

DANVILLE'S CIVIL WAR PRISONS, 1863-1865

by

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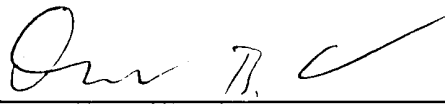
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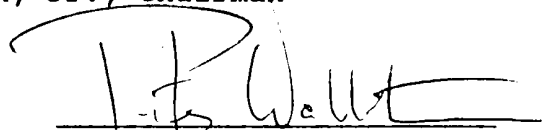
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PREFACE

In the years immediately following the American Civil War, few subjects provoked more controversy than the treatment of prisoners of war. The treatment of Union prisoners in particular came under harsh attack. Many Northern captives believed that they were victims of a deliberate plot to reduce the size of the Federal armies. Thus, they viewed inadequate shelter, meager rations, and poor medical treatment as calculated abuses. This theory generated hundreds of Northern "prison memoirs."

A plethora of prison accounts and numerous Federal government publications indicted Confederate prison officials for their systematic mistreatment of Union prisoners. Much of this literature was propaganda. For example, Henry M. Davidson predicated his Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons on his belief that Confederate officials deliberately neglected their captives' needs. Ralph Bates, author of Billy and Dick from Andersonville to the White House, was so obsessed with exposing Confederate atrocities that he described a stay in Andersonville one year before its establishment. Examples of government publications that advanced this theory were Rebel Barbarities: Official Accounts of the Cruelties Inflicted Upon Union Prisoners and Refugees, compiled by the Joint Committee on the Conduct of War, and The Report of the

Committees of the House of Representatives Made During the 3rd Session of the 40th Congress. Because so much biased literature exists, Civil War historians have had to evaluate each work for validity and objectivity.

With the passage of time, a more scholarly, in-depth study of Southern prisons has taken place. Slowly, the emotionally-charged tone of prison literature gave way to a more objective, academic approach. By 1930, William Best Hesselstine noted that it was possible "to examine the prisoners and prisons of the Civil War in a scientific spirit." Most twentieth-century historians have discarded the notion that deliberate atrocities distinguished the Southern prisoner-of-war system. Instead, they have focused on the similar problems that confronted captors and captives on both sides.¹

As Bruce Catton has stated: "Whether they were situated in the North or South, prison camps in the Civil War were almost incredibly lethal, and no refinement of figures leaves one side looking much better than the other." Many soldiers were sick or wounded at the time of capture, which contributed to the high mortality rate. This fact has often been overlooked. Every soldier taken captive endured miserable conditions. Both Northern and Southern prisoners experienced

¹ William Best Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology (New York, 1930), vii.

overcrowded facilities, poor rations, life-threatening diseases, filth, vermin, exposure to the elements, monotony, and depression. Many prisoners found captivity utterly unbearable. Some took great risks to escape, while others lost the will to live.²

Such problems existed because neither side was prepared for the confinement of enemy captives. In 1861, North and South alike were without precedent; never before in the nation's history had so many soldiers been taken as prisoners of war. Furthermore, Union and Confederate officials believed the war would be short. Consequently, neither attempted to establish a prison system during the first year of the conflict. Throughout the war both sides experienced great difficulty in caring for enemy soldiers

Southern officials in particular experienced many problems in the maintenance of enemy prisoners. The Union was quicker to appoint a man to take charge of prisons; on October 23, 1861, Lt. Col. William Hoffman assumed the position of commissary-general of prisoners. In the South, fragmentary control over the Union captives existed through most of the war. Secretary of War James A. Seddon, Gen. John H. Winder, and Brigadier General William M. Gardner shared control of the prison system. Communication was sometimes so poor that

² Bruce Catton, "Prison Camps of the Civil War," American Heritage, X, No. 5 (1959), 6.

compounds came into existence without the knowledge of all three men. Not until November 21, 1864, did Winder assume the position of commissary-general of prisoners.³

Such dilatoriness characterized the Confederacy's approach to its prison system. Southern compounds came into existence amid extreme chaos. A lack of forethought and organization seriously hindered the South's attempts to establish prisons. Often officials chose unsuitable locations or structures that were not intended for human confinement, such as stables on a fairground at Lynchburg, Virginia. Once the number of Federal captives outgrew the primary holding facilities in Richmond, the Confederacy's prison "system" rapidly deteriorated. Ad-hoc compounds sprang up throughout the South as the need arose. Consequently, prison commandants usually had little time to prepare buildings for long-term use. Even as late as March, 1865, officials continued to build new facilities. Throughout the course of the war, prisons "came into existence, without definite plans, to meet the exigencies of the moment."⁴

³ United 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, III, 321. Hereafter cited as O.R., with all references being to Series II. Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, 168, 162; O.R., VII, 1150.

⁴ Holland Thomas, "The Prisons of the War," The Photographic History of the Civil War in Ten Volumes (New York, 1911), VII, 40; Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, ix, 68; Richard F. Hemmerlein, Prisons and Prisoners of the Civil War (Boston, 1934), 25.

The conversion of six abandoned tobacco factories at Danville, Virginia, was perhaps the classic example of a facility designed to meet the "exigencies of the moment." On October 27, 1863, Gen. Robert E. Lee wrote to Secretary of War Seddon to suggest that a prison be established at Danville. Lee's objective was to relieve Richmond of some of its 12,000 prisoners, who had depleted the city's resources. The Danville compound came into existence to fulfill that very objective. A mere fortnight after Lee's suggestion, the six factories were in use.⁵

The selection of Danville as a prison site was indicative of the weaknesses that plagued the Confederate prison system. A lack of planning and forethought accompanied the decision to establish a compound in Danville. In 1860, the town enjoyed unparalleled prosperity, but by the third year of the war the standard of living had declined significantly. The manufacture of tobacco, which was largely responsible for the ante-bellum prosperity, ceased during the war. Prices of some basic foodstuffs increased by 300 percent. Accompanying the exorbitant prices was a shortage of goods. Many items, such as coffee and sugar, disappeared from the markets. The large number of refugees who lived in Danville compounded the supply problem. Over 3,000 displaced persons sought shelter in the

⁵ O.R., VI, 438.

town. The combination of these factors made Danville a highly unsuitable location for a prison.⁶

An understanding of the war's effects on Danville is necessary in order to appreciate the problems that occurred inside the town's prisons. The history of the prisons was intertwined with that of the town and, in a larger sense, the history of the Confederacy. The prisons did not exist as a separate entity. Instead, they were a part of the larger Danville community. Living conditions inside the compound often reflected the standards that existed in the town. Union prisoners and Danville civilians alike suffered the consequences of war: the ever-diminishing supplies of food, clothing, and medicine.

Despite the inauspicious conditions in the town, the factories at Danville served as one of the major prison facilities in the South. From November, 1863, to March, 1865, the compound held Union prisoners. It served as both a permanent place of confinement and a transitory depot for prisoners enroute to other facilities.

Although Danville was one of the South's major compounds, it has been ignored by Civil War historians. The only lengthy study of Danville's prisons in James I. Robertson's "House of

⁶ Harry Wooding, Sr., "Sketch of Danville," Harry Wooding Papers, University of Virginia, 4; Richmond Dispatch, Nov. 16, 1863; Charleston Daily Courier, June 28, 1862.

Horror: Danville's Civil War Prisons," published in the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography in 1969. The majority of prison literature focuses on the larger compounds in the South, such as Andersonville, Libby, and Belle Isle. Although the factory-prisons at Danville were incapable of holding tens of thousands, they merit attention because the Danville facility was illustrative of all that was wrong with the Southern prison system.

The lack of surviving official records makes any study of Danville's prisons problematic. Many of the inspection reports and daily records have been lost. In April, 1865, fires broke out in the Confederate capital of Richmond as Union forces occupied the city. Confederate documents from May, 1864, to the end of the war were destroyed in those fires. Surviving materials on Danville held at the National Archives primarily consist of a detailed clothing account book and a register of Federal prisoners confined in Danville's hospitals. These items are Entry No. 590 and Entry No. 53 of Record Group 249. Daily living conditions in the town of Danville are equally hard to recreate. In 1879, fire destroyed most of the surviving copies of the Danville Register, including the war years. Consequently, any study of the prisons requires a reliance on published materials and an in-depth search of archives for unpublished materials.

Despite the difficulty in obtaining Confederate records,

Danville's prisons merit serious study for several reasons. Between 7,000 and 8,000 Federals were confined at Danville; over 1,413 of these men died. Perhaps no other Southern compound was as hastily established. Thus Danville is an excellent case study for the problems that occurred when prisons were created too quickly. Finally, an examination of Danville's prisons, particularly when studied as a part of the larger community, illustrates the similar daily living conditions experienced by Union prisoners and Southern citizens alike.⁷

⁷ Virginia - North Carolina Piedmont Genealogical Society, "Register of Federal Prisoners of War of the U.S. Army Confined at Danville, Virginia, 1863-1864-1865" (Danville, 1982), 1. This register is a chronologically-organized compilation of the information contained in Entry #53, Record Group 249, "Register of the Federal Prisoners of War of the U.S. Army Confined at Danville, Virginia, 1863-1865 held at the National Archives at Washinton, D.C.

CHAPTER I
THE RAVAGES OF WAR

The Confederate prison at Danville, Virginia, never should have come into existence. The selection of the town as a location for a prison illustrated Southern officials' lack of forethought and organization in establishing new compounds. Danville was an extremely poor choice for the confinement of enemy captives. The community was in no position to maintain captured Federals. When the first prisoners of war arrived in November, 1863, the town was experiencing crowding, stagnant commerce, inflation, and a shortage of goods. These conditions significantly affected the prisons.

Perhaps no town experienced more travail over the course of the Civil War than did Danville. Although far removed from the battlefields of the struggle, the local citizens suffered great deprivation over those four years. The establishment of the prisons merely served as the climax of a long period of tribulation; Danville's troubles began as soon as the Virginia joined the Confederacy. The ravages of war transformed the town from a thriving tobacco manufacturing center to a desolate, stagnant village. An understanding of the town's decline is crucial in order to appreciate the problems that plagued the Danville prisons.

On the eve of the war, Danville was enjoying its golden

age. The largest town in Pittsylvania County, it lay a mere two miles north of the Virginia-North Carolina border. The town's most notable geographic feature was the swift-flowing Dan River. Edward Pollock, a visitor to the town, described Danville as "unique in its exceeding attractiveness." Its aesthetic appearance was not the only distinguishing characteristic of the town in 1860; its citizens were also enjoying an unparalleled period of growth and prosperity.¹

By 1860, Danville had overcome its humble beginnings. Approximately 3,500 people lived in the town. The population consisted of 2,616 whites, 245 free blacks, and 600-800 slaves. Citizens benefitted from a number of municipal institutions, including a post office and a circuit court. Two newspapers, the Danville Democratic Appeal and the Danville Register, circulated throughout the region. Thirteen private and public libraries existed, attesting to the importance Danvillians placed on learning and education.²

In addition to its libraries, Danville contained three private schools for girls. Young ladies could attend the Roanoke Female Institute or Danville Female College, commonly referred to as "the Methodist College." Those of the

¹ Edward Pollock, Illustrated Sketch Book of Danville, Virginia, Its Manufacturers and Commerce (Danville, Va., 1885), 8.

² Ibid, 36-38; U.S. Census Office, "Population Schedules of the 8th Census of the U.S., 1860: Virginia", Reel 1370.

Episcopal faith studied at the Danville Female Academy. The young men attended the Danville Male Academy, predecessor of the Danville Military Institute. These schools also attracted students from other locales, who boarded with local families.³

In addition to this growth of institutions, Danville was experiencing a period of unparalleled prosperity. By 1860, over thirty businesses existed in Danville. These included five banks, hotels, and a variety of retail shops. Merchants especially benefitted from the favorable economic climate. William Gratsy, a store owner who had moved to Danville in the 1840s, sold as much as \$1,000 of merchandise each month. James Voss's success proved even more impressive. Voss first worked as a tailor but eventually moved into selling manufactured clothes. In 1860 he owned \$23,000 in real estate and personal property. Despite the financial success of the town's businessmen, the most significant source of Danville's prosperity was tobacco manufacturing.⁴

By 1850, the production of tobacco was the mainstay of Danville's economy. During the decade the town experienced a tobacco boom, which resulted from the ability to grow bright

³ Jane Gray Hagan, The Story of Danville (New York, 1950), 72, 78; Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 38; Harry Wooding, Sr., "Sketch of Danville", Harry Wooding Papers, University of Virginia, 1.

⁴ Frederick F. Siegel, The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness Tobacco and Society in Danville, Virginia, 1780-1865 (Chapel Hill, 1987), 114-118; Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 37.

leaf tobacco. Consumers preferred the mellow flavor and golden color of the bright leaf which grew best in the sandy soil of Pittsylvania County. The leaf was delicate, and therefore hard to ship. However, manufacturing the leaf was easy, and planters found themselves in a favorable position to move into tobacco manufacturing. The Richmond and Danville Railroad, which arrived in the town in 1856, allowed manufacturers to ship the finished product to market.⁵

Danville's reputation as a manufacturer of fine-quality tobacco was well established by 1860. That year the town boasted thirteen tobacco warehouses and one inspection warehouse. Forty-six percent of the town's labor force worked in tobacco production. A large portion of the local slaves in addition to a number of hired slaves were responsible for Danville's success in tobacco manufacturing. In 1860, workers produced \$574,000 of manufactured tobacco, representing well over half the \$1,031,544 of tobacco products sold in Pittsylvania County. The tobacco industry generated many a personal fortune.⁶

⁵ Siegel, Roots of Southern Distinctiveness, 123, 129; Wooding, "Sketch of Danville", 4.

⁶ Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 33, 38; Siegel, Roots of Southern Distinctiveness, 130; Beatrice Hairston, A Brief History of Danville, Virginia, 1728-1954 (Richmond, 1955), 30; Charleston Daily Courier, June 28, 1862; Joseph Kennedy, Manufacturers of the United States in 1860 Compiled From the Original Returns of the Eighth Census (Washington, 1865), 626.

Two such "tobacco-made men" were Thomas Neal and William Thomas Sutherlin. Involved in tobacco manufacturing since the 1830s, Neal persevered through financially unrewarding years. His persistence paid off during the boom of the 1850s, when Neal's holdings exceeded \$48,500 at the beginning of the next decade. Sutherlin, mayor of Danville and President of the Danville Bank, was the town's most successful manufacturer. His factory was second in capacity and output to only one factory in Virginia, that of James Thomas in Richmond. In 1860, Sutherlin owned \$53,000 in real estate and \$102,630 in personal estate.⁷

Although not all Danvillians enjoyed such prosperity, the overall economic climate was good the year before the war. Many citizens benefitted from the financial good times brought on by the tobacco boom. They expressed confidence in their prospects in Danville at the beginning of the decade. One example was Dr. Robert E. Withers, a prominent Campbell County physician, who, particularly impressed with the town's prominence and prosperity, moved his family there in 1858. Almost immediately he profited from a lucrative practice. The majority of the town's residents experienced a similar success

⁷ Siegel, *Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 128, 134; Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 33; U.S. Census Office, "Population Schedules of the 8th Census of the U.S., 1860: Virginia," Reel 1370.

in their respective occupations.⁸

A low cost of living accompanied the general prosperity. Food prices quoted in an 1860 issue of the Danville Democratic Appeal indicated that most foodstuffs were easily affordable. Virtually everyone could purchase bacon, mutton, and beef. Items such as salt, butter, and sugar were also available at inexpensive prices. Produce and game were abundant in the markets. These economic good times prevailed throughout 1860, but the political events of the following year quickly ended the prosperous era in Danville.⁹

Tension dominated the early months of 1861. January witnessed the secession of five states; on February 1, Texas became the seventh state to join the Confederacy. Virginia stood divided over the issue of secession. While some wished to see the state leave the Union, advocates of secession were fewer in number as compared to the lower South. In Danville, citizens expressed a variety of opinions about the appropriate course of action.

Some townspeople favored secession because they believed that it would bring even greater prosperity to the town. However, the majority of Danvillians opposed secession.

⁸ Robert Enoch Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian (Roanoke, Va., 1907), 124.

