


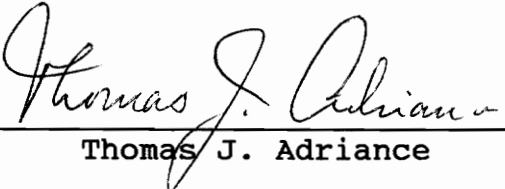
**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO CIVIL WAR PRISONS: OLD CAPITOL
PRISON AND CASTLE THUNDER PRISON**

by

Ronald W. Fischer, Jr.

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


James I. Robertson, Jr., Chairman


Thomas J. Adriance


Paul Finkelman

April 18, 1994
Blacksburg, Virginia

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Due to the assistance of various individuals, this thesis was made possible. Without the aid of librarians and curators, very few of the mysteries of history would be revealed. In particular, I would like to thank the Inter-Library Loan staff at the Carol M. Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and the Virginia Historical Society staff in Richmond. Mr. Michael Pilgrim at the National Archives assisted me in finding unknown sources on these two prisons. His sense of duty and love of history is exemplary and appreciated.

In addition, I would like to thank a few individuals who have showed continual friendship and concern in my walk to achieve my master's. These good friends are: Karen Byrne, Phil Egelston, Jeff Empfield, and Rhonda McDaniel. Without their suggestions and insight this work would not be as thorough or satisfying.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the members of my committee: Thomas J. Adriance, Paul Finkelman, and James I. Robertson, Jr. Dr. Finkelman's guidance through my first year as a graduate assistant revealed to me the wonders of being a collegiate instructor and the benefits of

hands-on experience. The reason I came to Virginia Tech was to work with Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr. I would like to thank him for his kind words of encouragement and his insight as a brilliant historian. I only hope to make him proud as I attain more knowledge as a historian.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Janet and Ron Fischer. Since I can remember, they have always encouraged me to pursue whatever I desired. They are always there to lend kind words and continued understanding. They have shown me true parental love, and, for that, I offer them my heartfelt thanks.

INTRODUCTION

Castle Thunder and Old Capitol prisons are integral parts in understanding a rarely researched side of the American Civil War. Prison life during the war is a confusing and often biased subject in history; however, it is important to study these prisons and others like them because they help define who we are as one nation of Americans. Officials created these prisons for the imprisonment of the captured and the disloyal and therefore were entirely unique in the annals of the war. Their uniqueness reveals how both governments treated persons who were considered enemy soldiers and traitors.

The building in Washington, D.C., that eventually housed Old Capitol Prison was originally the Tunnicliff Tavern built around 1800. Shortly before the War of 1812, bad management led to the close of the establishment. In 1814, when the British burned the original Capitol building, the nation had to search for a new temporary residence for the seat of the United States Government. Finding the tavern empty and in a suitable place, a private enterprize raised \$17,362 for the creation of a temporary capitol. The Federal government renovated the old tavern and purchased adjacent lots for the

expansion of the building.¹

In December, 1815, the building's additions were completed. Located at First and A Streets, N.E. in Washington, D.C., the new capitol was three stories tall with a high pitched roof and wide-arched door adorned with a large window opening. Within these walls two presidents were inaugurated, and various distinguished statesmen began their careers as public servants.²

When the permanent capitol building was completed in 1819, the old temporary capitol became the Congressional Boarding House, owned and operated by an aunt of Rose O'Neal Greenhow, a future prisoner. As a fashionable boarding house, the old capitol was "largely patronized by the creme de la creme of the Southern dwellers in Washington." It was here that Senator John C. Calhoun eventually expired while warning the nation of coming doom. Later, the building became a school. A decade or so before the Civil War the building was abandoned and began to decay under very little maintenance.³

¹Wilhelmus B. Bryan, A History of the National Capitol (New York, 1914), 636-37; James J. Williamson, Prison Life in the Old Capitol (West Orange, N.J., 1911), 20.

²Bryan, History, 637; Williamson, Prison, 21; James I. Robertson, Jr., "Old Capitol: Eminence to Infamy" Maryland Historical Magazine Winter 1970: 394; Glenn Brown, History of the United States Capitol (New York, 1970), 48.

³Williamson, Prison, 21; N. T. Colby, "The Old Capitol Prison," Annals of the War (Philadelphia, 1879), 502.

