretary of War Seddon that prison authorities remove all prisoners of war from Richmond. Lee declared that the presence of a large number of prisoners there was injurious since the retention of Federals there increased the amount of supplies to be transported. He believed that the already inadequate transportation system should be devoted solely to the benefit of the citizens. Union prisoners, in Lee's opinion, tended to increase the already high prices and caused distress among the poorer classes. From a military standpoint, the prisoners presented a danger. Lee had no doubt that prisoners were supplying Washington with information on the movements and the disposition of Confederate forces. He

³O.R., VI, 544; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 3 and 10, Nov. 16, 1863; Feb. 10, 1864; Hyde, A Captive, 72-73; Manarin, Richmond at War, 373-75.

suggested that the prisoners be transferred to Danville, Va. or some other more southern location.⁴

Seddon immediately notified Lee that prison authorities were making arrangements in Danville where they could secure six large, vacant buildings. On November 13, the prison authorities delivered the first of 4,000 prisoners to Danville, while other prisoners were delivered to Atlanta and Columbus, Ga.⁵

The transfer of these prisoners to Danville and elsewhere, however, did little to alleviate the overcrowding at Belle Isle. On November 24, the Secretary of War directed Capt. W. S. Winder, son of the General, to select a new prison site near Americus, Ga. Captain Winder selected a small train depot named Andersonville. Captain Richard B. Winder, a cousin of Gen. Winder, made preparations to accommodate 10,000 prisoners of war there. The prison stockade was officially known as Camp Sumter. On February 7, 1864, Gen. Winder reported to the adjutant and inspector general that he intended to send 400 non-commissioned officers and privates per day to Andersonville until the Richmond prisons were depleted.⁶

Ten days later, the first detachment of 400 Federals left Belle Isle for Andersonville. As prison authorities transferred more and

⁴O.R., VI, 438-39, 502.

⁵Ibid., 455-56, 502, 511, 527-28; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Nov. 14, 16 and 17, 1863. For the conditions faced by Federal prisoners transferred from Richmond, see James I. Robertson, Jr., "Houses of Horror: Danville's Civil War Prisons," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, LXIX (1961), 329-45.

⁶O.R., VI, 588; VIII, 730-31; Moran, Bastiles of the Confederacy, 38.

more men, Belle Isle, according to inmates began to look more desolate and "tomb-like." The prison officials reorganized the remaining men into new squads and allowed them greater privileges. Prisoners ate only cornbread, but in far greater quantities than before. Guards relaxed practically all camp rules, the deadline was forgotten, and guards and prisoners conversed freely. On March 24, the last of the prisoners left Belle Isle for Andersonville. As in September, 1862, prison officials ordered the tents removed and the prison grounds thoroughly cleaned. Thus ended the second period of the island prison's history.⁷

The life of Andersonville prison was relatively short compared to the use of Belle Isle and other Southern prisons. On February 25, the first prisoners from Belle Isle arrived at the Georgia compound. However, on September 5, with Gen. Sherman's army in Atlanta, Secretary Seddon directed Winder to remove the Federal prisoners from Andersonville. From this date until the end of the war, the ever-advancing Union armies compelled Confederate authorities to transfer captives from military prison to military prison. The continued piecemeal approach of the Confederate officials subjected captured Federals to incomplete and ill-prepared military prisons. Southern authorities first transferred the Andersonville prisoners to Charleston, S. C., and Savannah, Ga. At Charleston, Federals were crowded into the yard of the city jail. Yet their rations and general conditions were much

⁷Muffly, The Story of Our Regiment, 405-6; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Feb. 17, Mar. 11, 12 and 24, 1864; Richmond Examiner, Feb. 18 and Mar. 23, 1864; Richmond Enquirer, Feb. 26, 1864.

improved. However, hardly had the prisoners arrived when an outbreak of yellow fever in the city compelled prison authorities to transfer the Federals to a large stockade at Florence, S. C.⁸

The prisoners transferred from Andersonville to Savannah were confined in a stockade on the grounds of the old United States Marine Hospital. However, on October 10, owing to objections from the citizens of the city, authorities transferred the prisoners to a forty-two-acre stockade at Millen, Ga. On November 17, a cavalry raid from Gen. Sherman's army forced the abandonment of the prison at Millen and the transfer of the prisoners to Blackshear and Thomasville, Ga. In January, 1865, prison authorities transferred the Federals from these two locations back to Andersonville.⁹

Meanwhile, on June 7, 1864--less than three months after the second evacuation of Belle Isle, the prison had come back into use. Two factors were involved: the overcrowding at Andersonville and a large number of prisoners taken during Gen. U. S. Grant's 1864 spring offensive. During this third period of use, the conditions on the island prison were undeniably horrible, with not even bare necessities provided to all prisoners.