⁹ Danville Democratic Appeal, July 18, 1860; Wooding, "Sketch of Danville".

William Sutherlin was known for his decided support for the Union. Dr. Withers made several passionate speeches against secession. Withers was convinced that such a course could only bring about "a war such as the world has never seen." Levi Holbrook, a native of Massachusetts and one of the town's leading educators, also advocated Virginia's remaining in the Union.¹⁰

The state legislature realized that the uncertainty about Virginia's future could not continue. On January 14, 1861, the legislators passed a law which provided for convention to resolve the secession issue. On February 13, the Convention assembled in Richmond. Sutherlin journeyed to the capital to represent Pittsylvania county. William Tredway, a banker from Chatham, was the country's other representative. Convention delegates debated whether Virginia should "dissolve the union between the State of Virginia and the other states under the Constitution."¹¹

On April 4, the delegates settled the secession question by a margin of almost two to one; 85 of the 129 delegates

¹⁰ George Washington Dame, Historical Sketch of the Roman Eagle Lodge (Richmond, 1895), 55; Levi Holbrook to President Andrew Johnson, June 3, 1865, William T. Sutherlin Papers, Duke University; Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 127.

¹¹ J. G. Randall and David Herbert Donald, The Civil War and Reconstruction (Lexington, Mass., 1969), 180; Siegel, Roots of Southern Distinctiveness, 150; John H. Brubaker, The Last Capital, Danville, Virginia, and the Final Days of the Confederacy (Danville, 1979), 11; Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 42.

voted against secession. Its defeat stemmed largely from men like Sutherlin who "used all the influence he possessed in true fidelity to the Union." Throughout the state people rejoiced, but their joy was short-lived. On April 12, fighting erupted at Fort Sumter. The situation caused tension at the Convention, but it was not until Lincoln's April 15 proclamation of insurrection and subsequent call for 75,000 volunteers that a real furor erupted amongst the delegates.¹²

Many viewed Lincoln's declaration as an act of coercion. Sutherlin made a speech that reflected the general sentiment at the Convention: "I have been a Union man, but, my God, I have never been a submissionist. Here are these 120 gentlemen who voted a few days ago against coercion. Has not coercion commenced already, and are they not honor-bound to make good the pledge?" On April 17, the delegates adopted the Ordinance of Secession by a vote of 88 to 55. "I saw men, strong reserved men, sign the Secession Ordinance while tears coursed down their cheeks," Sutherlin recalled.¹³

Like Sutherlin, most Danvillians believed that secession

¹² George H. Reese (ed.), Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861, 4, (Richmond, 1966), 2:3, 1:21; William T. Sutherlin to President Andrew Johnson, June 3, 1865, William T. Sutherlin Papers.

¹³ Reese, Proceedings, 4:22, 144; Myrta Lockett Avary, Dixie After the War (Boston, 1906), 48; Friends and Family of William Sutherlin, Memorials of the Life, Public Service and Character of William T. Sutherlin (Danville, 1894), 8.

was the only possible alternative after Lincoln's call for troops. Although many townspeople had wanted to remain in the Union, they were unwilling to take up arms against their fellow Southerners. One citizen stated: "our section of the state was not for war or secession, but the South was in for war and we had to take our place with our kinsmen." Some even viewed Virginia's withdrawal from the Union as a "catastrophe required by force of circumstances."¹⁴

Although Danvillians had no way of knowing it at the time, the Convention's decision would terminate the prosperity the town was enjoying. Once the delegates voted on April 25 to accept the Constitution of the Confederate States of America, Virginia was fully committed to the war. The next four years would take a heavy toll on the state. Although the citizens of Danville would not have to witness actual fighting on their soil, they nonetheless would experience immense suffering and privation throughout those years. Over the course of the conflict, the townspeople would unwillingly experience more anguish than citizens in more exposed areas of the South.¹⁵

The negative effects of secession and war began

¹⁴ Dame, Historical Sketch of the Roman Eagle Lodge, 55; William Sutherlin to President Andrew Johnson, June 3, 1865, William T. Sutherlin Papers.

¹⁵ Reese, Virginia State Convention, 4:449; Brubaker, The Last Capital, 11.

immediately. Danville at once experienced a loss of manpower. On April 23, 200 young men in the "Danville Blues" and "Danville Grays", the town's two military companies, left for Richmond to begin training for service in the Confederate army. The adult male population underwent further depletion when a battery of artillery and a troop of cavalry departed for war. Many of those who left had worked in some of Danville's most vital occupations, holding such positions as store clerks, merchants, warehousemen, and manufacturers. These services suffered because few trained men remained in town. As the war progressed, the town's population consisted only of blacks, old men, women, and children.¹⁶

The war quickly ended Danville's thriving tobacco manufacture. Those who had believed that secession and war would bring additional business to the town's factories soon realized how wrong they were. A visitor to the town in 1863 noted the decline in business since the advent of war. Although Danville had been a place of "considerable business importance at a previous time," many tobacco warehouses after two years of war lay empty and unused. In 1860, brothers J. W. Holland and C. G. Holland each owned tobacco firms. The war forced the two men to consolidate their individual

¹⁶ Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 44; James I. Robertson, Jr., The 18th Virginia (Lynchburg, Va., 1984), 2; Gilbert E. Sabre, Nineteen Months a Prisoner of War (New York, 1865), 76; Hagan, The Story of Danville, 15.

interests. T. J. Talbott had operated a successful tobacco factory since 1856, but the war so completely paralyzed commerce that he was forced to close his factory. Business dwindled to the point that the town "presented an appearance of general desolation." One man noted that "massive piles of bricks told of a better past than present for Danville."¹⁷

No longer could Danville pride itself as an education center. The war played havoc with Danville's institutions of higher learning. As soon as fighting commenced, the Male Academy closed its doors. The Female Academy and the Danville Female College languished and suffered as the number of students decreased. The Confederate army drew away many teachers, and trustees of the schools lost interest as more pressing concerns demanded their attention.¹⁸

The war also brought on extreme inflation in the town. As early as 1862, prices began to rise. Many citizens began stockpiling supplies in anticipation of prices soaring even higher. One merchant urged a lady to buy a year's supply of groceries before prices increased again. When she replied she had no more money, he loaned her enough to buy a year's worth of food. The escalation of prices was astonishing. In 1860,

¹⁷ Henry M. Davidson, Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons (Milwaukee, 1865), 66; Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 134-36; Bernhard Domschcke, Twenty Months in Captivity (London, 1987), 76; J. V. Hadley, Seven Months a Prisoner (New York, 1988), 55.

¹⁸ Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 100-01.

butter had sold for \$.20 per pound; by 1863 it sold for \$3.00. Potatoes increased from \$1.37 per bushel in 1860 to \$6.00 in 1863. A pound of meat which sold for \$.15 before the war cost \$.90 three years later. Citizens who had previously eaten at "tables loaded with everything good to eat at little cost" were often only able to purchase exorbitantly-priced basic foodstuffs in 1863.¹⁹

Accompanying the rising cost of supplies was a shortage of goods. Coffee disappeared in Danville as well as many other areas in the South. Flour became so scarce that it was auctioned and sold to the highest bidder. The war diet of Danvillians often consisted of simple fare, such as bread, meat, and rice. As the food supply dwindled, parents consumed less so that their children would have more food.

Compounding the supply problem were large numbers of refugees who flocked to Danville. The population reached 6,000 as displaced families from northern and eastern Virginia sought safe havens. The town became so crowded that the hotels could not house the entire refugee population. Out of necessity, local families opened their homes to strangers. According to one man "every house was filled to the limit of its capacity." The vast majority of the refugees were women

¹⁹ Withers, Autobiography of An Octogenarian, 192; Danville Democratic Appeal, July 18, 1860; Richmond Dispatch, Nov. 16, 1863; Wooding, "Sketch of Danville," 4.

and children who did not add to the town's labor force, but did deplete its supplies. Food shortages were common in refugee centers as more and more people taxed limited supplies. The twin evils of rising prices and dwindling supplies plagued Danville throughout the war.²⁰

Throughout the war Danville served as a military post. The Richmond and Danville Railroad was crucial to the Confederacy for the transportation of supplies. The government established an arsenal in the town for the production and repair of arms as well as the storage of ordinance supplies. In May, 1862, Confederate authorities established hospital facilities at Danville capable of holding 5,000 sick or wounded. The town's hospitals relieved Richmond of its excess population of soldiers wounded in the Peninsular campaign. Even as early as 1862, Confederates convalescing in the hospitals complained of inadequate medicine and rations. Such complaints revealed the rapid deterioration that occurred in Danville.²¹

The loss of manpower, crowding, the rapid demise of

²⁰ Asa O. Abbott, Prison Life in the South: At Richmond, Macon, Savannah, Charleston, Columbia, Charlotte, Raleigh, Goldsborough, and Andersonville, During the years 1864 and 1865 (New York, 1865), 46; Charleston Daily Courier, June 28, 1862; Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 192; Mary E. Massey, Ersatz in the Confederacy (Columbia, S.C., 1952), 56.

²¹ Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 191; Richmond Dispatch, May 30, 1862; G. W. Nichols, A Soldier's Story of His Regiment (Kennesaw, Ga., 1961), 71.

prosperity and productivity, escalating prices, and shortages were all tribulations that resulted from the war. These problems caused great suffering in Danville, virtually eradicating all vestiges of prosperity and the high standard of living. Yet it was not until late 1863 that the town would come face-to-face with enemy soldiers. That year, six of the town's abandoned tobacco warehouses opened their doors to receive Federal prisoners of war. For the rest of the conflict, Danvillians would live in direct contact on a day-to-day basis with one of the most horrible consequences of war: the maintenance of enemy prisoners.

Chapter II

"UNTIL A PERMANENT PLACE CAN BE FOUND..."

During the first months of their existence, Danville's prisons suffered from a lack of adequate preparation. The compound was created to meet immediate needs. Captor and prisoner alike suffered from this ad-hoc arrangement. The first Federals, particularly, endured chaotic living conditions. Because the factories were converted almost overnight, the earliest captives lacked the most basic necessities of life such as food and medical attention. The arrival of large numbers of enemy soldiers also created problems for the citizens of Danville. Such problems were virtually unavoidable because the prisons at Danville, as well as other Confederate compounds, were expected to serve as a panacea for the failed exchange system.

By 1862, the capture of prisoners had become a serious problem. The first year of the war saw so few military engagements that only small numbers of men fell captive. In 1862, fighting exploded in the East and West and caused the number of prisoners of war to increase dramatically. Some of those captured never experienced actual confinement; exchanges frequently took place in the field between generals. Other

soldiers endured only short periods of captivity which ended when special exchanges of individuals could be arranged. However, the majority of captured soldiers were marched off the field and placed in prison.

By February, 1862, the Confederates refused to grant more exchanges. Authorities hoped to pressure the Union into recognizing formally the Confederate States of America. Union authorities resisted and continued their standing policy of classifying all those in service to the Confederate States as "traitors." Meanwhile, large numbers of Federal prisoners began to accumulate in Richmond. In the North the public's support for an exchange program and the increasing burden on Richmond in the South led to the beginning of negotiations for a permanent system of exchange.¹

On July 22, 1862, Federal Gen. John A. Dix and Confederate Gen. D. H. Hill ratified a formal agreement. The Dix-Hill cartel provided for a general exchange of prisoners on a man-to-man basis, with a scale of equivalents for soldiers of unequal rank. Prisoners were to be exchanged within ten days of capture; excess prisoners on either side were to be paroled. The cartel forbade paroled prisoners from taking up arms or assuming any duty usually performed by soldiers. The cartel was intended to function throughout the

¹ Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, passim.

war; any misunderstandings that might arise were not to interrupt the exchanges, but should be "made the subject of friendly explanations" between the two exchange agents.²

Numerous problems³ plagued the Cartel virtually from its inception. Several snags arose concerning the paroling of captured soldiers. Men waiting to be exchanged lived in parole camps in which officials found it hard to keep order. Most soldiers resented the compounds because they would have preferred to wait out the time at home. Paroling guerrilla troops presented a special problem: captors had no guarantee that they would not return to bushwhacking. Finally, the prospect of parole was so tempting that some men deliberately allowed themselves to be captured. Theoretically, paroled prisoners, once formally exchanged, were supposed to return to their units. In reality, many simply returned home, washing their hands of military service. This practice became a real problem in the North.³

The termination of the exchange of commissioned officers also crippled the cartel. This breakdown resulted from an event that occurred before the cartel's establishment. On June 7, 1862, Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, the Federal officer in charge of the occupation of Louisiana, ordered the execution

² O.R., IV, 267-68.

³ Randall and Donald, The Civil War and Reconstruction, 334; Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 34, 76.

of William B. Munford, a citizen of New Orleans, for tearing down the Union flag. Confederate authorities demanded an explanation for the execution. By December, Union authorities still had not provided any written statement that explained Butler's act. Consequently, on December 24, President Jefferson Davis issued a proclamation which pronounced Butler a felon and an outlaw. The order further stated that no commissioned officer of the United States taken prisoner could be exchanged or paroled until Butler was punished. Four days later, Union Secretary of War Edwin Stanton ordered the termination of the exchange of commissioned officers. The failure to resolve the "Beast Butler" controversy spelled doom for Union and Confederate officers alike.⁴

The Union's use of black soldiers also complicated the exchange process. Confederate authorities refused to accord prisoner-of-war status to blacks. In his December proclamation, Davis ordered that all "Negro slaves captured in arms" and their white officers were not to be treated as prisoners, but were to be turned over to the Confederate States to be dealt with according to their laws.

This stipulation meant that blacks and their officers were subject to statutes relating to negro insurrections. In

⁴ Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 72, 86-87; James Ford Rhodes, History of the United States From the Compromise of 1850 (London, 1904), V, 485; O.R., V, 128, 795-97.

May, 1863, the Confederate Congress directed that blacks be turned over to the states from which they had fled, and that their officers be executed. The refusal to grant parity to black soldiers, in addition to the parole problems and the Butler controversy, terminated the cartel in late May. Starting immediately thereafter, large number of prisoners began to accumulate in Northern and Southern prisons.⁵

The discontinuance of the Cartel significantly increased the number of Union prisoners confined in Richmond. Captured Federals occupied warehouses throughout the city, as well as Belle Isle, an island in the James River. As the number of captives increased to 12,494, conditions in the city deteriorated. Food prices skyrocketed as more prisoners entered the city. Often prisoners received more food than the city's poor, who could not afford to pay the going rates for food. The price of wood also escalated as the presence of prisoners increased demand. Small riots frequently occurred. By autumn, 1863, the living conditions in the city were desperate.⁶

General Robert E. Lee realized that this situation could

⁵ Rhodes, History of the United States, V, 486; O.R., V, 940; Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 93.

⁶ Ibid., 115; Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States -- Illinois Commandery, Military Essays and Recollections, I (1891), 262; J.W. Muffly (ed.), The 48th Pennsylvania Volunteers (Des Moines, 1904), 381.

not be allowed to continue. In addition to the problems of rising prices and diminishing supplies, the city's transportation system was overtaxed because of the prisoners, he stated in a letter to Secretary of War James A. Seddon. Furthermore, the presence of large numbers of prisoners posed a military danger should the enemy attack the city. For these reasons, on October 27, Lee suggested to Seddon that arrangements be made to confine Union prisoners at Danville.⁷

Lee had no way of knowing how unsuitable a location he had chosen. He was unaware of the inflation, scarcity of goods, and the decline in living conditions Danvillians were experiencing. Lee believed the town to be an appropriate choice for several reasons. Its location at the terminus of the Richmond and Danville Railroad would make it an easy location to supply; its remote location in the state made it relatively safe from enemy attack; "cheap and abundant wood and provisions" served as a further inducement. In reality, the latter by then had already disappeared, and the railroad was steadily deteriorating. Only Lee's belief that the town was safe from attack was true.⁸

Seddon's reply to Lee indicated the extreme haste with which Southern prisons were established. Just seventy-two

⁷ O.R., VI, 438-39.