After the Battle of First Manassas, the Federal government established military prisons throughout the North for incoming Rebel prisoners. However, Old Capitol Prison was not primarily intended for prisoners of war, but for persons who were considered disloyal. In 1862, Federal authorities haphazardly began to transform the old capitol building into a prison.⁴

The basic structure of the building was not altered, but the interior of the building was partitioned into more rooms than it was originally constructed to have. In fact, the elaborate, former Senate and House chambers were divided into five rooms, with Room No. 16 being the largest. To make the institution complete for the incarceration of various individuals, authorities added small buildings and an enclosed yard. This "Lincoln Bastile," as termed by one of the prisoners, had a partly paved yard "about one hundred feet square, [lined with] a sutler's shop, mess-room, and hospital, and running back to the gate [was] a one-story stone building in which the cook house, guard house, and wash house" were located. The superintendent's residence was also adjacent to the prison.⁵

⁴William E. Doster, Lincoln and Episodes of the Civil War (New York, 1915), 76.

⁵Williamson, Prison, 25, 54-55; Dennis A. Mahony, The Prisoner of State (New York, 1863), 18; Doster, Episodes, 75-76.

Later in the war, Duff Green's Row, a series of buildings on an adjoining block, became an annex to the Old Capitol. Authorities named the buildings the "Carrol Prison" and placed the Old Capitol superintendent in charge.⁶

As Old Capitol was a refection of one building in a nation's capital, Castle Thunder was a classic example of a building in Richmond, Virginia. The buildings which eventually became Castle Thunder Prison--the Eastern District Military Prison (as it was officially called)--were originally a group of tobacco warehouses. Built in the antebellum years, these buildings exhibited the popularity of tobacco and its benefits for Virginia. A man named John Enders owned the buildings and was financially secure in his venture until the Civil War began.

The Federal blockade of the Confederacy and a reduced market forced Enders to close his three warehouses: the Gleanor, Palmer, and Whitlock buildings on Cary Street between 18th and 19th streets. As Confederate authorities searched for suitable places for the rising prison populations, Thomas Turner reported to Gen. John H. Winder that three old tobacco warehouses were available. Winder ordered Turner to impress the buildings for the Confederacy "to ease the congestion at Libby [Prison]." Prison authorities found that prisons on

⁶Williamson, Prison, 21; Doster, Episodes, 75.

Cary Street caused less congestion than compounds in the center of the city. In addition, these obscure locations kept the prisons out of the public's view. Another benefit was that the prison was in close proximity to the James River, which facilitated easy supply and transportation of prisoners.⁷

On June 31, 1862, Confederate officials began renovating the tobacco warehouses for the retention of prisoners. The Richmond Daily Dispatch reported: "It being found impossible to accommodate all the Yankee officers recently captured with quarters in the warehouses called sometimes 'Libby's buildings,' the Government has engaged a house on 18th street, and it was being prepared for their accommodation yesterday." The maximum number of prisoners the institution could safely hold was 1,450 persons.⁸

On August 18, 1862, the buildings were ready for inmates. Although the structures still contained devices for the shipment of tobacco, prison authorities moved 500-600 prisoners from the Franklin Street Guardhouse and Castle Godwin to Castle Thunder. George Alexander, the Assistant Provost Marshal for the Eastern District, named the building "Castle Thunder." The Richmond Enquirer believed that Castle

⁷Sandra V. Parker, Richmond's Civil War Prisons (Lynchburg, VA, 1990), 9-10, 14.

⁸Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 1 and Aug. 14, 1862.

Thunder's name was entirely appropriate because it was "indicative of Olympian vengeance upon offenders against her [the Confederacy's] law."⁹

The renovators had not only converted the buildings to secure rooms for inmates, but they connected each of the buildings to create a yard for exercise. The old Gleanor building was in front, with Palmer's and Whitlock's attached to either side. A high wall connected each building and offered the sentries a permanent post for observation. Castle Lightning was across the street and later became part of the prison complex.¹⁰

It is the uniqueness of these prisons that makes them fascinating. When comparing them to other Civil War prisons, they are entirely distinctive. Governmental authorities established Castle Thunder and Old Capitol for the imprisonment of those with treasonable propensities. All other Civil War prisons primarily held captured soldiers. In addition, prison authorities established the prisons in an ad-hoc manner not knowing what to do with prisoners of state.

This study looks into three areas of this uniqueness: the incarceration and makeup of prisoners, treatment (including the hospitals), and release. Located in each government's

⁹Ibid., Aug. 18 and 19, 1862; Parker, Prisons, 17.