Federals suffered, as they did during the second period of Belle Isle's use, from lack of shelter, blankets and clothing. Only half

⁸O.R., VII, 678, 773, 837; Glazier, The Capture, 146; Jefferson Davis, A Short History of the Confederate States of America (New York, 1890), 449.

⁹Ransom, Andersonville Diary, 96; John Urban, My Experience Mid Shot and Shell and in Rebel Den (Lancaster, Pa., 1882), 576; O.R., VII, 1140, 1144, 1155, 1204, 1238-39.

of the prisoners had tents or other protection from the weather. Richmond authorities had transferred the tents previously used at Belle Isle to Andersonville and Salisbury. Even the guards on the island were without shelter. General William M. Gardner, temporarily in charge of the Richmond prisons, directed his subordinates to procure additional tenting, or lumber with which to build permanent barracks. A thorough search of Richmond located only seventy-five tents. Furthermore, no lumber was available as all products of the Richmond sawmills were needed to repair the city hospitals.¹⁰

According to prisoner reports, the rations during this period consisted solely of cornbread and pea soup. Fresh beef and pork were available in North Carolina, but transportation facilities were lacking. Because of the rapid increase of prisoners at Belle Isle, sanitary conditions rapidly deteriorated. Authorities reestablished the island hospital; as before, they transferred seriously ill prisoners to Richmond. However, medical provisions were scarce in the Confederacy during the late period of the war, and prisoners suffered accordingly. In late September, as a result of the failure of prison authorities to provide shelter, rations and medical provisions, 600 prisoners were delivered to Danville. On October 4, the first of 6,000 prisoners left Belle Isle for the enlarged prison at Salisbury. Three days later, the island was vacant except for 10-12 inmates who remained there until January 24, 1865. Possibly prison authorities retained these Federals

¹⁰Richmond Enquirer, June 7, 1864; Richmond Daily Dispatch, June 27, July 13, 15 and 28, Aug. 12, Sept. 3, 1864; O.R., VI, 870.

to provide necessary work on the island in the event of the prison's re-use. On February 10, the Confederacy officially returned the island to its owners.¹¹

From its conception, the Southern prisoner-of-war system lacked everything needed to guarantee success. The underlying factors that led to such an ill-fated system were poor organization, planning and foresight. For all practical purposes, Confederate authorities were unprepared at the beginning of the Civil War. Deficient in experienced prison personnel, and lacking a definite plan, Confederate prison officials improvised a prisoner-of-war system. As the number of prisoners continued to mount, authorities employed "stop-gap" measures which, for the most part, proved ineffective. Viewed in this light, Belle Isle prison was such a stop-gap measure. As with most Southern prisons, Belle Isle came into existence solely to alleviate overcrowding at the other prisons in the Confederacy. Only after it became evident that the existing prisons would not suffice did authorities select new prison sites. This lack of organization and foresight is most clearly seen in the last year of the war, when prison officials transferred captives from prison to prison while the Federals suffered from want of shelter, food, supplies and medicine.

Policies of the Northern authorities were in many respects responsible for the suffering of Federal prisoners of war. The breakdown of the cartel of exchange--an agreement which should have

¹¹Ibid., 870-72, 986-87; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Sept. 3, 1864 and Feb. 12, 1865; Furguson, Life and Struggles, 104; Roll Call, National Archives, Record Group 249, Ser. 47; SHSP, I (1876), 144.

alleviated the necessity of either government to hold prisoners-- was due in greatest part to policies of Union authorities. The Federal government's non-exchange regulation after April, 1864, contributed to the death of thousands of their captured soldiers. Other Northern policies, such as declaring medicine "contraband of war," as well as not allowing Confederate authorities to purchase or trade for medical provisions, were responsible for untold illness and death.

Belle Isle Prison was in many respects one of the more notorious of all military prisons used during the Civil War. Only at Andersonville were conditions worse. However, all Civil War military prisons, both Northern and Southern, exhibited similar conditions. Generally, all prisoners suffered from the effects of incompetent administration, inadequate space, overexposure, disease, depression and consequently high death rates.