⁸ Ibid; Friends and Family of William T. Sutherlin, Memorials, 28.

hours after Lee had made the request, Seddon initiated arrangements to establish a military prison at Danville. By October 31, he had secured several "large vacant buildings" to convert into prisons. Seddon's reply to Lee suggested that the factory-prisons were created merely to remedy the immediate problem of disposing of the Richmond prisoners. "As a more appropriate, permanent place of imprisonment I am endeavoring to find and secure possession of some suitable island . . ." he informed Lee.⁹

The six buildings Seddon secured were abandoned tobacco factories, three of which belonged to the brothers J. W. and C. G. Holland. The prisons did not have individual names but were simply designated by their numbers. Prisons No. 1 through No. 4 were located along Spring and Union streets. Prison No. 1, a brick structure, was connected to No. 2, which housed the prison headquarters on the ground floor. To the west lay Prison No. 3, the officers' prison. At the intersection of the two streets stood No. 4. The remaining prisons were elsewhere in the town. Prison No. 5 was at the corner of Floyd and High Streets. The most formidable-looking of the buildings was Prison No. 6, at the intersection of Lynn

⁹ O.R., VI, 455.

and Loyal streets.¹⁰

Each of the buildings, except for No. 2, was a four-story brick structure. The buildings consisted of a ground floor or "basement" with dirt floors, and three upper stories. Behind each of the prisons was a small yard enclosed by a high wooden fence. The yards housed the sinks (toilets). A small building behind Prison No. 2 served as a cookhouse. Three buildings which had served as Confederate hospitals in 1862 housed both Northern captives and Southern soldiers. The main hospital stood at the intersection of Jefferson Avenue and Loyal Street, while another overlooked the old Danville and Western Railway Shops.¹¹

Confederate authorities in Richmond assigned Captain Henry McCoy to command of the prisons. McCoy received his orders to report to Danville less than a week before the first prisoners arrived. Thus, he had virtually no time to make any preparations for the maintenance and comfort of his captives. Like other Southern prison commanders, McCoy was unable to alter the conditions under which he worked.

An officer in the Quartermaster's Department, McCoy was

¹⁰ Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 47; Alfred S. Roe, In a Rebel Prison; or Experiences at Danville, Virginia (Providence, 1891), 9; James I. Robertson, Jr., "Houses of Horror: Danville's Civil War Prisons," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography LXIX, (1961), 331.

¹¹ Roe, In A Rebel Prison, 11; Solon Hyde, A Captive of War (New York, 1900), 117; Robertson, "Houses of Horror", 329.

described as possessing "great experience and intelligence in business." While serving as commandant at Danville, McCoy proved to be a less-than-vigilant guardian of prisoners. During the few months he was in command, escapes were common; it was only after noticeable numbers of men fled that he took measures to prevent future departures. McCoy was not entirely responsible for the lax security. The problems of securing the basic necessities of life for his prisoners, plus the unexpected outbreak of a smallpox epidemic in December demanded all his energy. Assisting McCoy as prison guards were five veteran companies: Company H of the 9th Virginia; Company C the 32nd North Carolina; Company C of the 53rd North Carolina; Company D of the 3rd Virginia; and Company G of the 18th Virginia.¹²

Few Confederate guidelines existed at the time for the maintenance of prisoners of war. On May 21, 1861, the Confederate Congress had decreed that prisoners could be "transferred from time to time." The Secretary of War was responsible for issuing such instructions to the Quartermaster General and his subordinates, and the War Department would provide for the "safe custody and sustenance of prisoners of

¹² U.S. War Dept. (comp.), "Compiled Service Records of Confederate General and Staff Officers and Nonregimental Enlisted Men," National Archives Microfilm Collection, Reel 170. Watt Marchman, ed., "The Journal of William J. McKell;" Civil War History, III (1967), 326; Pollock, Sketch Book of Danville, 47.

war." Prisoners were to receive rations equal in quantity and quality to those issued Confederate soldiers. These criteria were all that McCoy had to provide him with any sense of direction.¹³

Confederate authorities in Richmond wasted no time once Danville's prisons were "established." Anxious to rid the city of its excess population, prison officials at Libby, Belle Isle, and other compounds assembled Federal soldiers for transport. On November 13 and November 14, two groups of 700 arrived in the town. According to the Richmond Dispatch, groups of that number were to be sent from the city each day until 4,000 were transferred.¹⁴

The trip to Danville was an exhausting experience for the prisoners. The men were squeezed tightly into cars that previously had been used to transport cattle. Locomotives were old, "leaking steam in every joint and seam." Trains frequently stalled and were compelled to stop for several hours before continuing the journey. Often the prisoners had to exit the trains and walk when the engines approached uphill grades. The road itself was dilapidated. At times the track would spread apart, and the men had to spike it down before

¹³ Committee of the Confederate Congress, Report of the Joint Committee to Investigate Conditions and Treatment of Prisoners of War (Richmond, 1865), 11.

¹⁴ O.R., VI, 527; Richmond Dispatch, Nov. 14, 1863.

they could proceed. Although the distance from Richmond to Danville was only 140 miles, the trip sometimes took up to two days.¹⁵

On November 13, the first prisoners arrived at Danville to discover that Confederate authorities had made virtually no preparation for their reception. In the rapid attempt to convert factories into prisons, the authorities did little to ameliorate the condition of the buildings. A few of the earliest arrivals were pleased with their new homes. Harlan Smith Howard, a member of the 3rd Wisconsin Light Artillery, "liked our building very well." A Connecticut soldier stated that the factories were fairly comfortable. Prisoners previously confined at Belle Isle, where the only shelter consisted of tents, were pleased that they were no longer exposed to the elements. However, the vast majority of prisoners were quick to criticize the spartan accommodations.¹⁶

To convert the factories into prisons, Confederate authorities simply removed all furnishings from the buildings, barred the windows, and strengthened the doors. Only the four

¹⁵ William W. Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie (Owatonna, Minn., 1889), 15; Davidson, Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons, 63; Angus J. Johnston, Virginia Railroads in the Civil War (Chapel Hill, 1961), 176.

¹⁶ Howard Harlan Smith, "Diary of a Union Artilleryman," West Virginia History, XXXVI (1975), 320; Sheldon Thorpe, History of the 15th Connecticut Volunteers (New Haven, 1908), 139.

bare walls greeted the prisoners upon their arrival. Adjutant George Putnam of the 176th New York noted that the factories could have "been made fairly comfortable if they had been fitted up and cared for."¹⁷

The first prisoners also discovered that their captors had made no arrangements for heating the prisons. The winter of 1863-1864 was extremely cold, and caused great suffering among the prisoners. Realizing that the men must have heat, authorities began a search for stoves. Prisoners in No. 4 were the first to receive a stove and fuel. Early in December, the men in No. 5 received a stove but no wood. According to William Riley Haskins, a member of the 2nd Minnesota, the prisoners quartered in No. 2 remained without heat until January. Eventually, each of the three upper floors of the six prisons had two stoves.¹⁸

Even after the authorities equipped the prisons with stoves, prisoners still suffered from the cold. Furnishing prisoners with fuel proved a difficult task for McCoy. Firewood was in high demand in the town. With wood priced at \$35 per cord, McCoy could not afford to purchase enough wood

¹⁷ George H. Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia (New York, 1912), 34.

¹⁸ W. H. Empson, A Story of Rebel Military Prisons (Lockport, N.Y., n.d.), 38; Simon Helwig, The Capture and Prison Life in Rebeldom for Fourteen Months (n.p., n.d.), 18; William Riley Haskins, "Reminiscences", William Riley Haskins Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, 16.

to heat the prisons adequately. Further, the quality of the wood was poor; the prisoners sometimes received green wood which would not burn. The Federals obtained coal for their stoves to compensate for the lack of wood. Confederates issued the men "poor bituminous coal", imported from the interior of the state. Fires sometimes burned out because the coal supply was inadequate. Prison guards also suffered, for they occupied the ground floor which had no stoves.¹⁹

Nighttime and the accompanying drop in temperature proved a miserable experience. Often the buildings grew so cold at night that prisoners had to walk the floor to keep their blood circulating. Sometimes the cold was so intense that it actually awakened the prisoners. "By nightfall at Danville, with all that I could do, my legs would become numb to the knees," recalled one soldier.²⁰

McCoy realized that something had to be done to alleviate the cold. In December he allowed Federal authorities to send blankets and clothing to the men. He paroled a group of prisoners to serve as clerks. These soldiers visited each of

¹⁹ Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie, 19; U.S. House of Representatives The Report of the Committees of the House of Representatives Made During the 3rd Session of the 40th Congress (Washington, 1869), 869. Alonzo Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons (Oswego, N.Y., 1888), 210.

²⁰ Winfield Scott Neely, "Memoirs", Winfield Scott Neely Papers, Illinois State Historical Library, 12; Haskins, "Reminiscences", 17.

the prisons to determine which prisoners were in greatest need. On Christmas eve, clerks distributed shirts and pants. Although no one received an entire outfit, the men welcomed any clothing.

Prisoners accused the guards of stealing much of the clothing. Undoubtedly such accusations were true. Clothing was scarce in the town, even when the first prisoners arrived. Available articles were exorbitantly priced; a hat, for example, cost \$50. The clerks, according to one prisoner, sold the clothing to the guards. Consequently, the clerks "had plenty of money", he bitterly remarked. This extra clothing helped protect the men from the cold. However, McCoy was not satisfied. Concerned about the lack of fuel, he asked Confederate authorities in Richmond to provide 96 cords of wood and 4,000 pounds of coal.²¹

Perhaps the most obvious lack of preparation was evident in the filth the first prisoners encountered. Prison authorities had made few if any efforts to clean the buildings. Dirt and tobacco juice had accumulated on the floors. Filth was the cause of numerous complaints. One prisoner stated that the buildings could have "been made much better with a little washing and cleansing." Although a few

²¹ Marchman, "Journal of William McKell", 326; Haskins, "Reminiscences", 16; William Meade Dame to George Washington Dame, Oct. 28, 1863, William Meade Dame Papers, University of Virginia; "Compiled Service Records", Reel 170.

seemed unbothered by the dirt, most of the men at once improvised "housekeeping." Floors received several sweepings each day in the attempt to clean the buildings.²²

Unintentionally, the prisoners themselves were partially responsible for the filth. Each man who stepped inside the buildings brought with him a supply of lice. Most of the prisoners made a diligent effort to keep themselves as clean as the circumstances would permit. Occasionally some abandoned all attempts at cleanliness, which increased the prisoners' misery. By far the worst problem was the insufficiency of sink accommodations. Only a limited number could visit the sinks at a time. As a result, some men resorted to relieving themselves inside the prisons. The stench of the buildings permeated the whole town.²³

Danville officials were unprepared to receive the vast numbers that began arriving so quickly. Confederate authorities in Richmond apparently neglected to notify the Danville staff to expect as many as 4,000 prisoners. "Our numbers were somewhat uncertain," observed one officer. By

²² Samuel D. Foster to Mr. William Johnston and family, Aug. 17, 1864, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

²³ Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 13; Joseph S. Keen, Experiences in Rebel Military Prisons at Richmond, Danville, and Andersonville (Detroit, 1890), 16; Asa B. Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons with General Account of Prison Life and Prisons in the South During the War of the Rebellion, Including Statistical Information Pertaining to Prisoners of War (Cincinnati, 1890), 16.

November 25, less than two weeks after the prison opened, 4,200 prisoners were at Danville. Each prison contained four floors and each floor was "home" to 175 men. William W. Day, a Minnesota soldier placed in No. 2, recorded that each prisoner had an average of ten and one-third square feet of space. Men previously confined in Libby prison complained about the loss of space. Such crowding made sleeping especially problematic.²⁴

Only by arranging themselves in a meticulous fashion were all of the men on each floor able to lie down. The rooms were so packed that four columns of men lined the floor. Two rows slept with their heads against the walls; the remaining men formed two columns that slept head-to-head in the center of the room. Anyone who had to leave the room during the night found it nearly impossible to walk in the narrow aisles separating the columns. Upon returning, he was likely to find that his space had disappeared. During the first months, when each floor held 700 men, the prisoners had to sleep on their sides throughout the night. Sleeping "spoon fashion" proved most bothersome. When an individual wished to turn over, the entire column had to do likewise. Calls of "spoon left" or "spoon right" echoed throughout the rooms all night. The

²⁴ Davidson, Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons, 70; Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie, 15-16; Alva C. Roach, The Prisoner of War and How Treated (Indianapolis, 1865), 126; Willard W. Glazier, The Capture, the Prison Pen and the Escape (Hartford, 1868), 104.

unceasing noise and motion made sleep difficult, if not impossible. Often men lay awake the whole night waiting for daybreak.²⁵

As if crowding was not a severe enough problem, the prisoners' own actions compounded the problem. Men began to look for opportunities to escape as soon as they arrived. On November 14, the first escape occurred in No. 1. Under cover of darkness, men living on the ground floor slipped out to the yard. They cut a large hole in the wooden fence enclosing the prison yard. Approximately sixty-five men escaped through the hole.²⁶

In No. 5, the men dug a tunnel from the basement to the outside, through which 100 escaped. Prisoners in Nos. 2 and 3 followed suit. Each night several men escaped by jumping out of the ground floor windows. To prevent further escapes, prison officials declared the ground floors off limits at night. The prisoners living there were moved upstairs. James S. Anderson, a member of the 24th Wisconsin, complained that this policy resulted in "rooms full to suffocation." Although the policy seemed cruel to the captives, prison officials had little choice. Severe rebukes from Richmond officials for the

²⁵ Glazier, Capture, Prison Pen, and Escape, 104; Homer B. Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons (New York, 1915), 105.

²⁶ Marchman, "Journal of William McKell," 31.

number of escapes, forced the prison staff to tighten security.²⁷

Those who were caught were sometimes returned to prison without punishment. Occasionally, those who were caught digging tunnels lost their rations for short periods. The most public form of punishment, designed to serve as an example to the other men, was bucking and gagging. The culprit's hands were bound and slipped over his knees. A pole was then run through the space between his bent knees and extended arms. In his mouth, the guards placed a rag. Soldiers who attempted to escape sometimes received this punishment for periods of one to two hours.²⁸

Because the prisons stood in the center of town, the local residents could not fail to notice the plight of the Federals. Danvillians were well aware of the terrible conditions inside the factories. On November 24, the Lynchburg Virginian ran a copy of an editorial from the Danville Register. It criticized the "most wretched conditions" in the prisons. Crowding, filth, and lack of heat each came under attack. Humanity dictated that "these abuses should be corrected." The author emphasized that the

²⁷ James S. Anderson, Nineteen Months a Prisoner in the Hands of the Rebels (Milwaukee, 1865), 42; Davidson, Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons, 86.

²⁸ Marchman, "Journal of William McKell," 326; Empson, A Story of Rebel Military Prisons, 39; Robertson, "Houses of Horror," 331.

townspeople were not responsible for the state of the prisons; the blame rested upon the officers in charge. "We presume the Confederate authorities do not design to make the prison houses worse than the Black Hole of Calcutta," he scathingly concluded.²⁹

By far the most serious problem confronting the first prisoners was the inadequate supply of food. Prison authorities were unprepared to feed the large numbers of prisoners that arrived in November. The first group of men to leave Richmond received one day's rations. Many were so famished that they immediately devoured their entire supply of food; only a few were wise enough to husband their rations. The first prisoners arrived at Danville received no rations for two days, then were given half of a loaf of wheat bread.³⁰

Prisoners lived on a bread diet. The men found the loaves very coarse and sour. Prisoners complained that they did not receive enough bread, despite its unpleasant taste. Along with their bread, Federals drank water from the Dan River. Squads of ten men carried buckets down to the river to procure the day's supply. They also drew water from a nearby spring. Caught off guard by the large numbers of prisoners

²⁹ Lynchburg Virginian, Nov. 24, 1863.