¹⁰Ibid., 17-18.

capital, these prisons were under the constant scrutiny of high-ranking officials. External influences, sometimes meddling, is another aspect of these prisons which is examined.

Both prisons contained a wide variety of personages: the old and young, rich and poor, soldier and civilian, male and female. It was this conglomeration of inmates which forced atypical social settings and class antagonisms. Although this thesis does not delve into this topic as much as it could, it touches upon this unique problem shared by these prisons and illustrates a few of the difficulties.

For the most part, governmental authorities took added interest in Old Capitol and Castle Thunder because of the distinctive characters of these prisons and the concurrent feelings that civil liberties should be preserved. Although the Civil War forced drastic measures (e.g. the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus) in both sections, officials went to great lengths to ensure that all inmates were treated well. Yet those same authorities continued to recognize that these persons were still prisoners--sometimes dangerous persons who deserved punishment and imprisonment for crimes against each respective government.

CHAPTER ONE
PRISONS FOR THE DISLOYAL

The means and reasons for commitment, in regards to these prisons, was remarkably similar. Old Capitol and Castle Thunder came into being for similar reasons. Each prison was used to incarcerate disloyal, traitorous, and dangerous persons who could damage the government.

In both North and South, people were increasingly suspicious of individuals who held different political and social viewpoints after the outbreak of Civil War. The situation became even worse when armies began to move and certain states started to question their place in the original Union. The level of tension was extreme. In the minds of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, the situation had to be remedied. One of the remedies, which affected both the Old Capitol and Castle Thunder, in terms of the number and reasons for commitment, was the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus¹.

The suspension, although used differently by the two governments, made it much easier to arrest and confine "disloyal" persons who might damage war aims. Both governments were wary of the sentimental feelings toward civil

¹The right of habeas corpus protects an individual from illegal detention or imprisonment.

liberties, and it was only under emergency situations that those governments took the privilege away.

The suspension of the writ of habeas corpus in the North resulted primarily to ensure public safety during the "rebellion." It gave authorities permission to arrest and incarcerate individuals for a variety of reasons: interference with the transportation of troops, enlistment, conscription, or giving aid and/or comfort to the enemy in any way (including act, speech, or writing). Therefore the suspension was not originally a political proposition but only a remedy for a momentary situation.²

The South was more devoted than the North to state rights and inherent civil liberties for whites. The suspension of the writ was even more difficult and questionable in that section. Jefferson Davis, unlike Lincoln, acted only through the empowerment of his nation's Congress. Therefore, the suspension was delayed due to the long process of discussion and different from that of the North. The Confederate Congress gave Davis the power to suspend the writ in areas that required martial law for effective defense. The suspensions in the Confederacy were additionally limited in duration by Congress. For this reason, Davis had to make pleas for further suspensions. The last re-authorization for

²Mark E. Neely, Jr., The Fate of Liberty (New York, 1991), 7-9, 53, 64-65, 69, 87.

suspension dealt primarily with arrests for crimes or insurrections against the Confederacy.³

In both North and South, provost marshals were primarily responsible for arresting traitors and suspicious characters under the suspension. In fact, Castle Thunder was the Assistant Provost Marshal's station in Richmond. In both sections, these individuals kept alert for suspicious activity in their districts. Sometimes their meddlesome ways led to arbitrary and unfounded arrests. Yet, for the majority, such incarcerations successfully relieved a tense situation by removing potentially dangerous persons.

Not all arrests derived from the suspension of habeas corpus. Provost marshals were definitely not the only persons who incarcerated individuals in either prison. Indeed, a wide range and complexity of prisoners matched the enigmatic and ambiguous ways they were incarcerated at each prison.

All prisoners slated for confinement in Old Capitol Prison were processed in either the War Department or the Provost Marshal's office in Washington. The Secretary of War or his agent, the military governor, provost marshal, the President, or an exchange commissioner could all commit persons to the Old Capitol. William E. Doster, the Provost

³John B. Robbins, "The Confederacy and the Writ of Habeas Corpus," Georgia Historical Quarterly LV (1971): 84-85, 88-89, 92, 95-96.