Incompetent administration, especially in the South, was the leading factor in creating such an inefficient prisoner-of-war system. Both the United States and the Confederacy lacked experienced administrative talent. With top-flight officers and personnel serving their governments in other positions, second-rate officials were left to direct the prisons. General Winder proved to be an incompetent commissary general and provost marshal. Much of the blame for the faulty Southern prisoner-of-war system was due to his policies and inabilities. In the North, Lt. Col. William Hoffman proved to be much more efficient in his duties as commissary general of prisoners.

However, many of his subordinates were ill-suited for authoritative positions and duties. Prisoners suffered accordingly.¹²

Ignorance and shortsightedness on the part of prison authorities caused captured soldiers to suffer dearly. In the selection of prison sites, both Northern and Southern prison authorities made grievous errors in judgement. As noted, the location of Belle Isle Prison was instrumental in causing disease, illness and death. In both North and South, this mistake was repeated. Authorities often selected islands, peninsulas, marshes or barren locations to confine their prisoners. At Camp Douglas, near Chicago, Ill., the low ground on which the prison stood frequently flooded. Large pools of stagnant water collected throughout the camp and led to unsanitary conditions. The highest mortality rate (10%) for any prison during one month of the war took place at this camp. Another Federal prison, Fort Delaware, located on Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River, stood several feet below water level. In July, 1863, when prisoners occupied new barracks at the fort, the buildings began sinking and were in danger of completely collapsing. Furthermore, at this location the Northern prison authorities crowded 8,000 prisoners into barracks without cooking facilities and without proper police.¹³

Other examples of this shortsightedness concerning the selection of prison sites abound. Andersonville Prison was located in the hottest, most isolated and barren location of south-central Georgia. The prison

¹²William B. Hesseltine (ed.) Civil War Prisons (Kent, O., n.d.), 6-7.

¹³O.R., VI, 314-15; Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 181, 184.

of Elmira, N. Y., stood near stagnant pools which were a source of disease and led to an exceptionally high mortality rate. Two other Federal prisons, Rock Island, Ill., and Johnsen's Island, O., were surrounded by water. Prisoners at these two locations, just as inmates at Belle Isle, suffered from exposure, overcrowding and lack of supplies and rations. Another Federal prison, Point Lookout, Md., had conditions similar to those at Belle Isle. The prison was established on a low peninsula, where the Potomac River joins the Chesapeake Bay. Federal prison officials neglected to erect barracks. Tents provided the only shelter. In the winter the air was cold and damp, and the ground on which most of the prisoners lay was wet and saturated with filth. At times Federal authorities crowded over 20,000 prisoners into this site, which Southern prisoners considered the most dreadful of all Civil War prisons.¹⁴

Southern prisoners in the North generally received more to eat and were better supplied than their counterparts in the South. After 1863, all prisoners of war in the South were hungry and without sufficient supplies. However, the same is true of the armies of the Confederacy. In the North, prisoners also suffered from lack of rations and supplies. This is attributed not to the scarcity of these provisions but to the policies of Secretary of War Stanton and his subordinates. During much of the war, stories of Southern prison atrocities circulated throughout the North. In retaliation, Stanton ordered Northern prison authorities to reduce food, shelter, clothing and other provisions of

¹⁴O.R., VI, 182-83, 848; VII, 465-66, 603-5; Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 183, 201.

prisoners to levels which he believed were equivalent to those in Southern prisons. Southern prisoners, especially during the last two years of the conflict, suffered immensely because of these orders.¹⁵

In both North and South, captured soldiers suffered essentially from the same conditions: ineffective administration, overcrowding, overexposure, disease, filthy surroundings, malnutrition, lack of supplies and medical provisions, and from the depressing effects of prison life. Both governments were guilty of mistreatment.

Owing to incomplete data, it is impossible to determine accurately the number of prisoners captured and confined, or the number of deaths of prisoners during the Civil War. The generally accepted figures--those released by the Adjutant General of the United States--state that 197,743 Northerners and 214,865 Southerners were confined during the Civil War. Over 30,000, or 15.5% of all Federal prisoners, died. Approximately 26,000 or 12% of all Confederate prisoners succumbed during captivity. It is little wonder that both Northern and Southern prisons, Belle Isle being a valid representative, have been marked as disgraces to their respective governments.¹⁶

¹⁵Hesseltine, Prisons, 7; O.R., VI, 50, 72-75, 330; Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 188, 196, 202-3.