³⁰ Davidson, Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons, 69.

who arrived the first week, prison officials could only supply the men with bread and water.³¹

A number of prisoners panicked when the food supply failed to increase after the first week. Distressed at the initial allotment, one group of officers waited several days to see if daily rations would increase. When no substantial change had occurred by November 19, the officers decided to try to escape. Believing that they would starve to death if they remained in prison, the men devised a plan to break down the prison door and rush the guards. Prisoners loosened the lock in the door and had only to remove the cross bar. The man assigned this task grew nervous and dropped the heavy bar, instantly alerting the guards. The Federal officers quickly abandoned their plan.³²

By the month's end, Confederate authorities had remedied the food supply problem. The arrival from Lynchburg of 300 head of cattle provided the prisoners with fresh meat. Throughout December, the Federals received a "pretty good quantity of good quality beef." The men also drew rations of bacon and boiled corn beef. Although the first prisoners to

³¹ Empson, A Story of Rebel Military Prisons, 38; Samuel S. Boggs, Eighteen Months a Prisoner Under the Rebel Flag (Lovingston, Ill., 1889), 12; Thomas Simpson, "My Four Months Experience as a Prisoner of War", Personal Narratives of the Events of the War of the Rebellion, 3rd Ser., (Providence, 1883), 30.

³² Davidson, Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons, 70.

arrive at Danville experienced an initial food shortage, the men confined there during the winter of 1863-1864 were fortunate to receive meat on a regular basis.³³

Soups, rice, and potatoes rounded out the men's diet. Cow-pea soup became a staple in the prisoners' bill of fare. The men welcomed the soup, but not the bugs that accompanied it. One prisoner observed that the small, hard-shelled black bugs would not disappear no matter how long the cooks boiled the soup. So many worms appeared in the cabbage soup that prisoners often dubbed it "worm soup." Sometimes a layer of green cabbage lice covered the soup. Prisoners merely skimmed the layer away before eating. Occasionally the soldiers received vegetable rations, which consisted of cabbage and peas. Vegetables were hard to procure on a regular basis, and throughout the prisons' existence large numbers of men suffered from scurvy. Although the quality of the food sometimes left much to be desired, the men generally appeared satisfied with the quantity of food during the first winter. Most of the men united in pronouncing the rations far superior in quantity to those they had received in Richmond. Some even went so far as to proclaim the rations "better in quality than

³³ Lynchburg Virginian, Nov. 24, 1863; Marchman, "Journal of William McKell," 325; Hyde, A Captive of War, 101.

at any other prison."³⁴

Once prison administrators remedied the food supply problem, a new catastrophe confronted them: an outbreak of smallpox. On December 13, the first case appeared. In all probability, prisoners from Richmond brought the virus with them when they entered Danville. Cases of smallpox appeared in Richmond as early as September. The disease reached epidemic proportions on Belle Isle in December, which caused Confederate authorities to arrange for the construction of a separate smallpox hospital. On December 9, a group of prisoners from the island left for Danville. Henry H. Eby, a member of the 7th Illinois Cavalry, arrived with this group. One week later, Eby had the disease.³⁵

Notwithstanding the origin of the disease, Confederate authorities were completely unprepared for the epidemic. The disease "broke out with unabated fury." Vast numbers of men contracted the virus so quickly that many died in the prisons before they could receive medical attention. When smallpox struck, one officer stated, "as many as eighteen patients lay helplessly on the floor without medicine while no effort was made to remove them." The disease swept through the prisons

³⁴ Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie, 17; Helwig, Capture and Prison Life in Rebelldom, 17; Boggs, Eighteen Months a Prisoner, 12; Neely, "Memoirs", 13.

³⁵ Henry H. Eby, Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons -- 1861-1865 (Mendota, Ill., 1910), 155.

so rapidly that sometimes two to three days passed before guards removed the dead from the prisons.³⁶

The inability of Confederate authorities to effect a quick transfer of infected men from the prisons caused severe problems. Healthy men came in constant contact with those who had the virus. As a result, the number of cases skyrocketed over the next several weeks. Few men escaped the disease, but many had it "in only the lightest form" and never required hospitalization. The presence of diseased soldiers increased to the general filth of the buildings. The stench caused by smallpox was nearly unbearable inside the crowded buildings; even the townspeople complained about the "excessive offensiveness."³⁷

Aware of the horrible conditions inside the prisons, the authorities scrambled to find a solution to the problem. The immediate dilemma they faced was where to put the infected men. The regular hospitals, located in the center of the town, filled up immediately. As early as December 17, construction of a new hospital was underway. Men built the new facility a mile west of the town on the right bank of the Dan river. The smallpox hospital consisted of three wards

³⁶ Keen, Experiences in Rebel Military Prisons, 11; House Report, 1131.

³⁷ Keen, Experiences in Rebel Military Prisons, 11; O.R., VI, 890.

which could accommodate a total of 150 men. The hospital compound also contained a cook-house and a dead-house. A row of eight tents served as quarters for convalescent prisoners and the hospital staff. Workers finished the smallpox hospital just before Christmas.³⁸

The new facility represented perhaps the only bright spot in the prisoners' otherwise dismal world. Stoves gave some warmth to the rooms. Prisoners slept on comfortable bunks with pillows and blankets. A laundry ensured that the men would have clean clothes to wear. The hospital contained an abundant supply of soap and water for washing. Prison officials also saved the best food for the sick men. The hospital diet consisted of wheat bread, a hash made of potatoes and beef, and fresh meat. To the prisoners these buildings seemed to be "a little piece of heaven." Despite their hasty construction, the smallpox hospitals at Danville grew famous for their lavish accommodations. "Without exception they were the best arranged and most commodious hospital buildings I saw in the South," recalled Solon Hyde, a hospital steward of the 17th Ohio.³⁹

The Confederate authorities quickly removed the sick to

³⁸ Lynchburg Virginian, Dec. 31, 1863; W. H. Newlin, A Narrative of Prison Escape (Cincinnati, 1890), 12.

³⁹ Davidson, Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons, 82; Thorpe, The History of the 15th Connecticut Volunteers, 128; Hyde, A Captive of War, 117.

the new hospital. Each prison had a steward who made a list of the sick requiring medical treatment. Every morning the hospital surgeon made rounds through the prisons. He examined all prisoners whose illnesses the steward could not determine. Smallpox symptoms included a high fever, general malaise and, in the advanced stages, the outbreak of pustules. Throughout December, large numbers entered the smallpox hospital.⁴⁰

An extraordinary percentage of men contracted smallpox. By December 17, four days after the first case appeared, 150 men were ill. One prisoner reported that an average of five to fifteen men from his building left for the hospital each day. In a single day 86 cases of the disease erupted in Prison No. 5. The virus continued to make inroads among the men into the new year. At the beginning of January, the regular hospital alone contained 92 cases of smallpox. Before the epidemic ended, 227 prisoners had been treated for the disease in the general hospital.⁴¹

The Confederate medical staff was not nearly large enough to handle an epidemic. Operating under a serious manpower

⁴⁰ Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie, 21; Davidson, Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons, 76; Joseph Shewmon, "The Amazing Ordeal of Pvt. Joe Shewmon," Civil War Times Illustrated, I, (1962), 46; Eby, Observations of an Illinois Boy, 157.

⁴¹ Lynchburg Virginian, Dec. 17, 1863; Boggs, Eighteen Months Under the Rebel Flag; 17; Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont Genealogical Society, "Register of Federal Prisoners of War of the Union Army Confined at Danville, Virginia, 1863-1864-1865" (Danville, 1982), passim.

shortage, Confederate authorities in Richmond could not provide McCoy with additional medical staff. Thus the Danville authorities turned to the prisoners themselves to remedy the deficiency. Soldiers who possessed medical knowledge, such as hospital steward Solon Hyde, assumed duties in the hospitals. Although these men performed their duties faithfully and compassionately, the opportunity to escape often proved too tempting. Security was especially lax in the smallpox hospital.⁴²

Early in January, William H. Newlin, an officer in the 73rd Illinois, took command of Ward No. 1 after the previous staff of prisoners had escaped from the smallpox compound. The same idea appealed to Newlin, who seized an opportune moment and escaped with his staff of five in February. Despite the high escape rate, the prison administrators continued to use the Federals as medical staff to care for the large numbers of sick.⁴³

Scarcity of medical supplies hampered the efforts to treat those infected. Medicines of all kinds were virtually unobtainable throughout the South because Federal authorities had declared medicine a contraband of war. As early as December, 1863, Newlin had commented on the "scanty supply" of

⁴² Hyde, A Captive of War, 111.

⁴³ Newlin, Narrative of Prison Escape, 11.

medicine. Following the example set in Richmond, Danville physicians decided to vaccinate the prisoners in hopes of preventing the disease from spreading further. Union authorities provided the Confederates with the virus to be administered in the vaccinations. The men could choose not be vaccinated, but most elected to try it. Unfortunately, the vaccine appeared to cause problems more often than preventing them. Gangrene could set in before the wound had time to heal. Many prisoners complained that their arms began to rot and consequently had to be amputated.⁴⁴

Notwithstanding complaints about the vaccine, the Federals attributed the high survival rate among smallpox victims to the outstanding care they received. A two-week stay in the hospital "greatly improved" Henry Eby's health. Doctors Richard Boyd and C. M. Hunter, the two Confederate physicians in charge of the smallpox hospital "did all they could for our boys." Dr. P. S. Dance, another Confederate surgeon, was well-loved for his kindness to the prisoners. The sick credited these men with conquering the dreaded disease.⁴⁵

The high quality of treatment in the hospitals "mitigated the virulence of the disorder." Although they had experienced

⁴⁴ Empson, A Story of Rebel Military Prisons, 39; House Report, 1131.

⁴⁵ Eby, Observation of an Illinois Boy, 157.

some problems at the onset of the epidemic, Confederate authorities at Danville distinguished themselves by their efforts to care for the infected prisoners. Undoubtedly, their diligent exertions were a major reason for the low mortality rate among smallpox patients.⁴⁶

More than any other event in the prisons' history, the smallpox epidemic revealed how closely intertwined were the prisoners' and townspeople's lives. The sympathy Danvillians expressed in November evaporated the next month in the face of the epidemic. Reflecting the feelings of the prisoners themselves, Danville residents lived in absolute terror of the disease. This terror dominated the lives of prisoners and citizens alike over the winter.

The prisons and regular hospitals stood in "the very heart" of the town. As soon as the first cases appeared, the townspeople feared the disease would spread rapidly throughout the town. Waste from the hospital ran down the streets of the town, collecting in level places until rain washed it away. No water system capable of cleaning the streets existed. The

⁴⁶ Neely "Memoirs", 13; Hyde, A Captive of War, 118. It is impossible to state the exact number of prisoners who died from smallpox because no records for the smallpox hospital have been found. The U.S. National Cemetery in Danville contains the graves of 182 men who died during the epidemic. Undoubtedly others succumbed to the disease. An unknown number were buried in separate smallpox cemeteries. Prisoners' memoirs reveal a consensus that the percentage of fatalities among the infected prisoners was relatively low.

horrible stench and the fear of contagion caused people to avoid the principal streets. From December to February, citizens and prisoners feared for their very lives.⁴⁷

It was not long before the citizens' worst fears became reality. By the end of December, smallpox had struck the civilian population. Mayor Thomas P. Atkinson stated that the disease "was raging within the limits of the corporation." Many of Danville's black residents contracted the disease. The smallpox hospital built in December lay near the town's black section, known as "Poor House Hill." It was ironic that Federal prisoners probably brought suffering and death to the black residents of Danville.⁴⁸

On January 28, 1864, the Danville Board of Health petitioned Secretary of War Seddon "move the prisoners some other place, or at least outside the limits of the corporation of Danville." Their worst fears having been realized, the townspeople felt justified in making this demand. Danvillians had entered the war reluctantly; it was not until Lincoln required Virginians to take up arms against her sister states that most Danvillians voiced support for the Confederate cause. It was the threat posed by the prisoners that the citizenry resented, not the Federals themselves. At no time

⁴⁷ Hyde, A Captive of War, 113; O.R., VI, 889-90.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 889; Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 198; Robertson, "Houses of Horror," 329.

previous to the epidemic, and at no time afterward, did they express such hostility to the Union captives. Fear, not malice, motivated the request for the prisoners' removal.⁴⁹

Fear of the disease continued to dominate life in Danville in February. Numerous cases still existed in the hospitals. Throughout the epidemic, prisoners eagerly searched for opportunities to escape. Early in the month, a large group of prisoners found just such a chance. Prisoners in No. 5 completed a tunnel from the basement of their building to the street. One night in February, 86 men escaped through this tunnel. The town "came alive with excitement; guns were fired and bells rung." Some of the townspeople formed a posse to capture the "smallpox Yanks" in order to prevent the disease from spreading further. Although earlier escaped captives had been pursued, no outbreak generated as much excitement as the one that occurred during the epidemic.⁵⁰

By mid-February smallpox finally began to abate inside the prisons. Each day the number of men removed to the hospital decreased. By the end of the month the smallpox hospital was no longer necessary; the few remaining cases could be treated at the regular hospital. As the epidemic

⁴⁹ O.R., VI, 889.

⁵⁰ Boggs, Eighteen Months Under the Rebel Flag, 13.

slowly wound to a close the townspeople's lives gradually returned to normal.⁵¹

It was not until March, 1864, that some sense of "normalcy" existed inside the prisons. Chaos had dominated the first four months of the prisons' operation. The first captives to arrive experienced severe inconveniences that arose from mass disorganization. The early arrivals found themselves crowded into ill-prepared buildings, and lacked adequate space, heat, and food. Just as Confederate authorities had nearly overcome these problems, the smallpox epidemic struck. Even after the initial problems of treating all those infected had been remedied, fear of contagion lasted throughout the epidemic. Undoubtedly some of the prisoners could not handle the psychological strain brought on by such chaos. Such men, who might otherwise have survived, simply lost the will to live. Those who did survive this "seasoning time" at Danville found the next several months' captivity less devastating.

⁵¹ Newlin, Narrative of a Prison Escape, 12.

CHAPTER III

"THIS PROSTRATING ENNUI"

Prisoners confined at Danville from March to August, 1864, enjoyed the most auspicious conditions in the compound's history. Warm weather, adequate rations, and lower disease rates alleviated much of the suffering that characterized the early period. The first prisoners had experienced so much chaos that their paramount concern was mere survival. With the advent of more tolerable living conditions, a new problem confronted the captives: the monotony of prison life.

Many prisoners commented upon the dreary repetitiousness of day-to-day existence. Henry M. Davidson, a member of the 1st Ohio Light Artillery, noted that "each day's events were but a recurrence of those of the preceding." Idleness became the men's worst enemy. For those who focused upon it, boredom was as deadly as any disease. "This monotony at length became more horrible than our imprisonment, and death would be a welcome change, so utterly exhausted were we with this prostrating ennui," Davidson concluded.¹

The majority of the Federals recognized the dangers of idleness. George Putnam, a member of the 176th New York, commented upon the psychological decline associated with

¹ Abbott, Prison Life in the South, 208.

inactivity. "We realized that unless our minds, or at least our thoughts could be kept busy in some fashion, there was risk of stagnation that might easily develop into idiocy," he stated. Numerous prisoners remembered men who spent their days staring at the floor. Almost always such individuals lost control of their mental faculties. Most of the captives realized that they had to overcome the tedium in order to survive. Therefore, soldiers engaged in a daily routine filled with as much activity as possible.²

Prisoners began each day by caring for their toilet. Upon awakening, most needed to use the sinks in the yard. Groups of only thirty at a time could leave. As a result, the men "experienced great difficulty in getting to the sinks in the morning." Long lines formed on each floor of the buildings as prisoners awaited their turn. A consensus existed among the captives that the sink accommodations were not commensurate with their needs.³

As soon as the soldiers answered the call of nature, the "real business of the day" began. "Skirmishing" took place in each of the six prisons as soon as it was light. A Rhode Island prisoner described the practice thusly: "There

² Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 47.

³ Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 217; George W. Grant Diary, May 8, 1864, George W. Grant Papers, Duke University; Keen, Experiences in Rebel Military Prisons, 16.

occurred a searching examination of every particular seam and thread in our clothes, from head to foot for vermin, which was plentiful." The captives removed one piece of clothing at a time to examine it for lice; each of the pests had to be removed and crushed. Prisoners found lice especially tormenting. "They swarmed upon us, making our days days of woe," William Day recalled. Almost as soon as the men removed the lice, a new supply took their place. Thus, skirmishing occurred several times each day.⁴

Prisoners at Danville benefitted from limited bathing facilities. One soldier noted that it was possible to have a sponge bath "without the sponge." Some washed themselves at the troughs in the yards. Confederate authorities sometimes issued soap to the captives. Those who had access to soap and water were quick to utilize them. Soldiers who refused to keep themselves clean increased the misery of all. Few prisoners possessed combs or razors. For the majority, skirmishing and bathing represented the only means of attending to personal hygiene.⁵

At 8:00, the men lined up for roll call. When the guards entered, prisoners formed in four ranks. An actual roll of

⁴ Simpson, "My Four Months Experience as a Prisoner of War," 30; Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie, 22; Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 17.