Marshal in Washington, said that the prison "operated like a rat trap--there was only a hole in but no hole out." Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, his assistant secretaries, Col. Lafayette Baker and his detectives, and the military governors and their provost marshals could all confine individuals. However, "none of them could discharge without running great risk of getting into trouble with some or all of the others."⁴

One of the more hated groups of Northern arresting officials was the "National Detectives," created by the Assistant Secretary of War Phillip H. Watson. This was the organization under which Lafayette C. Baker and his detectives worked. Given an ambiguous commission to arrest Southern sympathizers and suspicious characters, Baker took charge of the situation in Washington by ridding it of most traitorous elements. Baker was ruthless, inclined to neither procedures nor rules. Watson, his immediate superior, had once said to an official that he had hired Baker on the principle of "set a rouge to catch a rouge." Yet Baker was successful in his duties in the eyes of the War Department. He eventually became a special provost marshal in that department.⁵

⁴Commitment, exchange, transfer and release book, Record Group 393, Entry 2132, National Archives; Doster, Episodes, 107-9.

⁵Doster, Episodes, 126-27.

A wide range of people also had a hand in commitment to Castle Thunder. When Richmond became the capital of the Confederacy, many rouses filled its streets. Lawlessness was rife; and garroting, theft, and arson, became commonplace. After the Confederate government established martial law in Richmond on March 1, 1862, President Davis commissioned General John H. Winder as provost marshal-general. Winder was ordered to bring peace and order to the streets of Richmond. Finding little room for the multitude of civil, military, and state offenders he was arresting, some under the suspension of the writ, Winder seized a group of tobacco warehouses. This complex eventually became Castle Thunder Prison, "the general repository for all the desperate characters in the Southern Confederacy who have been arrested by the Government." Winder and his "plug-uglies,"⁶ associates from Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, effectively brought peace to Richmond's streets. Comparable to Baker's methods in Washington, D.C., however, their reasoning for imprisonment was often questionable.⁷

Arbitrary opinions, doctored charges, and personal grudges led to many jailings. As in Washington, the provost

⁶The people of Richmond adopted this term to describe the hated detectives; Arch Fredric Blakey, General John H. Winder, C.S.A. (Gainesville, 1990), 51-52.

⁷Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 26, 1863.

marshal, Secretary of War, and President could all commit persons to Castle Thunder. Unlike Old Capitol, many regimental commanders also committed persons (mostly their own soldiers) directly to the prison for punishment. Additionally, commitment was usually direct to the prison in most cases and not through any bureaucratic offices. This occurred primarily because the prison served as a marshal's station. Officially it was called the Eastern District Military Prison.

Winder's detectives and the city police kept alert for treasonable persons. Consequently, many who were sympathetic to the Union found Castle Thunder their place of imprisonment, "the living death chamber of these bold, fearless men, who advocated their country's unity and welfare." Castle Thunder was initially a place for common criminals and general military offenders. Hundreds of civilian criminals, thieves, murderers, and other culprits were a direct result of the newfound attention Richmond received as a capital. Spies, traitors, delinquent Confederate soldiers, prisoners of war, hostages, and captured blacks all went these abandoned tobacco warehouses.⁸

In both Old Capitol and Castle Thunder, elements from two sides of war and society clashed in a confined area unsuited

⁸Joseph Ferguson, Life Struggles in Rebel Prisons (Philadelphia, 1865), 39.

most of the time to deal with the number, or character, of its inmates. This vast heterogeneity of prisoners, black and white, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, all faced one common factor, imprisonment under equal circumstances. All of inmates recieved the same treatment, regardless of the offense that put each one there.

In 1861 and early 1862, Old Capitol Prison primarily held traitorous, elderly Virginia farmers or those individuals who lived within disputed areas or within Union lines. Their common crime was refusing to take the oath of allegiance. Initially, the Old Capitol was used only for suspected individuals in the vicinity of Washington, D.C. Not long after its establishment, U.S. Marshals were arresting and imprisoning individuals as far away as Dubuque, Iowa.⁹

By mid-1862, the type and number of prisoners had changed in the Old Capitol; prisoners began to pour into the compound from all over the Union. Alleged traitors from all states joined rebel mail carriers, spies, hostages, insurgents, prisoners of war, and military offenders. This became the true character of prisoners in Old Capitol throughout the rest of the war.