¹⁶F. C. Aimsforth to N. V. Randolph, April 1, 1898, Museum of the Confederacy.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

The single most important source for Civil War historians is the 128 volumes of the U. S. War Department (comp.), War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, 1880-1901). The eight volumes in Series II of this mammoth work were the foundation for this study of Belle Isle Prison. Included in these volumes are correspondence between the agents of exchange and their subordinates, official orders and prison inspections and hospital reports. Material concerning Belle Isle is located in Volumes VI-VIII. However, all eight texts are essential for a full understanding of the development of the Confederate prisoner-of-war system.

The War Department Collection of Confederate Records, located in the National Archives in Washington, is another excellent source for official statements, prison hospital reports and correspondence. Record Groups 109 and 249 proved especially helpful. Relevant material in Record Group 109 includes several books containing copies of letters and orders of Gen. Winder, Captains Wirz, Turner and W. S. Winder and Robert Ould, as well as instructions to the commanders of the various Richmond prisons. A register of Union patients at General Hospital No. 21 is also in this collection. In Record Group 249 are the Roll Call Books (October 18, 1861-January 24, 1865) which contain morning and evening reports on the numbers of prisoners in the various Richmond prisons and hospitals. This collection also has the "Morning Reports

of Sick and Wounded U. S. Prisoners at the Belle Isle Military Prison Hospital."

The Ryder Collection of Confederate Archives in the Tufts College Library contains 455 morning reports of prisoners in Richmond military prisons. These reports show the number of prisoners of war, Federal deserters, civilian inmates and the number of prisoners daily received and transferred.

Federal government reports are of little use in the study of Belle Isle Prison. During the last year of the Civil War, the Federal Government and U. S. Sanitary Commission released a number of propaganda pamphlets greatly exaggerating the dismal conditions of Southern prisons. Three such works were: U. S. Sanitary Commission, Narrative of Privations and Sufferings of United States Officers and Soldiers While Prisoners of War in the Hands of the Rebel Authorities (Philadelphia, 1864); House of Representatives, House Report No. 67, 38th Congress, 1st Session, Returned Prisoners (Washington, 1864); Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Rebel Barbarities: Official Accounts of the Cruelties Inflicted upon Union Prisoners and Refugees (Washington, 1864). In these and other reports, the North sought to demonstrate that Confederate authorities engaged in a deliberately destructive policy toward prisoners of war. Pictures of destitute and disease-ridden Federal soldiers in Richmond hospitals usually accompanied these propaganda pamphlets.

Personal letters concerning Belle Isle are few in number. Five letters from different Belle Isle prisoners are located in the C. S. A.

Army Department of Henrico Collection, Virginia Historical Society. All are addressed to Confederate authorities and treat solely of prisoners asking to take the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy. Four postwar letters from Jefferson Davis to Gen. Robert H. Chilton are in the Miscellaneous Collection at the Museum of the Confederacy. All discuss the Confederate government's attempt to relieve the suffering of the prisoners at Belle Isle and other Southern prisons. A letter from New York Private George W. Lambert to his father, located in this same collection, was valuable in illustrating conditions at Belle Isle during its first period of use. Lambert gave a detailed description of prison guards, the design of the prison, daily rations allotted to each prisoner and prices of foodstuffs both in Richmond and on the island.

The John H. Winder Papers, deposited in the Perkins Library at Duke University, are a great disappointment to Civil War historians. Most of Winder's letters and correspondence pertain to his early career as a Federal officer. During the Civil War, Winder was more interested in shifting blame for faulty prisoner-of-war system on other Confederate authorities rather than recording aspects of the prison system. The papers of Dr. William A. Carrington, also at Duke, are of much greater value. Throughout much of the Civil War, Carrington served as medical director of the Richmond hospitals. His observations concerning illnesses that afflicted Federal prisoners and Confederate soldiers are clear and precise. His correspondence is also of value in determining the problems the Confederate medical authorities encountered in their search for medical provisions. A letter by Private Turner Holley

of the 1st South Carolina Cavalry (located in this same depository) provides valuable information. For a period of two months Holley served as a guard at Belle Isle. His letter is the only such correspondence by a Belle Isle guard that could be located. Although Holley's epistle mainly concerns the shooting of prisoners by sentinels, it does present an interesting glimpse of the life of the guards on the island.