⁵ Abner R. Small, The Road to Richmond (Berkeley, Cal., 1939), 169; O.R., VI, 1126; Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 13.

prisoners' names was not used. Instead the sergeant of the guard merely counted the men on the first floor and then worked his way upstairs. Roll call became a challenge for the captives. When prisoners escaped, those who remained tried to conceal the fact. Sometimes men in the rear ranks slipped farther down the lines to be recounted. More often, soldiers on the lower floor were lifted through holes cut in the ceilings to be recounted on the upper floors. Several prisoners lingered on the stairs to delay the guard. Federals successfully employed this technique on numerous occasions.⁶

After the completion of roll call, the prisoners received "breakfast", which generally consisted of bread and river water. Small squads of men made the short trip to the Dan River to procure the morning's supply of drinking water. In addition to the water, a square of corn bread completed the meal. Some of the prisoners burned their bread crusts which they added to their water to make a concoction that passed for "coffee." After they finished breakfast, captives turned their attention to cleaning the factory-prisons.

Federals did not engage in housekeeping merely to pass the time. Prisoners in each of the six factories found themselves living in filth. Dirt and dust accumulated on the

⁶ Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 100; George Sherman, "Assault on Fort Gilmer and Reminiscences of Prison Life," Personal Narratives of Events in the War of the Rebellion, 8th Ser., (Providence, 1897), 41.

floors. Lice and fleas infested the buildings. Worst of all, captives lived in their own waste. At times up to seventy-five waited in line to visit the sinks. Some "were obliged to make their evacuations right on the floor. Men would relieve nature everywhere." The captives found such conditions unbearable.⁷

Prisoners used splint brooms that they themselves had manufactured to sweep the floors. Sweeping was an arduous task. Dirt had hardened into a thick crust. Occasionally the men used water to "wash and scrub the floors." Filth was such a problem that the captives often cleaned the prisons several times a day. However, nothing could be done to rid buildings of vermin.⁸

Cleanliness concerned some prisoners more than others. In Prison No. 3 the officers devised a list of rules "to promote decency." Each of the rooms was to be swept four times per day. Officers were not to shake clothing inside, nor could they wash in the water buckets. Another rule stipulated "no being filthy or lousy." Finally, men were not to loiter in the yard so that all could use the sinks. An officer of the day enforced these rules. According to one

⁷ Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons, 16; House Report, 1004.

⁸ Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III (1908), 45.

officer, "the observance of these rules wrought wonders in correcting evils which had become almost unendurable."⁹

Later in the morning, Confederate surgeons made rounds through the prisons. Stewards presented the surgeon with "sick lists." Prisoners whose names appeared on the list were removed to the hospitals for treatment. Hospital registers indicated that the number of hospitalized prisoners decreased over time. During much of July and August, the hospitals contained fewer than 100 prisoners per day.¹⁰

During the middle period of the prisons' operation, many of those who entered the hospitals suffered from rheumatism and scurvy. However, the most prevalent disease was chronic diarrhea. During the Civil War, medical authorities considered diarrhea a disease; they failed to realize it was often was a symptom of other illnesses. The disease was attributable to the prison diet. Prisoners consumed large quantities of unsifted corn meal and received almost no fruits or vegetables. The men complained that the river water was unhealthy and caused stomach cramps. Over the course of 1864, the hospital surgeons "treated" 983 patients for diarrhea. Of

⁹ Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 87.

¹⁰ Register of Hospital Patients, National Archives Record Group 249, No. 1110.

these, 246, or 25 percent of those affected, died.¹¹

A consensus existed among the prisoners that the warm months represented the healthiest period in the prisons' history. "My health is good and the general health of the prisoners is good," William Haskins wrote in a letter to his parents in March. A month later, Lyman H. Needham, a member of the 42nd Illinois, observed: "my health is very good and has been most of the time since I have been a prisoner." Others described their fellow prisoners as "looking well and fleshy."¹²

Some prisoners feigned illness in order to be sent to the hospital. The Federals believed that sick prisoners stood the best chance to be exchanged. Furthermore, conditions inside the hospitals were superior to those in the prisons. Captives in the hospital enjoyed straw mattresses, better food, and a clean environment. Townsmen often visited the sick and brought them small gifts of food. However, it may have been the ladies of Danville who served as the greatest

¹¹ Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont Genealogical Society, "Register of Federal Prisoners," passim.

¹² William Riley Haskins to Parents, Mar. 5, 1864; Lyman H. Needham to Brother and Sister, Apr. 10, 1864, Lyman H. Needham Papers, Illinois State Historical Library; Samuel L. Foster to Mr. William Johnston, Aug. 17, 1864, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

inducement.¹³

Although a number of Danville women worked in the hospitals, prisoners singled out the matron and the assistant matron for praise. The matron, the widow of a Confederate officer, "deserved kindly mention on account of kindnesses extended to our very sick boys, many of whom received delicacies which only a woman's hand knows how to administer." The sick loved her for her acts of sympathy: "a word of cheer, a moistening of fevered lips with lime juice from her little silver cup."¹⁴

Even more renowned for her acts of kindness was Miss Anne Eliza Johns, the assistant matron. A devoutly Christian woman, Miss Johns sought to direct the men's attention to spiritual matters. With her own money she purchased pictures of religious scenes to brighten the wards. She encouraged the sick to turn their thoughts toward God. Not one to neglect the prisoners' secular concerns, Miss Johns mended clothing, wrote letters to families, and comforted those in pain. She ministered "as faithfully to the enemy as to our own beloved

¹³ Marchman, "Journal of William McKell," 331; Thorpe, History of the 15th Connecticut Volunteers, 128; Francis W. Palfrey, Memoir of William Francis Bartlett (Boston, 1878), 124; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 106.

¹⁴ Hyde, A Captive of War, 120.

men." In turn, the Federals were devoted to "our Miss Anne."¹⁵

Conditions inside Danville's hospitals disproved the theory that Federal prisoners were mistreated. From 1862 until the end of the war, sick and wounded Confederate prisoners also occupied the hospitals. General Orders No. 159 ordered Confederate authorities to place hospitals for prisoners on the same footing as other Confederate hospitals in all respects; rations were to be the same as those issued to soldiers in the field, and prisoners were to be "treated with kindness." The hospital staff at Danville enforced these regulations. A local minister observed that treatment and rations were equal. On one occasion he found a Federal officer crying tears of joy when he observed hospital matrons distributing equal rations to Union and Confederate patients. Furthermore, soldiers on both sides suffered from the same diseases. Chronic diarrhea, pneumonia, and fevers, the very illnesses that claimed many prisoners, were also the killers of Southern soldiers.¹⁶

Prisoners who suffered from perhaps the deadliest of

¹⁵ Laura Johns Abbot, "Anne Eliza Johns," Anne Eliza Johns Genealogical File, Danville Public Library, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid; Dame, Historical Sketch of the Roman Eagle Lodge, 59; Raymond W. Watkins, "List of the Confederate Soldiers Who Died in the Danville, Virginia, General Hospitals 1862-1865 (Danville, 1983), passim. O.R., VI, 548, 647.

diseases did not qualify for a stay in the hospitals. Mental illness was as lethal as any physical disease. Once men lost interest in living, death soon followed. Those who made no effort to engage their minds experienced a serious psychological decline which sometimes resulted in insanity. References to prisoners whose "reason had fled" were common. Captives were well aware of the dangers associated with mental passivity, and relied upon their ingenuity to keep themselves busy.¹⁷

The manufacture of woodwork and bonework was a popular pastime. The prisoners' tools consisted of knives, cold chisels, and bits of glass. After the men confiscated some old tobacco presses they found in the basements, however, more elaborate tools came into existence. Prisoners fashioned saws out of sheet iron, bolts, and case knives. The men produced crude drills from darning needles, bows, and string. "Although the tools were made in a primitive manner, they were very serviceable," one prisoner stated.¹⁸

The captives used these tools to produce a variety of carved "trinkets." Carvings took shape from beef bones and laurel root supplied by the guards. Spoons, napkin rings,

¹⁷ Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 23; Small, The Road to Richmond, 122.

¹⁸ Hyde, A Captive of War, 93; Isham, Prisoners of War and Military Prisons, 209.

pipes, rings, and pins took shape under skilled hands. Highly-skilled prisoners produced more sophisticated items, such as chessmen. Henry Davidson observed that "the noise in the prisons reminded one of the busy hum of an extensive machine shop, so constant were the labors of those within."¹⁹

Prisoners enjoyed woodworking for two reasons. The manufacture of crafts was a time-consuming process, and the more time spent working "the better pleased the mechanic would be." Captives benefitted psychologically from any productive activity; they also profited financially. Federals found a ready market among the guards for every type of woodwork. By 1864, many everyday items had disappeared from Southern markets because of the effectiveness of the Union naval blockade. Highly-skilled craftsmen received orders and commissions for their work. Prisoners used their payment to purchase extra food, especially "delicacies," and tobacco.²⁰

Those who did not possess carving skills engaged in other activities. Reading was a favorite pastime. The prisoners owned a few books and magazines. Winfield Scott Neely, a prisoner from Illinois, recalled "the pleasure of overlooking a copy of Harper's Magazine." Newspapers seldom circulated through the prisons. The limited supply of reading matter was

¹⁹ Ibid., 210.

²⁰ Ibid. Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 23.

in use from morning to night.²¹

The Bible was the favorite book among the prisoners. Many of the captives devoted a portion of each day to religious study. "Some found none too much time to study the scripture," one man noted. Often religion provided the sole source of comfort. Prisoners felt connected to their loved ones when engaged in devotions. Some turned their attention to spiritual matters because of a desire "to be a consistent Christian." Others, troubled by the possibility of death, embraced religion out of an awareness of their own mortality.²²

While some prisoners devoted themselves to the study of religion, others pursued more secular knowledge. Many captives attempted to learn a foreign language. Capt. William Cook, an officer of the U.S. 9th Colored Troops, taught French while Adj. George Putnam of the 176th New York presided over a German class. Others engaged in historical debates, which sometimes produced comical arguments. One officer discussed Euclid's achievements as "an early English writer." Math and science were also popular subjects. A twenty-five year old copy of Hitchcock's Elementary Geology was "quite

²¹ Neely, "Reminiscences," 19; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 141.

²² Small, The Road to Richmond, 173, 218; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 98.

interesting", according to one prisoner. The need to stay busy was so crucial that soldiers studied almost any subject.²³

Mail call was the high point of any day. Few events cheered the prisoners as much as receiving letters. Captives compared letters to "rays of sunshine." Mail represented one of the few opportunities for the men to receive news about war developments. Soldiers also longed for news of loved ones. The Federals themselves sent massive numbers of letters home. These letters often ended with a plea for more frequent correspondence.²⁴

Letters were not the captives' only source of news. Over the spring and summer of 1864, Danville also served as a temporary holding facility for prisoners enroute to other compounds. Many were on their way to Andersonville, which opened on February 27, 1864, to alleviate crowding in Richmond. "Fresh fish" who had come from the Confederate capital created an uproar. Old prisoners bombarded the new arrivals with questions about the latest exchange news and war developments. Richmond captives had greater access to newspapers and thus were able to pass along new information.

²³ Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 45; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 69, 91-92, 140.

²⁴ Ibid., 88.

Discussion of the latest events occupied many hours.²⁵

Prisoners also participated in less serious activities to fill the long hours. Games were a common pastime at Danville. Soldiers held daily chess and checker competitions. Those lucky enough to possess a deck of cards enjoyed a variety of games. So often were the cards in use that they were worn down into "hardly legible oval shapes." Other games testified to the prisoners' ingenuity. The captives often held "races" in which they placed two lice on a hot surface to see which would "run" first.²⁶

Union soldiers displayed a remarkable ingenuity in their efforts to entertain themselves. However, nothing delighted them more than diversions that were not of their own creation. Visitors to the prisons helped break the monotony. Levi Holbrook, one of Danville's most prominent citizens, often visited the factories. The prisoners described him as a "kindly man" who brought books to the Federals. Colonel Robert Withers also frequently visited the captives. Many townsmen entered the factories with small gifts of food and clothing taken from their own scanty supplies. While the Federals appreciated the gifts, they most enjoyed the

²⁵ O.R., VI, 925.

²⁶ Sherman "Attack on Fort Gilmer and Reminiscences of Prison Life," 31.

opportunity for social intercourse.²⁷

In the afternoon, after the intense heat of midday had faded, most of the prisoners attempted to get some form of exercise. George Grant of the 88th Pennsylvania noted that captives benefitted from outdoor exercise. Some men strolled in the yards. Others volunteered for water detail to avail themselves of the opportunity to walk to the river. The short trip to the Dan also provided the men with a chance to enjoy fresh air and sunshine.²⁸

Water detail was most popular, however, because it presented an excellent opportunity for escape. The path from the prisons to the river passed by the ruins of an old bakery; several large ovens remained at the site. Because the two guards who accompanied the water detail did not count the prisoners, one man could slip away undetected. The others created a diversion so that the man in the rear could dodge into the oven. After dark, the individual headed for Union lines. At least eighteen prisoners escaped this way.²⁹

²⁷ Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 91; Greensboro Daily News, Jan. 10, 1971; Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 196.

²⁸ Simpson, "My Four Months Experience as a Prison of War," 30; Grant Diary, May 8, 1864.

²⁹ James Bracken, "Take to the Old Oven: Escape From Danville," Civil War Times Illustrated, XXII (October, 1983), 45; Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 228; Simpson, "My Four Months Experience as a Prisoner of War," 33.

Late in the afternoon, the men received a second meal. "Dinner" consisted of bread, meat, and soup or rice. Prisoners did not receive vegetables on a regular basis, although Confederate authorities occasionally issued peas and cabbage. Enlisted prisoners cooked for each of the six prisons.

During the middle period of the prisons' operation, Federals agreed that the prison staff provided adequate rations. Those who had come from Richmond prisons commented upon the difference in food. According to Willard Glazier, a member of the 2nd New York, the food allotment at Danville was one and a half times that at Richmond.³⁰

Prisoners who kept diaries or journals often recorded entries such as "got enough to eat" or "our rations are sufficient." Others were more laudatory. Horace Rowe of the 4th Vermont stated: "When we got to Danville we were fed plenty -- sufficient for anyone. This is the only place we got half enough to eat." A fellow member of the 4th Vermont recalled that the captives could draw as much bread as they wanted.³¹

The quality of the rations, however, caused more

³⁰ Glazier, Capture, Prison Pen, and Escape, 103; Grant Diary, May 8, 1864.

³¹ Leon Basile, ed., The Civil War Diary of Amos E. Stearns (London, 1981), 61; House Report, 814, 820, 830.

complaints. Charles Humphreys, Chaplain of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry, grumbled that the "tough, indigestible beans" found in the soup made the men sick. Complaints about the quality of the meat were common. Pork issued to the prisoners was "sometimes very poor." According to one Federal, the meat "was generally very fat Bacon and sometimes very badly cured. It was never washed much."³²

Captives were most critical of the inadequate supply of drinking water. During the hot summer days, prisoners often complained that "not enough buckets could be delivered to keep us adequately supplied." When George Grant arrived at Danville in May, he noted that "the prisoners fare badly here for water. This morning we did not receive any for a long time." During rainstorms the Dan River became quite muddy. As a result the drinking water was "thick and turbid." Throughout the summer the men complained about the quantity and quality of their drinking water.³³

Federals who occupied the factories during the middle period voiced few real complaints about hunger. Although some grumbled about the quality of their food, very few suffered

³² Charles Humphreys, Field, Camp, Hospital, and Prison in the Civil War (Boston, 1918), 124; Marchman, "Journal of William McKell", 328; Samuel L. Foster to Mr. William Johnston, August 17, 1864, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

³³ Domschcke, Twenty Months in Captivity, 76; Grant Diary, May 8, 1864; House Report, 868; John Worrell Northrop, Chronicles From the Diary of a War Prisoner (Wichita, Kan., 1904), 46.

from actual hunger. Ironically, the prisoners appeared to have suffered less privation than the citizens of Danville. While Union captives generally agreed that they received enough food, Danvillians experienced great difficulty in feeding themselves.