Unlike Castle Thunder, officials in Washington avoided imprisoning common civilian criminals in Old Capitol Prison,

⁹Mahoney, Prisoner, 212.

because it was not established to deal with this type of inmate. After all, Washington had been dealing with the criminal personalities the capital had attracted for almost one hundred years. It had created ample institutions to confine these individuals. In addition, the questions of civil liberty in the Union were under scrutiny. No conflict existed in the character of the prisoners, aside from a strictly military or loyalty issue. The question of class continued to make this prison, comparable to Castle Thunder, unique in the annals of the war. One prison official in the Old Capitol even commented in his memoir that "the character of the prisoners was a matter of wide variation, differing in this particular from any other place of confinement."¹⁰

Because of the wide variety of prisoners, officials at Castle Thunder and Old Capitol decided to separate the incarcerated as best they could. Although overcrowding sometimes interrupted the general scheme of things, prison officials followed this separation consistently to avoid the threat of collaboration and large-scale escape.

From the time Castle Thunder came into being in August 1862, the jailers utilized the complex's various buildings to their advantage. The old Gleanor building, the largest in the prison complex, became a repository for the outcasts of the

¹⁰Colby, Annals, 503.

Confederacy: deserters, subversives, and political enemies. The old Whitlock factory primarily held black men and white women. Palmer's factory contained Federal deserters and occasional prisoners of war. Later, Castle Lightning, located across the street, became a part of the Castle Thunder complex. This addition helped with an increasing number of Federal deserters toward the end of the war.¹¹

Old Capitol Prison was only one building. Separation was primarily by room until the Carrol Prison became a part of Old Capitol, after which the officials only relieved the congestion. Prisoners of war occupied the ground floor and a majority of the rooms on the upper floor. Parts of the lower floor were for Union soldiers under sentence. The inner rooms were reserved for prisoners of state (citizens of Virginia and other alleged traitors from the eastern border region). Prison officials filled Room number 17 with Federal officers under sentence, while Confederate prisoners of war became residents of the first floor. The most famous room was number 16. The superintendent placed the most "ruthless and dangerous" political prisoners there. At times officials crowded up to thirty or forty individuals in this spacious room, usually many of these men were from the West. The authorities of the prison made special arrangements to

¹¹Richmond Daily Dispatch, Mar. 12, 1863.

separate spies and women into their own small private rooms in various places throughout the prison.¹²

Although Castle Thunder was established in August 1862, it did not handle all citizen prisoners. Until late 1863, General Winder held some citizens at Libby Prison. After August 26, 1863, all political and civilian prisoners went to Castle Thunder. For instance, detectives arrested William Wilson in central Virginia and took him to Castle Thunder to await trial, after which, a military court sentenced him to long-term confinement at the prison. Officials arrested John Shanks for selling "so called Union badges [a sort of uniform] to negroes belonging to citizens residing in the Congressional district of which Norfolk forms a part." The Provost Marshal sent Shanks to Castle Thunder to answer these charges.¹³

One of the most striking differences with Castle Thunder was the incarceration of common criminals who committed crimes against the military or the city. In the beginning of the war, the arrest and confinement of civilians in Castle Thunder was a common occurrence. For instance, on October 18, 1862, J. Kilgrove, and Thomas and Robert Oatley, citizens of Henrico county, illegally appropriated government wood. They

¹²Doster, Episodes, 76-77; Mahony, Prisoner, 153-55, 158.

¹³Order Book, John H. Winder, Special Order No. 205, Aug. 26, 1863, Museum of the Confederacy; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Apr. 16, May 20, and Feb. 19, 1863.

subsequently went to Castle Thunder. Later that month, George Rollins was arrested and taken to the "Castle" for breaking into Moore and Hayward's hat factory. Most citizens viewed Castle Thunder as the proper place for such individuals.¹⁴

By August 1863, city officials--especially Richmond's mayoral office--believed that a military prison was not a proper place for civilian criminals. The Richmond Daily Dispatch wrote that regular crimes were civil offenses and should be brought before civil authorities. Equally, they believed civil authorities should not hold military offenders. The newspaper went on to say that "if this course were pursued all the branches of the Government would work harmoniously, and important matters that now escape notice would then be discovered and brought to light."¹⁵

The frequency of regular civilian criminal commitments to Castle Thunder seemed to diminish after this debate, but the arrests did not stop totally. Later in 1863 and early in 1864, individuals were being taken to Castle Thunder for petty civilian offenses.¹⁶

When authorities arrested individuals for disloyal practices while the writ of habeas corpus was under

¹⁴Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 18 and 30, 1862; Jan. 9, 1863.

¹⁵Ibid., Aug. 1 and 5, 1863.