Two gigantic compilations, the Southern Historical Society Papers (Richmond, 1876-1952, 52 vols.) and the Confederate Veteran (Nashville, 1893-1932, 40 vols.) are indispensable in studying Civil War history. However, only the former proved of value in this narrative. Two noteworthy articles in the Papers are: J. William Jones, "The Treatment of Prisoners During the War Between the States" and Robert Ould, "Captain Irving and the Steamer Convoy--Supplies for Prisoners." Jones's serialized monograph is an outstanding polemic on the Southern view of the exchange question. A large portion of this article is taken from the "Report of the Joint Select Committee [Confederate Congress] Appointed to Investigate the Conditions and Treatment of Prisoners of War, March 3, 1865," O. R., VIII, 337-53. This article is a direct refutation of the House of Representative Report No. 67 and the U. S. Sanitary Commission's Narratives and Privations. The latter article in the Papers, "Captain Irving and the Steamer Convoy--Supplies for Prisoners," is an excellent summary of the efforts of Robert Ould and other Confederate authorities to gain supplies for both Southern and Northern prisoners.

Another excellent article is James J. Heslin (ed.) "The Diary of a Union Soldier in Confederate Prisons," The New York Historical Society Quarterly, XLI (1957). The soldier in question, Private Henry Heglman, was wounded and taken captive during the battle of Bristoe Station. His accounts of the conditions at Belle Isle and Andersonville are vivid and colorful, although he does tend to exaggerate the number of men confined and shot by the guards.

Prisoners' diaries and reminiscences are an instrumental part of any Civil War prison study. In general, however, the prisoners tended to exaggerate the evils of prison life. Hence, their accounts must be used with caution. Nevertheless, these personal records add color and drama to the narrative. Two prison accounts, William H. Jeffery, Richmond Prisons 1861-1862 (St. Johnsbury, Vt., 1893), and Alfred Ely, Journal of Alfred Ely, A Prisoner of War in Richmond (New York, 1862), were valuable sources in understanding the early development of the Richmond prison system. Jeffery's work is additionally important in that he vividly described the conditions of the various prisons located in Rocketts, as well as the transfer of prisoners to Salisbury and other prison sites.

This writer researched over 125 diaries and reminiscences of prisoners who were confined to Belle Isle Prison. No more than ten are worth mentioning as the other prison accounts are exxaggerated, biased, and based heavily upon U. S. Government and Sanitary Commission propaganda. Warren Lee Goss, The Soldier's Story of His Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and other Rebel Prisons (Boston, 1866) excels in its description of the daily life of the prisoners at Belle Isle.

Another excellent work depicting prison life at Belle Isle is Henry H. Eby, Observation of An Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prison--1861 to 1865 (Mendota, Ill., 1910), Although written years after the war, this account was based on twenty-nine letters written by Eby during his confinement at Belle Isle. James M. Page's The True Story of Andersonville Prison (New York, 1908) is a balanced and unbiased diary which contains not only an excellent description of prison life but also a superb analysis of the problems that Confederate prison authorities faced.

John L. Ransom, Andersonville Diary (Auburn, N. Y., 1881) is a gripping day-by-day account of a Michigan soldier's confinement at Belle Isle and Andersonville prisons. George W. Darby, Incidents and Adventures in Rebeldom, Libby, Belle Isle, Salisbury (Pittsburg, 1899), is useful in its description of conditions at both the Belle Isle Hospital and General Hospital No. 21. Other diaries and reminiscences containing useful information on Belle Isle are: Gilbert E. Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner of War (New York, 1865), William W. Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie, or My Personal Experiences in Rebel Prisons (Owatonna, Minn., 1889), Willard W. Glazier, The Capture, the Prison Pen, and the Escape (New York, 1870), Andrew Roy, Recollections of a Prisoner of War (Columbus, O., 1909), Asa B. Isham et. al., Prisoners of War and Military Prisons: Personal Narratives of Experiences in the Prisons of Richmond, Danville, Macon, Andersonville, Savannah, Millen, Charleston and Columbia (Cincinnati, 1890).

Several Federal officers confined at Libby Prison wrote excellent diaries which reveal much on Belle Isle. The four most noteworthy are:

Louis Palma Di Cesnola, Ten Months in Libby Prison (n. p., n. d.), Frederick F. Cavada, Libby Life; Experiences of a Prisoner of War in Richmond, Va., 1863-1864 (Philadelphia, 1865), James M. Sanderson, My Record in Rebeldom, as Written by Friend and Foe (New York, 1865), Louis R. Fortescue, "The Diary of Louis R. Fortescue" (deposited in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). All four of these officers were instrumental in delivering Northern supplies to prisoners on Belle Isle. Their observations are sharp, and their firsthand accounts of the conditions and daily routine of the prisoners on the island compound lack the bitterness so prevalent in diaries of enlisted men.