Escalating prices reduced the purchasing power of the lower classes throughout the South. Danville was no exception. Jed Carter, a Confederate soldier camped near the town, commented on the exorbitant prices he encountered. "We sometimes buy some potatoes and turnips but we have to pay very dearly for them. It takes all our wages to buy something to eat," he complained in a letter to his wife. Carter did not exaggerate. By 1864, bacon cost \$6.10 per pound; corn sold for \$22.50 per bushel; a barrel of flour cost \$205. Such items were well beyond the means of many citizens.³⁴

The presence of large numbers of refugees seriously taxed the food supply. Furthermore, all townspeople had to pay a "food tax" to support the Confederate armies. Colonel Withers reported the tax was so excessive that little meat remained in the town. So scarce was meat that "no one considered eating it more than once a day." Often the supply was so scanty that a small child could consume the entire family's share.³⁵

³⁴ Jed Carter to Sue Carter, Nov. 22, 1863, Jed Carter Letters, Duke University; Richmond Enquirer, Mar. 29, 1864.

³⁵ Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 209.

Families employed numerous tactics to survive such hardships. Many scaled back and lived on much simpler fare. Others relied on friends in other locales to send provisions. Most resorted to the use of substitutions. Flour virtually disappeared and was replaced by corn meal. Molasses took the place of sugar. The Lynchburg Virginian advocated the use of sorghum as a substitute for meat. Even prominent families used substitutes. Although Col. Withers had enjoyed a lucrative medical practice before the war, when his eldest daughter married in August, 1864, the "wedding buffet" consisted of "rye coffee, sorghum cakes, and biscuits."³⁶

The plight of the townspeople was well known to many of the prisoners. Journals and memoirs contain frequent references to the suffering of citizens. Alfred S. Roe, a member of the 9th New York Heavy Artillery, stated that "the poverty of the country was apparent." Many alluded to the gloomy atmosphere in the town. Prisoners who realized that the common people of the South suffered harsh living conditions were often the least critical of the privations they themselves endured.³⁷

After the Federals finished their rations, the day

³⁶ Ibid., 210, 206; Lynchburg Virginian, Apr. 20, 1864.

³⁷ Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 36; John Gregory Bishop Adams, Reminiscences of the 19th Massachusetts Regiment (Boston, 1899), 112.

quickly wound to a close. In the early evening a second roll call took place. Once darkness fell, the prisoners found it impossible to move about without collisions. Small groups gathered to discuss home and freedom until they retired. The men developed a habit of "turning in all together at the same time." Each night the captives faced the grim realization that the next day would be a repetition of the same events. Yet they knew that "at the worst we are twenty-four hours nearer release."³⁸

Throughout the course of the day, prisoners came into contact with their captors. In most prisons, whether they were located in the North or South, mutual animosity distinguished relations between prisoners and guards. Occasionally, however, a rapport developed between the two groups. Such was often the case at Danville. Although acts of cruelty sometimes occurred, a surprising degree of cordiality existed between Confederate guards and Union captives.

In February, 1864, Maj. Mason Morfit assumed command of the prisons after McCoy was assigned to claim-settling duty in Alabama. During his nine months as commandant, Morfit proved to be a highly controversial administrator. Prisoners credited him with acts of exceptional kindness and deliberate

³⁸ Sherman, "Assault on Fort Gilmer and Reminiscences of Prison Life," 44; Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 16.

torment.³⁹

According to some prisoners, Morfit possessed a dark side. Numerous prisoners stated that Morfit issued the order limiting the number of men who could visit the sinks at one time. The men damned the commandant for such cruelty, and complained that the policy was especially unfair to men who suffered from diarrhea. A Massachusetts soldier stated that Morfit told guards to shoot anyone who grumbled. Another charged him with "terrorizing the prisoners in every conceivable way."⁴⁰

Other captives attributed to Morfit acts of extreme courtesy. One officer recalled Morfit sending him note-paper to replace the "scraps of paper" on which he was trying to write a letter. Morfit sometimes arranged for extended periods of hospitalization for weak prisoners. A Pennsylvania soldier believed that "he treated us as kindly as it was possible for anyone to do under the circumstances."⁴¹

Morfit may have singled out some captives for special treatment. E. J. Johnson, a soldier from Twinsburg, Ohio,

³⁹ U.S. War Dept. (comp.), *Compiled Service Records*, Reels 182, 170.

⁴⁰ Davidson, *Fourteen Months in Southern Prisons*, 95; Hyde, *A Captive of War*, 125; *House Report*, 845; Domschcke, *Twenty Months in Captivity*, 76.

⁴¹ Palfrey, *Memoir of William Francis Bartlett*, 21, 127; *House Report*, 821.

credited the commandant with numerous acts of friendship. "I doubt if another Federal prisoner was ever conducted from out of the prison to dine with the officer in command," he wrote years after the war. According to Johnson, this ritual took place on a number of occasions. Morfit allowed him to visit the other prisons. He extended to the captive "many courtesies not given to prisoners of war but on rare occasions. In many ways he showed a warm friendship for me." So impressed was Johnson by this treatment that he maintained correspondence with Morfit after the war.⁴²

Most Federals, however, did not have contact with the commandant. More often they were acquainted with the prison guards. The two groups interacted with one another in a variety of ways. Often, both laid aside their official "roles" and related to each other as individuals. Occasionally the Federals did accuse their captors of deliberate cruelty.

Nearly all complaints of "atrocities" stemmed from guards shooting prisoners. "Dead lines" existed in all prisons, including Danville. The men were forbidden to lean out the windows or even to stand in front of them. Those who violated the rule risked their lives. Numerous captives were shot during their confinement in the factories; only 21 died from

⁴² E. J. Johnson to J. P. Leach, Feb. 22 and Mar. 13, 1905, J. P. Leach Papers, North Carolina State Archives.

gunshot wounds over the course of the prisons' operation. Hospital records do not indicate if the fatalities resulted from prison shootings or battle wounds. On most occasions, the guards shouted warnings before firing.⁴³

Most guards who fired on the Federals did so merely to obey orders. Sentinels may have deliberately "missed" their targets to avoid killing the men. Sometimes prisoners stepped in front of the windows and refused to move, even after repeated warnings. In such cases sentinels had no choice but to fire or risk harsh disciplinary action. The Lynchburg Virginian stated: "The orders, it seems to us, are needlessly stringent."⁴⁴

On rare occasions guards deliberately tried to kill prisoners. One officer recalled an incident in which a fellow captive was engaged in conversation with a guard. Suddenly, and for no reason, the sentinel fired on the Union soldier. William Broomfield, a member of the 1st New York Cavalry, described an unusual event in his diary: "a guard fired into the prison for no apparent reason." Broomfield later learned that the youth's uncle had been killed in battle and the young

⁴³ Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 30; Virginia - North Carolina Piedmont Genealogical Society, "Register of Federal Prisoners," passim.

⁴⁴ John Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison (Truro, Mass., n.d.), 9; Lynchburg Virginian, Feb. 8, 1864.

man swore "to have the life of a Yank" for revenge.⁴⁵

Notwithstanding complaints about shootings, the prisoners appeared satisfied with their treatment. "We have been used very kindly, and from what I have learned, the enlisted men also have been used well," one officer informed his father. Another commented that he found the guards to be "more friendly than I ever expected they could be." An Ohio captive, recalling an instance in which he was "bucked and gagged" for attempting to escape, commented on the sympathy displayed by his captor: "I saw compassion in your eyes for my silent suffering," he wrote in a postwar letter to the guard who punished him.⁴⁶

Often the guards took measures to make life more pleasant for their captives. Among the North Carolina companies were a number of secret Unionists who helped the prisoners whenever possible. Federals recalled instances in which they received books, clothing, tobacco, and food from their captors. John F. Ficklin, a young guard from Danville, provided the Union soldiers with Confederate money and food from his own table. Sometimes the prisoners were fortunate enough to receive

⁴⁵ Hyde, A Captive of War, 128; William Broomfield, "My Imprisonment Down in Dixie," Civil War Times Illustrated, XXVII (Jan., 1989), 28.

⁴⁶ George W. Grant to James A. Grant, May 10, 1864, George W. Grant Papers; Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison, 10; E. J. Johnson to J. P. Leach, Mar. 30, 1903, J. P. Leach Papers.

invitations to visit their captors' homes for meals. Those who could not furnish the Federals with gifts found other ways to help. Charles Brady was "kind and pleasant in his personal intercourse with us"; on one occasion Brady transferred a soldier to a different prison so that he could be with members of his own unit.⁴⁷

Prisoners and guards sometimes engaged in playful relationships. Sometimes the Federals would trade their blankets for rice through the ground-floor windows. So many men would hold on to the blanket that the guard would be caught struggling to remove it. For their part, the Confederates sometimes passed ash-filled sacks instead of rice into the prisons. Other captives recalled how they "teased the guards" by singing "we will hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree."⁴⁸

Although the very nature of captivity precluded any prison stay from being pleasant, Union soldiers confined at Danville during the spring and summer of 1864 enjoyed the most hospitable conditions in the compound's history. Adequate rations, fewer diseases, and good treatment by the guards

⁴⁷ Samuel L. Foster to Mr. William Johnston, August 17, 1864; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 97, 126; Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 35; Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie, 17; Keen, Experiences in Rebel Military Prisons, 15.

⁴⁸ Haskins, "Reminiscences," 26; Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie, 18.

distinguished the middle period. Overcoming the day-to-day monotony may have been the prisoners' greatest challenge.

By the end of August, however, living conditions began to deteriorate. The relatively relaxed atmosphere inside the factories changed overnight. Once again, anxiety dominated the Federals lives. Extreme cold, dwindling rations, higher disease rates, and increased psychological suffering distinguished the compound's final period of operation. Those who occupied the compound during this period endured the most lethal living conditions in the prisons' history.

CHAPTER IV

"THE STATE OF THINGS IS TRULY HORRIBLE"

During the fall and winter of 1864-1865, unparalleled privation taxed the endurance of prisoners and civilians alike. Ever-diminishing supplies of food caused hunger and malnutrition both inside and outside the prisons. The extreme cold that characterized the winter months increased the misery of all. However, the worst problem by far was the despondency that dominated Danville. While the town's citizens despaired of Confederate victory in the war, many prisoners believed that they would never leave the factories alive. The combination of these problems yielded a gloomy atmosphere that lasted until the end of the war.

Throughout the prisons' final months of operation, the Federals suffered immensely from the cold. As early as October prisoners complained about the weather. Major Abner Small of the 16th Maine recorded in his diary that October 20 was cold and cloudy. Two days later he described the weather as "raw and cold." To combat the chill inside the building, a number of officers pooled their money to purchase an extra stove. Small noted that "the superannuated relic" was in

constant use.¹

As the months passed, the weather grew even colder. One officer recorded in his diary detailed entries about the climate. November 13 ended with a very cold night. His notes for November 22 included the statement: "weather cold with a raw north wind. Suffered severely from cold during the night." By December, snow had fallen and the Dan River froze over "solid enough to make a safe crossing on the ice." At times the temperature dropped so low that prisoners suffered frozen hands and feet.²

One explanation for the extreme cold inside the prisons was that the factories were never "winterized." The ground floor windows did not contain glass and were boarded up only halfway. Consequently, cold winds blew into the buildings. Prisoners complained that cracks in the floors allowed the wind to penetrate the upper levels. Such conditions made sleeping a miserable experience. "Wind came through the floors so freely as to make it seem as though we were sleeping on ice," one captive complained. Others stated that they had

¹ Small, The Road to Richmond, 171, 217, 219; Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States Maine--Commandery, War Papers, III, 44. Hereafter cited as MOLLUS.

² Major Byron Parsons Diary, Nov. 13, Nov. 22, 1864, and Dec. 10, 1864, Major Byron Parsons Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress; Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 210; House Report, 869.

to massage their legs upon awakening to restore circulation.³

Insufficient heat contributed further to the captives' suffering. Although Confederate authorities had provided two stoves for each floor of the prisons, captives complained that the outdated devices failed to warm the rooms. Two of the "oldest-fashioned cylinder stoves" heated the place "quite imperfectly." Many prisoners commented upon the obsolescence of the stoves, but the supply of fuel drew the most criticism.⁴

Both the quantity and quality of fuel came under attack. Prisoners were issued coal and wood. Usually they did not receive enough of either to heat the buildings adequately. Fires sometimes burned out in the middle of the day. One officer stated that "with careful attention" fires could be kept burning all day, but by night "the stoves afforded little comfort to any." Although Morfit submitted requisitions to Confederate officials in Richmond for 83 cords of wood, an inadequate supply existed throughout the winter.⁵

Some prisoners attributed the lack of heat to the

³ Sherman, "Assault on Fort Gilmer and Reminiscences of Prison Life," 41; Simpson, "My Four Months Experience as a Prisoner of War," 24.

⁴ Ibid. Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 36.

⁵ Ibid. House Report, 869; MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III, 44; U.S. War Dept. (Comp.), Compiled Service Records, Reel 182.

inferiority of the coal. Soldiers described the anthracite as "the very poorest quality, abounding in slate rock." Sometimes the men went without fires because the coal would not burn. When the captives exhausted their daily allotment, Confederate authorities allowed them to make the quarter-mile trip to the pile to replenish their supply. One Federal observed that the "extra" coal made little difference, "owing to its poor quality."⁶

The lack of heat was particularly critical because many of the prisoners did not have enough clothing; those who had been captured during the spring or summer were not dressed for cold weather. Many Federals had neither shoes nor overcoats. An officer from New York stated that among 350 men "there may have been sixty scraps of blanket."⁷

A number of prisoners appealed to the Masons of Danville for assistance. Such men were quick to identify themselves as fellow members of the order. One soldier whose clothing had nearly worn out stated: "I am suffering more than I can bear in such cold weather. Hope you are able to assist me." Another prisoner complained that he was "destitute of necessary clothing and blankets," and beseeched the Masons to

⁶ MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III, 45; Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 218; Small, The Road to Richmond, 228.

⁷ Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 40; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 130; Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison, 17.

help him.⁸

Although some members of the order did supply the Federals with clothing, few Danvillians were in a position to help the prisoners. During the war, Anne Eliza Johns owned just three dresses, each of which was homespun. She wore these garments throughout the four years, even though her hospital duties reduced the dresses to "candidates for the ragbag." Throughout Danville, citizens patched and mended their old clothing. Few could afford to purchase new clothes; by the beginning of 1865, a calico dress and a pair of shoes sold for \$475, a sum far beyond the means of most townspeople.⁹

Early in December, 1864, Union and Confederate authorities reached an agreement to allow clothing from the North to be sent to the prisons at Danville, Richmond, and Salisbury, N.C. Unfortunately, not until early February did the shipment arrive at Danville. The contents included 992 blankets, 1,100 shirts and blouses, and 500 pairs of pants. Prisoners received the item they needed the most; no one obtained an entire outfit. Although the Federals welcomed the

⁸ William Schagle to Honorable Brother Masons of Danville, Jan. 29, 1865, William Meade Dame Papers; Lt. H. L. Adams to Rev. George Dame, Feb. 3, 1865, ibid.

⁹ Abbot, "Anne Eliza Johns," 2; J. Downing to Rev. George Dame, Feb. 11, 1865, William Meade Dame Papers; Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 36.

much-needed clothing, some accused the guards of stealing the supplies for their own use.¹⁰

One irate prisoner claimed that the guards appropriated the entire shipment and taunted the captives by "shaking their clue overcoats in our face." In actuality, the Confederates confiscated only a portion of the clothing. Colonel Gilbert Prey, the Union prisoner in charge of the distribution at Danville, stated that 37 blankets, 23 pairs of pants, and 157 shirts and blouses were missing when the supplies reached him.¹¹

Because the guards themselves lacked adequate uniforms, the temptation proved too great for some. Many possessed worn, shabby uniforms. According to one Federal officer, the Confederates on duty at Danville "were arrayed in rags of every shade of grey and brown." A large number of the guards not only lacked clothing but were also barefoot. In the face of such suffering, some Confederates could not refrain from helping themselves to the Northern shipment of shirts and pants.¹²

However, the majority of the guards who sported "Union

¹⁰ Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons; Clothing Account Book, Records Group 249, No. 590, National Archives.