¹⁶Ibid., Dec. 18, 1863; Apr. 14, 1864

suspension, officials were not obliged to afford the prisoner a trial or even a hearing. The reasoning for the suspension was relatively cut and dry, and the liberty was only taken away if the offense was under the reasoning for the suspension. Yet provost marshals and civilian police took extreme liberties when confining an individual, whether the offense was under the suspension or not. In both governments, the reason for commitment could be vague. Remarks usually included the most basic offenses: "suspicious character," "disloyal," or simply "committed by Sec. of War."¹⁷

Persons like Dennis Mahony and James J. Williamson found themselves imprisoned in Old Capitol for various reasons. Mahony worked as a newspaper editor in Dubuque, Iowa and wrote various anti-government editorials. The local provost marshal and other authorities later arrested him for treasonable utterances. Williamson's charges included "having been in Richmond, and also with being accessory to the imprisonment of some Union citizens." Many of the individuals incarcerated in Old Capitol Prison were simply alleged suspicious characters, while many were guilty of crimes against the government,

¹⁷Old Capitol Prison, Washington, D.C., Register of Prisoners, Compiled by the Office of the Commissary General of Prisoners 1863-65. Microfilm Roll 110, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; Confederate States of America. Army. Department of Henrico, Report of Brigadier General J.H. Winder, Headquarters Department of Henrico, Feb. 13, 1863 (Richmond, 1863).

others were innocent of any crimes.¹⁸

Occasionally, large groups of prisoners would arrive from towns in disputed areas where frequent amounts of bushwhacking was taking place. The Federal authorities believed that arresting the "supposed" supporters of the bushwhackers would put an end to the activity. The Washington Evening Star reported that thirty-two residents of Fairfax and Loudoun counties were committed to Old Capitol Prison because of their connection with guerrillas. The federal authorities held these individuals as hostages until the activity ceased, some were women and others men of the cloth. Upon their release prison officials required them to sign a "parole of honor" stating that they would not support that sort of activity in their counties.¹⁹

The Richmond authorities also took advantage of the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus. General Winder arrested an individual named Rev. Robert J. Graves in North Carolina for encouraging Confederate war weariness. Winder had him arrested and taken to Castle Thunder where he was questioned extensively to determine his loyalty. The minister was returned to North Carolina for trial but only after he spent over a month in Castle Thunder. Andrew Johnson, Jr.,

¹⁸Williamson, Prison, 20.

¹⁹Washington Evening Star, Sept. 2, 1864; Oct. 31, 1864.

the nephew of the Unionist Tennessee war governor Andrew Johnson, was also held at Castle Thunder after being arrested in Tennessee during a raid. Accused of disloyalty, military authorities in the West sent him to Castle Thunder.²⁰

Old Capitol Prison and Castle Thunder Prison were not only created to hold treasonous persons but also informers. Administrators and government officials arrested many individuals under the charge of spying.

During its operation, Old Capitol Prison held its share of famous and infamous spies during its operation. Rose O'Neal Greenhow was held at the prison along with Belle Boyd, both noteworthy spies. Much excitement was created when officials arrested Rose O'Neal Greenhow and Belle Boyd and confined them in Old Capitol. Aside from the Greenhows and Boyds of the prison, detectives brought many unknown spies to this prison. One man was John Price of White's battalion of Virginia Cavalry. Price tried to acquire a pass in Baltimore and then in Washington in order to go south with information he had gained while on observation in the North. Federal authorities had become suspicious of Price's request to go south and arrested him. A search of Price uncovered drawings and information about defenses. He was immediately taken to Old Capitol. William E. Chenowith was arrested as a supposed

²⁰Examination of Andrew Johnson, Jr., July 31, 1863, Record Group 249, Entry 131, National Archives.

spy and sent to Old Capitol Prison after he revealed past experiences about blockade running and information gathering to a federal officer.²¹

Castle Thunder also had its share of spies who took part in various activities throughout the Confederacy. Richmond officials were as paranoid as those in Washington. Even the innocent and devout were sometimes accused of being spies. R. Lewis Scott had received a furlough from his regiment during a lull in the fighting. On his way home, Scott entered Richmond. Unfortunately, he did not know it was much easier to enter Richmond than it was to leave. All persons in and around the city were required to present a pass with specific destinations and purposes. For some reason, officials at the provost marshal's office where he inquired became suspicious of him and arrested him as a spy. Scott won eventual release after a friend vouched for him. This is an example of suspicions officials had of even the most common of persons.²²

Many others were arrested while committing acts of espionage. Officials arrested a man named Spenser for looking over the city's defenses and various batteries. Detectives apprehended him and took him to Castle Thunder. One of the

²¹Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 8 and May 21, 1864.