Unfortunately, this writer was unable to locate diaries written by either prison officials or guards.

An interesting diary on the life and people of the Confederacy is John B. Jones, A Rebel War Clerk's Diary at the Capital (New York, 1935). This work is valuable to this thesis because it accurately relates the effects of prisoners upon citizens of the Confederate capital. Although of little use to this study, Robert H. Kean's Inside the Confederate Government, edited by Edward Younger (New York, 1957), is excellent. Kean was head of the Bureau of War, and his observations on the functions and personalities of the Confederate War Department are incisive. Another journal of little use in this study, but a true Civil War classic, is Mary B. Chesnut, A Diary From Dixie (Boston, 1904). Chesnut's diary covers the major events of the Civil War and conveys the social and economic hardships endured by the citizens of the Confederacy.

Regimental histories offered much information on Belle Isle Prison. The three most useful were John D. Billings, The History of the Tenth Massachusetts Battery of Light Artillery in the War of the Rebellion (Boston, 1909), C. B. Fairchild, History of the 27th Regiment New York Vols. (Binghamton, N. Y., 1888), J. W. Muffly (ed.), The Story of Our Regiment: A History of the 148th Pennsylvania Vols. (Des Moines, 1904). The last-named reference is the most useful work concerning all aspects of prison life and conditions at Belle Isle. The information obtained from this regimental history provided more valuable material than that obtained from prisoners' diaries and reminiscences.

Few secondary sources exist on Civil War prisons. Three were useful in this study. Volume VII ("Prisons and Hospitals") of the Photographic History of the Civil War, (New York, 1911) is well-balanced and unbiased. Richard F. Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners of the Civil War (Boston, 1934) is useful in its description of the development of the Southern and Northern prison systems. However, Hemmerlein plagiarized considerably. The best secondary account of Civil War military prisons is William B. Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons; A Study in War Psychology (New York, 1930). This volume surpasses all other published sources on the subject and is especially useful in describing the development of both the North's and the South's prisoner-of-war systems, as well as the exchange question.

James K. Sanford (ed.), Richmond: Her Triumphs, Tragedies and Growth (Richmond, 1975), served as the chief source for background

information on Belle Isle. Kathleen Bruce's excellent work, Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era (New York, 1931), is unsurpassed in describing the various iron works that stood on Belle Isle.

Two annotated bibliographies were indispensable in referring the student of Civil War prisons to additional material: Allan Nevins et. al., Civil War Books: A Critical Bibliography (Baton Rouge, 1970, 2 vols.), and E. Merton Coulter, Travels in the Confederate States: A Bibliography (Norman, Okla., 1948).

VITA

Daniel Wayne Robinson, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Robinson was born March 10, 1954, in Lynwood, California. The writer was reared in Southern California, where he received his primary and secondary education through the public school system. In 1972, he entered Chaffey Community College and later transferred to California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, where he completed degree requirements. In the spring of 1979, the writer began his post-graduate work in the History Department at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and studied under Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr.

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BELLE ISLE: PRISON IN THE JAMES, 1862-1865

by

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(ABSTRACT)

This thesis is a socio-military history of the development and use of Belle Isle Military Prison; possibly the most notorious of all Civil War prisons. The prison compound stood on a seventy-five acre island in the James River, approximately one-half mile west of wartime Richmond. The island's use as a prison lasted intermittently from July 18, 1862 to February, 1865. During this period the Confederate authorities confined to Belle Isle over 20,000 Federal prisoners of war.

The Confederate authorities were unprepared from the very outset of the Civil War to deal with such a large number of prisoners. Due to lack of planning and foresight, the Confederate authorities improvised in a piecemeal fashion and with "stop-gap" measures a prisoner-of-war system. Confederate prisons came into existence merely to relieve the overcrowding at other prison sites. Belle Isle was such a stop-gap measure. The island prison was used only after the other Richmond prisons were congested.

The Federal prisoners at Belle Isle suffered from a number of diseases and illnesses, including pneumonia, pellagra, scurvy and dysentery. Possibly more devastating to the prisoners constitution were the psychological effects of prison confinement. So dismal

were the conditions on the island that it became know by many prisoners as the "most infamous bit of land in the national geography."