¹¹ Empson, A Story of Rebel Military Prisons, 41; Clothing Account Book; Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison, 24.

¹² Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 213; MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers III, 51; O.R., Ser. I, XLVI, pt. 2, 1151-52.

clothes" obtained the garments by trading with the Federals. Many prisoners bartered their clothing for tobacco or extra food. A large number of soldiers were dependent on tobacco products. One officer who owned a fine pair of boots parted with them because "his luxurious habit of smoking demanded a sacrifice." More often hunger drove the captives to swapping their garments for additional food.¹³

The captives' willingness to forfeit their clothes in the dead of winter in order to supplement their diet revealed the extreme deterioration of the food supply. As the months passed, the problem grew more severe. By the closing months of 1864, and continuing until the end of the war, extreme hunger dominated life in Danville, both outside and inside the prisons.

Although Danvillians had experienced some reduction in their diet over the summer of 1864, nothing prepared them for the magnitude of privation they encountered during the winter. Already-exorbitant prices skyrocketed even further. By early 1865, oysters could be had for \$.50 to \$1.00 each; onions for \$1.00 a piece. The small supply of flour that remained sold for \$700 per barrel. Bacon reached \$12 per pound, an 80 percent increase over the 1860 price; coffee, at \$50 per pound, had risen 333 percent. Butter sold for \$15 per pound,

¹³ Day, Fifteen Months in Dixie, 21; Small, The Road to Richmond, 173.

up 75 percent from its pre-war price. Faced with such inflation, many families purchased smaller and smaller amounts. "Luxuries" such as coffee and butter disappeared from most households.¹⁴

Not only did citizens encounter staggering prices during the winter, they also suffered from unparalleled shortages. According to Col. Withers, "food became more and more scarce." Even staple items diminished in supply. At the beginning of March, 1865, the Danville Register stated that salt was very scarce; families could purchase only ten pounds per month. One agent urged people to "hurry and get rice" because the supply was nearly exhausted. On March 3, two grocers took out an ad in the town newspaper to offer to sell one barrel of Georgia syrup and one barrel of vinegar. So severe was the food shortage that items such as a piece of bacon, a cake of gingerbread, and a few walnuts were auctioned in Danville.¹⁵

The lack of sufficient food contributed to an increase in the town's crime rate. Citizens lucky enough to procure wild game, which often had been sent by friends in less devastated areas, resorted to tying the animals inside their houses. The mere sight of game caused a frenzy. Danville's black

¹⁴ Danville Register, Mar. 1, 1865; Danville Democratic Appeal, Jul. 18, 1860; MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III, 53.

¹⁵ Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 209; Danville Register, Mar. 1 and Mar. 3, 1865; Brubaker, Last Capital of the Confederacy, 40.

population especially suffered from the lack of food. One man noted that "the negroes were on shorter rations than they had ever been in their lives." Most blacks lacked the necessary money or "connections" to feed themselves adequately. Consequently, thefts of foodstuffs constantly occurred among the town's black residents.¹⁶

Rampant hunger among the civilian populace guaranteed a miserable existence for Danville's prison population. Almost overnight, statements such as "rations are sufficient" disappeared to be replaced by more despondent comments. As early as October, 1864, Federals complained less about the quality of their food than the ever-decreasing quantity. By the time the majority of the captives left Danville in February, 1865, rations were so scanty as to be almost incapable of sustaining life.

During the summer months, the soldiers had received bread, meat, and soup on a daily basis. As winter approached the soldiers seldom were given all three items in a single day. One Federal observed that September daily rations consisted of six to eight ounces of corn bread and a cup of soup or a small piece of beef. During the months of October and November one officer recorded that only on four occasions

¹⁶ Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 210.

did he receive bread, meat, and soup on the same day.¹⁷

A few prisoners kept detailed accounts of the food they received at Danville. Homer B. Sprague, a Colonel of the 13th Connecticut, listed the rations he received from October 20, 1864 to February 17, 1865: bread, every morning; meat, forty-three times; soup, sixty-two; potatoes, seven times; and salt fish, five. The soup he pronounced "very weak", and the meat included "jaws, tails, and intestines." Another captive recorded his diet from October to January. He received meat on eleven occasions, fish on three, and soup four times, in addition to the daily supply of bread. Diaries indicated that sorghum was often issued "instead of meat."¹⁸

Officers fared better than enlisted men because they were able to supplement their rations. Some officers possessed the necessary funds to purchase extra food. Few lived on prison fare alone. Those who had ample money could purchase from the guard apples, onions, sorghum, and sometimes meat and flour "at fabulous prices." A captive from Maine noted: "We have run through \$100 in about six days." Officers also wrote letters to their families to request boxes of supplies. Federals asked for everything from coffee and ham to

¹⁷ Sherman "Assault on Fort Gilmer and Reminiscences of Prison Life," 38; Parsons Diary, passim.

¹⁸ Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 93; Small, The Road to Richmond, passim.

chocolate, nutmeg, and tapioca. Another tactic employed by officers was a mutual-supply arrangement: Northerners would furnish a Confederate prisoner with food and money in exchange for reciprocal treatment of a Union captive by a Southern family. Charles Mattocks, a member of the 17th Maine Infantry, cautioned his parents to select a prisoner "whose relatives live handy to this prison."¹⁹

Most of the soldiers confined at Danville did not have the necessary means to make such arrangements. They resorted instead to more desperate measures. Some hugged themselves in an effort to pinch their stomachs, in hopes that pangs of hunger would become less noticeable. Occasionally, hospitalized captives slipped into the cook house to search for food. One captive who did so "refrained from telling the straits to which I was forced in my researches, and the quality of alleged food that I secured there." At times hunger became so severe that the captives ate rats, or "sold" them for a piece of bread. Numerous prisoners consumed the rodents by "making an excellent soup." This practice was not new; for months Richmonders had been eating rats, which

¹⁹ MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III, 57, 53; Small, The Road to Richmond, 170; Charles Mattocks Journal, Charles Mattocks Papers, Bowdoin College, 294, 295.

brought as much as \$2.50 each in the markets.²⁰

By the beginning of 1865, prison rations dwindled down to cornbread and water alone. "We eke out a miserable existence with about half as much corn bread as we could eat," one officer complained. Another commented that the daily allotment of a four-inch by three-inch piece of bread "would not more than half satisfy an ordinary man for his breakfast." As the month passed, the loaves became even smaller. The soldiers grew so despondent over the lack of food that some broke down and wept.²¹

Prison guards also suffered from hunger. "They too complained bitterly of the rations issued to them," one captive observed. By the last several months of 1864, the guards' entire daily ration consisted of a pint of raw corn meal. Captors suffered as more and more food was sent to Southern armies in the field. Quartermaster's Department officials appropriated nearly all of the meat and flour left in Danville. One Federal recalled "loads of beef and meal going through the square to the depot for their army." Because Confederate officials reserved the bulk of the

²⁰ Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 20, 37, 12; Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison, 23; Massey, Ersatz in the Confederacy, 63; John B. Jones, A Rebel War Clerk's Diary (New York, 1958), 259.

²¹ Mattocks Journal, 289; Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 218; MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III, 46; Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 36.

diminishing food supplies for soldiers who were doing the fighting, "home guards" such as those at Danville experienced an increasing reduction in their rations as the months passed.²²

Hunger not only demoralized the prisoners but also contributed to a loss of strength. With so little to eat, the soldiers' mental capacities suffered. Captives abandoned their chess and card games because the effort to concentrate caused dizziness and fainting spells. Some were so weak from hunger that the trips up and down the stairs became terrifying. By January, 1865, many Federals were so malnourished that it required two men to carry a bucket half full of water from the river.²³

The lack of proper nourishment and the constant exposure to the cold combined to make the final period of the prisons' operation the most deadly. Of the 1,131 Federals who died in the regular hospital, 59 percent succumbed to disease between September, 1864, and February, 1865. During those six months, chronic diarrhea claimed 339 lives. Pneumonia and bronchitis also made rapid inroads among the prisoners, claiming 100 lives. The harsh winter contributed to the number of cases of

²² William F. Tieman, Prison Life in Dixie (New York, 1894), 28, 31; House Report, 869; Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 36.

²³ Ibid., 44; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 236.

rheumatism, colds, and fevers.²⁴

Although the prisons had become crowded over the summer months of 1864, sickness and death significantly reduced the population inside the factories. A New York officer noted that the number of captives visibly decreased over the winter. Eventually "there were enough vacancies through death to give space on the floor." On a few occasions, as many as 25 men died in a single day. According to one prisoner, by November, 1864, the prison population consisted of only 2,400 men.²⁵

Federals who were seriously ill often tried to conceal the fact from their families. Late in October, 1864, George Washington Whitman, brother of Walt Whitman and a member of the 51st New York, wrote a letter from Danville to his mother. "I am very well indeed, am tough as a mule, so you see dear Mother that I am all right, and my greatest trouble is that you will worry about me," he informed her. In reality, Whitman was seriously ill. According to one officer, Whitman was "weakened and delirious," and had only "thin and wretched clothing." On December 3, he was admitted to the hospital

²⁴ Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont Genealogical Society, "Register of Federal Prisoners," passim; Parsons Diary, Oct. 30, 1864.

²⁵ House Report, 93; Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 35; Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison, 17; Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 209.

with lung fever.²⁶

Most diseased prisoners failed in their attempt to protect their families from anxiety. Many were so ill that they could not write letters. Whitman himself remained in the hospital for over a month. His family became increasingly agitated when he failed to write. Walt Whitman penned a frantic inquiry to an officer who had seen George: "Was my brother really well and hearty? Write me, soon as possible, what you know on any point relating to my brother." By the final months of the war, nothing terrified the families of Union prisoners more than the spectre of disease.²⁷

Although illness, hunger, and exposure affected all prisoners, none suffered more than black soldiers. On July 30, 1864, at the "Battle of the Crater" in front of Petersburg, Confederates had captured 900 prisoners, including 150 blacks. These men arrived at Danville three days later. Many of the black prisoners were slaves who had fled to the North before the war. Slave owners from various parts of the state arrived at the prisons to claim their property. After a few days, only eighty blacks remained at Danville. These

²⁶ Jerome M. Loving (ed.), Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman (Durham, N.C., 1975), 133; Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont Genealogical Society, "Register of Federal Prisoners," 104.

²⁷ Walt Whitman to Capt. William Cook, Feb. 27, 1865, Walt Whitman Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

captives endured the worst conditions in the compound's history.²⁸

Blacks spent their captivity in Prison No. 6, the coldest building. Consequently, a high mortality rate existed among its occupants. Because they were banned from the hospitals, black soldiers who contracted diseases usually died. According to one Massachusetts soldier, white prisoners removed the bodies from the factories because blacks would have been shot for stepping outside.²⁹

Unlike their white comrades, black captives received beatings and were put to work at hard labor. The first whippings occurred when seven slaves attempted to conceal their true identity. Those who refused to work for the Confederates also suffered the whip. Prison authorities ordered them to help build the fortifications that surrounded the town. Although digging the entrenchments was hard work, it presented black prisoners with an excellent opportunity to escape. On October 10, 1864, a small number of blacks on work detail overpowered the guards and fled.³⁰

Throughout the winter all prisoners looked for

²⁸ Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison, 10, 11; House Report, 870.

²⁹ Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 132; Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison, 12.

³⁰ Ibid., 11; Henry Estabrooks, Adrift in Dixie (New York, 1866), 92; Lynchburg Virginian, Oct. 12, 1864.

opportunities to escape. A group of officers soon concluded that the perfect chance had arrived. On December 5, 1864, the veteran companies who guarded the Federals left Danville for the front lines. Six companies from Colonel Henry's Regiment of Reserves, which was comprised of boys under 14 and old men over 60, arrived the same day. The "new issue" unloaded their equipment and stacked their arms in the town square. When the men marched off to secured their rations, the officers decided to make their escape.³¹

The captives believed that if they could seize the 150 muskets stacked in the square, they could then overpower the guards. Once free, they would head for the Union lines. The officers planned to rush the sentinels on the ground floor. Several men received the assignment to choke the guards. Once the sentinels were eliminated, the prisoners would be free to rush the square.³²

According to several accounts, a number of officers though the plan too risky. One such opponent was Colonel William Raulston of the 24th New York Cavalry. Raulston and others tried to dissuade the prisoners, but to no avail. Brigadier General Alfred N. Duffie, the ranking officer among the captives, ordered the attack despite the objections. As

³¹ Parsons Diary, Dec. 5, 1864; MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III, 49; O.R., Ser. I, XLVI, pt. 2, 1151.

³² Ibid.; Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 53.

one soldier stated: "With such a word there was of course no alternative."³³

The plan almost worked. At the signal, the officers rushed back down the stairs and overpowered two of the guards. A third, however, managed to scream out a warning. A water party happened to return to the building just as the sentinel yelled. Guards accompanying the water party raised the alarm. Immediately Confederates swarmed on the prison and thrust their rifles through the ground floor windows. They fired a number of shots upon the prisoners who had not yet rushed upstairs. One bullet struck Colonel Raulston in the intestines. Removed to hospital, he claimed full responsibility for the plot. On December 15, Raulston died.³⁴

The results of the failed escaped would have been much more disastrous had not Lt. Col. Robert C. Smith, the new prison commandant, arrived on the scene. Smith immediately ordered the guards to cease firing, which prevented further loss of life. Smith arranged for Raulston to receive the best medical attention available. He was filled with sorrow when he learned of the Union officer's death, for the two had

³³ Ibid.; Small, The Road to Richmond, 177.

³⁴ Putnam, A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 54; Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 226; MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III, 49.

become friends. When the sentinels identified Lt. McGraw as one of the prisoners who tried to choke them, Smith placed him in solitary confinement for several days. No retribution against the officers took place.³⁵

The commandant's charity toward those who had tried to flee came as no surprise. From the time he assumed command of the prisons on October 12, 1864, Smith displayed many acts of kindness. A former prisoner of war himself, he understood the agonies of captivity. Described as a "humane gentleman who would not voluntarily inflict any unnecessary hardships upon those under his charge," Smith discovered a variety of ways to alleviate the Federals' suffering.³⁶

On numerous occasions the commandant attended to his prisoners' physical needs. When he noticed that some of the soldiers did not possess adequate clothing, Smith gave his own coat to one man and his vest to another. When a party of shivering officers arrived at Danville, Smith asked the men why they had no blankets. After the men informed him that they had been ordered to leave their blankets at Libby Prison, Smith requested Richmond officials to forward the blankets. They arrived at Danville one week later. Having heard

³⁵ Ibid.; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 119; Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 226-27.

³⁶ Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison, 15; Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 225; O.R., VII, 974.

frequent complaints about the quality and quantity of rations, the commandant appealed to his superiors for better food but never received a reply.³⁷

Well acquainted with the tedium that accompanied prison life, Smith also sought to reduce monotony among the captives. On occasion he supplied the soldiers with reading material. With the help of apple brandy supplied by the commandant, some prisoners were able temporarily to forget their problems. Smith created a visiting policy which allowed three Federals to leave the factories to visit friends in the hospital. He sometimes entertained selected officers in his own quarters. Prisoners expressed gratitude for these acts of kindness.³⁸

Although Smith assisted the captives when he could, he could not entirely eliminate the misery in evidence all around him. His sense of helplessness often resulted in his own depression. "I have no heart for this business. It requires a man without any heart to keep a military prison," he sadly informed one soldier. So oppressive were his duties that Smith asked several times to be sent to the front. His requests met with cold refusal. The commandant was ordered "to do the best he could" for "all prisons have the same

³⁷ Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 120; MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III, 50.