²²R. Lewis Scott to Mrs. C. Harper Anderson, Clifton, Texas, Feb. 10, 1892, Virginia Historical Society.

more flamboyant spies held at the "Castle" was C. Orizio Lugo, also known as Roesio Lugo. He had visited Richmond in the past and had become quite a regular at various social functions throughout the city. Lugo stayed at the best hotels and drank the finest whiskey. Although he was a resident of New York, no one suspected him of anything until he asked too many questions and forgot to pay an exorbitant bill. Upon arriving in Richmond again, in April 1864, detectives arrested him and found various incriminating documents in his baggage. He later found a room at Castle Thunder and Confederate authorities insured he paid this time.²³

General Winder and his detectives were very attentive when searching for spies and the results of espionage. General Winder issued orders for certain individuals to be held at Castle Thunder for long periods or until orders came from his office. That could take months or years. In comparison to those who died, a long stay at a prison was preferable. Spencer Kellogg was one who did lose his life in service to his country. Kellogg became a Union spy early in the war and joined the Confederate navy to learn more about Confederate fortifications and ships on the Mississippi. Deserting from the Confederate navy, he reported his findings directly to General Grant. Eventually, after being

²³Richmond Daily Dispatch, Apr. 24, 1863; Apr. 19, 1864.

recognized, Kellogg was captured while spying again in the West. He was taken to Castle Thunder. After a short stay there he was tried and hanged for desertion and espionage.²⁴

Authorities on both sides were overly vigilant in looking for spy activity. Both prisons had their share of innocent inmates in this regard. Prison authorities at both prisons were equally harsh in their treatment of spies. Many such prisoners found the gallows their punishment. This was civil war; both governments saw the need to punish those individuals who were detriments to their cause.

One of the little-known facts about Old Capitol and Castle Thunder is that at one point or another both held many of prisoners of war in transit. Both compounds went through fluctuations in the numbers of prisoners they were holding. One day the prisons would be packed to capacity, the next they could be virtually empty. Two reasons existed for this: to relieve overcrowding in other prisons and to concentrate prisoners while facilitating easier exchange or transfer.²⁵

The Old Capitol occasionally held battlefield prisoners awaiting transfer to military prisons or for exchange. One

²⁴Order Book, John H. Winder, Sept. 5, 1863; Oct. 21, 1863.

²⁵U.S. War Dept. (comp.) War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. II, V, 759. Hereafter cited as O.R.; all references are to Ser. II.

prisoner summed up the situation nicely by stating that the Old Capitol "was used as a rendezvous for the captured, who there remained until its apartments overflowed, when the garnered Rebel material was discharged into the various entrenched camps for prisoners, such as Point Lookout, Elmira and other forts."²⁶

By late 1863, prison officials in Washington had made a concerted effort to remove all prisoners of war to established prison camps. It was not odd to see 200-500 prisoners on the morning roll call leaving for Fort Delaware, Fort McHenry, or Elmira. Periodically, prisoners of war entered the prison, but they were primarily Rebel officers. Yet, by the end of the war, the great influx of prisoners from Petersburg and Richmond brought thousands of prisoners to Old Capitol where military officials held them briefly and paroled them after Appomattox.²⁷

By 1863, the Castle Thunder Prison also became an institution for Union soldiers in transit. Winder routed large portions of the 148th Pennsylvania through Castle

²⁶Alexander Hunter, Johnny Reb and Billy Yank (New York, 1905), 458.

²⁷Morning roll call, Old Capitol Prison, Oct. 4, 1864, Record Group 393, Entry 2129, National Archives; Washington Evening Star, May 18, 1864; Roll of prisoners of war committed to Old Capitol Prison for 5 days ending Apr. 5, 1865, Record Group 393, Entry 2130, National Archives; Memorandum book, Alexander D. Payne, Apr. 23, and May 4, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

Thunder on their way to Belle Isle. This seems to have been a regular occurrence as General Winder frequently shuffled prisoners around Richmond to avoid overcrowding and to facilitate movement to the established military prisons around the city. Additionally, in January 1863, Winder transferred over 100 prisoners from Libby to Castle Thunder because of overcrowding at the former prison. The route of the prisoners usually started at Libby, where all prisoners of war were registered and searched, then to Castle Thunder, where they were routinely searched and questioned again, and then onto their final stop, Belle Isle.²⁸

Aside from the political, esoteric, and military inmates of both prisons, prison authorities used Old Capitol and Castle Thunder to incarcerate those individuals who were military offenders in each of the respective armed forces. In this respect, the two prisons were primarily to punish those who broke military rules. Military tribunals incarcerated the convicted to each of these prisons.