³⁸ Cooper, In and Out of Rebel Prisons, 228; Matlocks Journal, 225-26.

problems." Discouraged, he turned to liquor to escape his despair.³⁹

By the beginning of 1865, despair affected everyone in Danville. For months citizens and captives alike had endured extreme privation. However, it was not the lack of provisions or the harsh cold that accounted for the psychological decline. As the months passed, a sense of utter hopelessness engulfed the civilian and prison populations.

Danvillians' despondency stemmed from the realization that the Confederacy would not survive. As early as December, some predicted Southern defeat. One citizen confessed to the prisoners that the townspeople were of the opinion that the war would be over within six months. Colonel Withers expressed the belief of the majority of the residents when he stated that "as the winter advanced, the prospects of the Confederacy became more gloomy and desperate."⁴⁰

The citizens came to this realization as they observed the Confederacy crumbling all about them. Money depreciated overnight. In November, 1864, the exchange rate of Confederate money for "greenbacks" was five to one; by December, ten to one. When the new year began, the rate

³⁹ Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 82-83; O.R., VIII, 33.

⁴⁰ Small, The Road to Richmond, 233; Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 213.

reached twenty to one. Even those who possessed the astronomical amounts of currency needed to buy the most basic foodstuffs suffered because "there was no possibility of replenishing our food supply."⁴¹

High rates of desertion from the Confederate army also convinced Danvillians that the end was in sight. As hardships and suffering increased, greater numbers fled from the Southern ranks. Men who had opposed secession from the start deserted first. A number of townsmen had joined the army only because of compulsion. Many of these men abandoned their units and returned home over the winter. Some disguised themselves as women; others hid when soldiers appeared. Not only did such acts deplete the Southern armies, they also contributed to the demoralization of the town. Colonel Withers described local deserters as "contemptible and disgusting."⁴²

Ironically, while Danvillians gloomily resigned themselves to defeat, Federal prisoners simultaneously experienced severe depression. Morale had reached an all-time low inside the prisons. The prospect of spending the winter in captivity without adequate food or clothing contributed to the distress among the prisoners. It was the North's exchange

⁴¹ Sherman, "Assault on Fort Gilmer and Reminiscences of Prison Life," 55; Withers, Autobiography of an Octogenarian, 213.

⁴² Ibid., 211.

policy, however, that caused unprecedented despair at Danville.

On April 17, 1864, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant had ordered that no more exchanges take place. Grant argued that the Confederate government's refusal to exchange black soldiers was primarily responsible for his decision. In August, Confederate authorities proposed to exchange officer for officer and man for man in the interest of humanity to Union captives. Grant's response to the offer indicated his true motive. On August 18, 1864, he stated: "It is hard on our men in Southern prisons not to exchange them, but it is humanity to those left in the ranks to fight our battles. If we commence a system of exchange which liberates all prisoners taken, we will have to fight on until the whole South is exterminated."⁴³

This stance caused much anguish in prisons throughout the South. Union prisoners thought the policy extremely cruel in light of the fact that it damned them to spend the winter in captivity. As the months passed and suffering increased, so did criticism of the Northern government. Curses against the Lincoln administration were common in all Southern compounds; Danville was no exception.

Comments in prisoners' journals and memoirs indicated the

⁴³ O.R., VII, 62, 578, 705, 607.

acute sense of betrayal the soldiers experienced. "I think that if the Commissioner of Exchange were compelled to live on our rations, an exchange would be made at once," one officer complained bitterly. William Francis Bartlett, of the 20th Massachusetts was even more critical: "I wish our government could see the suffering that their delay and quibbling about exchange is causing. Men dying reprove their government for forgetting them." Others denounced the policy as a mistake and "gross neglect of duty." The charge that the Federal government no longer viewed the prisoners as soldiers was just as common. "Have our services ceased to be as valuable to our government as before we were captured? We entered the fight boldly, with burning, patriotic hearts," declared one Federal.⁴⁴

Despair over exchange contributed to illness, and sometimes even caused death. A hospital steward noticed that many diseases stemmed from mental, not physical, conditions "which finally brought the unfortunate one beyond the reach of aid." Prisoners recalled that soldiers who refused to give up usually lived; men who lost hope were doomed. References to men who lay down and died from despondency were common. Once a soldier convinced himself that he would never leave prison,

⁴⁴ Small, The Road to Richmond, 216; Palfrey, Memoir of William Francis Barlett, 127; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 182; Abbott, Prison Life in the South, 170.

fellow prisoners were unable to change his mind. One man had "every reason to believe that several of my comrades, who lie buried in the neighborhood of these prisons, might be living today, notwithstanding our sufferings, had they not given up all hopes of being liberated."⁴⁵

Well aware that some of their captives perished in this fashion, guards often started rumors that exchange was at hand. Although one captive pronounced such actions "the most cruel thing I ever saw," most men looked upon false rumors as a kindness. The news often cheered prisoners, sometimes enough to sustain life. Years after the war one former captive stated that in "diagnosing those 'rebel lies' about exchange I can find no better reason for them than kindness of heart."⁴⁶

Although the guards attempted to raise the spirits of the prisoners, depression increased as the months passed. The atmosphere inside the prisons was so demoralizing that several captives requested religious counseling. They petitioned the guards to see if local ministers would visit the prisons. Reverend Charles K. Hall, pastor of the Methodist Church, and

⁴⁵ Hyde, A Captive of War, 109; Wilson, Seven Months in a Rebel Prison, 14; John W. Urban, Battlefield and Prison Pen (Lancaster, Pa., 1882), 105; O.R., VII, 559.

⁴⁶ Wilson, Seven Months a Prisoner, 22; The Wells Mirror, Apr. 2, 1925, "Newspaper Clippings," William Riley Haskins Papers; James Madison Page, True Story of Andersonville (New York, 1908), 42.

Reverend George Washington Dame, rector of the Episcopal Church, answered the call.

Of all Danvillians who assisted the prisoners, no one was more beloved than these two men. Hall often brought books, tobacco, and small gifts of food. Prisoners appreciated these items, but they valued most his comforting words. The captives found solace in the religious tracts he distributed. The minister had a reputation for delivering meaningful sermons. His topics, such as charity and suffering, were regarded as highly appropriate, perhaps the highest compliment for a preacher during the Civil War. Hall told the soldiers that he was not there as a Confederate to preach to Union prisoners, for they all had the same Lord. One Federal commented: "We admired him as a preacher and regarded him with affection as a man. It would be hard to find a man more loveable than Charles K. Hall."⁴⁷

Captives held Rev. Dame in equally high regard. He too brought his own books and food for their use. A member of the town's Roman Eagle Masonic Lodge, Dame attempted to find all the masons who were imprisoned so that he could bring them supplies. Each day he visited the prisoners, and on Sundays he conducted religious services. Ironically, one of the men

⁴⁷ Small, The Road to Richmond, 173, 242; Sprague, Lights and Shadows in Confederate Prisons, 122; MOLLUS--Maine Commandery, War Papers, III, 56.

who listened to the sermons was Caleb Cushing, Dame's second cousin.⁴⁸

That Dame showed deep and genuine affection for the prisoners was obvious from their remarks. Some thought of him as the epitome of the true Christian. Many wrote to him after their release to express gratitude. The letters he received contained such accolades as: "I feel I can never repay you, but it will be my highest ambition to do so." One former captive emotionally declared: "Your kindness to me has been such to win my love and undying gratitude. I will remember you as one of the noblest examples of Christian men."⁴⁹

By the end of January, 1865, living conditions reached an all-time low for captive and captor alike. Near the end of the month, Lt. Col. A.S. Cunningham arrived at Danville to inspect the prisons. In his report he noted that the guards lived in very poor barracks and were much exposed to the inclemency of the weather. Because they lacked clothes and shoes, many of the guards were sick. Furthermore, most of those on duty were "disabled men" who were "continually on guard." Payments were very irregular.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Dame, Historical Sketch of the Roman Eagle Lodge, 60; Roe, In a Rebel Prison, 34; Mattocks Journal, 295.

⁴⁹ H. C. Newton to Rev. Dame, Feb. 9, 1865, William Meade Dame Papers; J. Downing to Rev. George Dame, Feb. 11, 1865, Feb. 20, 1865, ibid.

⁵⁰ O.R., Ser. I, XLVI, pt. 2, 1151-52.

Cunningham was shocked at the conditions inside the prisons. He criticized the vermin-infected rooms filled with fetid air. The prisoners lacked proper clothing; only a "very small supply" existed. The mortality rate, "about five per day," he attributed to the insufficiency of food, the entire ration being only a pound and a half of cornbread per day. "This state of things is truly horrible, and demands the immediate attention of higher authorities," his report concluded.⁵¹

Around the same time Cunningham wrote his report, Confederate Agent of Exchange Robert Ould attempted once more to negotiate an exchange of prisoners. On January 24, 1865, in a letter to General Grant, Ould admitted that Union prisoners were suffering "because of the calamities and necessity of war made so not by our choice." In the interests of humanity, Ould asked Grant for a man-for-man, officer-for-officer exchange. Grant agreed to the proposition, and officials on both sides began to make arrangements for the transportation of the prisoners.⁵²

On February 15, 1865, the captives at Danville finally heard the news they had long awaited. Colonel Smith hurried into Prison No. 3 and happily announced that he had just

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² O.R., VIII, 122.

received word from Richmond that the prisoners were to be exchanged. Excitement swept through the prison. Men cheered and laughed and wept. On February 17, at 10 P.M., half of the prisoners left for Richmond. The next day, the remaining Federals boarded the train just before midnight.⁵³

The departure of the prisoners in February marked the end of Danville's service as a major prison center. A small number of captives, most of whom had been sent from compounds farther South, arrived later in the winter. On March 27, 1865, Smith stated that he had 763 prisoners in his possession. By April, Confederate authorities had relinquished all but one of the prisons. Early that month, Commissary-General of Prisoners Daniel Ruggles made inquiries to see if the facility could be re-opened to hold the large number of prisoners that General Lee was expected to capture. However, on April 9, 1865, Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Grant at Appomattox Court House. Two weeks later what was left of the compound fell to Union forces. On April 27, at 9:45 A.M., General Horatio G. Wright and his VI Corps received the surrender of the town of Danville; on that date, Danville's Civil War prisons passed into history.⁵⁴

⁵³ Simpson, "My Four Months Experience as a Prisoner of War," 35; Small, The Road to Richmond, 177; Mattocks Journal, 297.

⁵⁴ O.R., VIII, 264, 475, 476; O.R., Ser. I, XLVI, pt. 1, 364.

CONCLUSION

The Confederate prison system was almost destined to fail. Throughout the war, Southern officials were handicapped by poor organization and a lack of planning and forethought. These problems were virtually unavoidable. Confederate authorities had to establish their own government, maintain armies in the field, and oversee the Southern transportation system. These responsibilities left little time and manpower and few resources for the establishment and maintenance of prisons. Consequently, prisons came into existence almost overnight as the need arose. Danville was a classic example of the Confederacy's ad-hoc compounds.

All soldiers who endured captivity found it a miserable experience, but Union prisoners of war faced the most life-threatening conditions. Even as early as 1863, the Confederacy experienced a shortage of food and goods; resources dwindled in many areas in the South. Prisoners and Southern civilians alike suffered the consequences. Food, clothing, and medicine were not deliberately withheld from captives; rather such items were often unavailable. Confederate soldiers' letters and civilian accounts revealed that they too endured great privation. Prisoners who realized that suffering was common throughout the South often were the

least critical of their captors.¹

Northern officials were partially responsible for the conditions in Confederate prisons. Grant's decision to cease exchanges in April, 1864, was responsible for much suffering and an undeterminable number of deaths. Furthermore, the North's classification of medicine as contraband hurt both Federal prisoners and Southern civilians. Many considered this policy brutally inhuman. In January, 1864, Confederate Agent of Exchange Robert Ould proposed that surgeons from both armies be allowed to cross enemy lines to treat prisoners and that these surgeons could also distribute food, clothing, and medicine to prisoners in need. That summer he offered to pay gold, cotton, or tobacco to U.S. authorities for medicine that would be used exclusively to treat Union prisoners; Federal surgeons could administer the medicines themselves to assure that the agreement would be honored. Northern Agent of Exchange Ethan A. Hitchcock never answered either proposal. These policies were needlessly cruel and caused many deaths in Southern prisons.²

The six tobacco factories at Danville were representative of all that was wrong with the South's approach to handling

¹ S.A. Swiggett, The Bright Side of Prison Life (Baltimore, 1897), 229.

² Southern Historical Society Papers I (1876), 129, 181; House Report, 868-69; O.R. VI, 871; VII, 607.

prisoners of war. Rampant inflation, a shortage of goods, stagnation in business and manufacturing, and the crowding caused by large numbers of refugees made Danville a highly unsuitable location for a prison compound. In their desperation to relieve Richmond of its excess prisoner population, Confederate officials hastily converted the deserted buildings in Danville to fulfill that objective.³

During their period of service, Danville's prisons exhibited many of the weaknesses typical of the Southern prison system. The hasty establishment of the compound caused numerous problems during the first month of operation. Throughout the time that the prisons were in service, a shortage of medicine contributed to the mortality rate. Over the final months, shortages of food, fuel, and clothing increased the captives' misery. So chaotic was the Confederate prison system that Danville officials' attempts to improve living conditions often met with no response.

The suffering and death that occurred at Danville did not result from a calculated plot to abuse Union captives. Rather, the weakness inherent in the Southern approach to its prisoner of war system were often responsible. Poor planning and organization never disappeared. Confederate authorities had no control over the availability of food and supplies;

³ O.R., VI, 455.

consequently, shortages also adversely affected Southern civilians. Often Northern policies had a detrimental effect on Union prisoners. These factors played a significant role at Danville and all Confederate compounds.⁴

Captured soldiers, whether Union or Confederate, experienced the same miserable conditions: filth, vermin, exposure, inferior rations, crowding, disease, and depression were present in all prisons. These conditions were extremely traumatic for prisoners who were sick or wounded at the time of capture. Such men seldom survived captivity. On occasion deliberate atrocities did occur, but such acts were the exception to the rule. According to Bruce Catton, much of the suffering in Civil War prison compounds resulted from "grievous wrongs against humanity, done by people who had meant to do no wrong at all; wrong done because of hasty action taken under immense pressures, growing out of human blundering and incompetence."⁵

Neither the Union nor the Confederacy ever produced a laudable prison system. Both sides were guilty of incompetence and poor administration. North and South alike contributed to the breakdown of the cartel by arguing over technicalities. Over 400,000 soldiers endured captivity

⁴ Page, True Story of Andersonville, 12.

⁵ Catton, "Prison Camps of the Civil War," 5; Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, 257.

during the war. Although the exact number of fatalities will never be known, the Adjutant General of the United States placed the figures at 30,000 deaths in Southern prisons and 26,000 in Northern compounds. Such losses are inexcusable. The prisoner-of-war experience may be the most tragic aspect of the American Civil War, if only because it was preventable.

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Karen L. Byrne

DANVILLE'S CIVIL WAR PRISONS, 1863-1865

by

Karen L. Byrne

(ABSTRACT)

During the Civil War, six abandoned tobacco factories in Danville, Virginia, served as one of the Confederacy's major prison compounds. From late 1863 to 1865, the Danville Prisons held over 7,000 captured Federals. The compound was used as both a permanent place of confinement and a transitory depot.

The earliest captives found the prisons ill-prepared. Inadequate food, heat, and medical facilities contributed to miserable living conditions. During the spring and summer of 1864, the prisoners enjoyed some sense of normalcy inside the compound. By autumn, conditions had deteriorated. Prisoners suffered from extreme deprivation during the final months of the war. Throughout Danville's operation, the captives suffered from disease. Chronic diarrhea, smallpox, pneumonia, and variola were the deadliest illnesses.

While conditions inside the prisons were often harsh, Confederate authorities in charge of the compound provided for the captives to the best of their ability. Often the citizens of Danville experienced the same living conditions as the prisoners. Hunger, exposure, illness, and depression affected

civilians and prisoners alike. When possible, Danvillians tried to alleviate suffering inside the compound. The experiences of captured Federals in the Danville Prisons reveal not a deliberate Confederate plot to abuse prisoners, but rather suffering brought on by shortsightedness and the exhaustion of supplies in the Southern states.