Old Capitol Prison did not house many court martialled individuals, but authorities held officers and enlisted men at the prison prior to their sentencing. The period was usually just a few weeks, but once sentenced officials sent them

²⁸J.W. Muffly, ed., The Story of Our Regiment: A History of the 148th Pennsylvania Vols. (Des Moines, Iowa, 1904), 373; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Jan. 3, 1863.

elsewhere or returned them to Old Capitol to serve sentences which called for hardlabor, forfeiture of pay, or the wearing of ball and chain. Prison officials filled certain rooms with this sort of prisoner serving his time. Dennis Mahony noted that sometimes Federal officers could be arrested on the whim of certain Federal marshals, for some reason or another, in order to get them to resign from service. This kind of arrest was infrequent though and military authorities usually arrested and incarcerated officers for good reason. Military tribunals worked diligently to deal with military offenders; therefore, these courts relieved Old Capitol of this type of prisoner quickly.²⁹

At Castle Thunder, the frequency and number of arrests and confinements were more numerous. Accounts of the arrests of military offenders are very detailed. One of the reasons Winder created Castle Thunder was to deal with the increase in military crimes in Richmond and surrounding areas. Eventually, Confederate military offenders came from camps all over the Confederacy to Castle Thunder to await sentencing. Enlisted men who impersonated officers, falsified residences, forged discharges or pay accounts, entered Richmond without a pass, or were found drunk, could all find themselves in Castle

²⁹Mahony, Prisoner, 154; Commitment papers for the Old Capitol Prison, October 19, 1864, Record Group 393, Entry 2129, National Archives.

Thunder awaiting trial. Sometimes officials placed whole companies under arrest. For instance, Confederate military authorities arrested all privates of Company D, 20th Virginia Battalion on mutinous conduct charges. The Richmond Daily Dispatch explained that "the cause of their alleged mutinous demonstration was the ill treatment of the battalion commander, Major Delagnol."³⁰

Officials arrested other enlisted men for simple things like playing "Old Sledge," a popular gambling game. One instance involved gambling for a pass and furlough. Obviously this was illegal but still not very dangerous to the war effort. Other crimes could be humorous. One such incident happened when the police of the Eastern District arrested a soldier named John Gormley. He had a drunken Christmas eve while visiting an old friend who was in Castle Thunder. Gormley wanted his friend to share the rest of the season with him and created a story about the prisoner's two imaginary children who had just died of an imaginary fever. He convinced authorities to let the prisoner attend the funeral, after which he would return the prisoner to the institution. Detectives discovered the ruse later in the day and placed Gormley and his friend in the same room in Castle Thunder so

³⁰Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 1, and 18, and Dec. 29, 1862; Feb. 27, and Apr. 7, 1863; May 3, 1864.

that they could spend the next few months together.³¹

Other offenses could be very serious. Military authorities arrested individuals for the careless use of firearms or fighting which resulted in the death of a fellow soldier or innocent bystander. An argument between two members of Captain Whitingham's artillery battery ended in a death. Patrick Fagan, "a strong and hearty man," struck James Morrissey, "a feeble old man," in the neck, and he fell dead. Officials took Fagan to Castle Thunder, astonished at the result of his blow. Prison officials held him briefly and convicted him of manslaughter. The punishment was not publicized. Another incident involved a sentinel at Castle Thunder. After a heated discussion with a prisoner through a window at the prison, the guard felt insulted and fired a round at the individual. The shot killed James Fickey, a prisoner who was lounging on the second story awning. The prison superintendant incarcerated the sentinel at Castle Thunder.³²

Confederate authorities sent some sentinels from prisons around Richmond to Castle Thunder when suspecting them of taking bribes, disorderly conduct, or failing in their duty to detect and stop escapes. Hospital administrators sent two

³¹Ibid., Nov. 15 and Dec. 27, 1862.

³²Ibid., Oct. 7, 1862; Feb. 6, 1863; Feb. 5, 1864,

watchmen at the Chimborazo Hospital to Castle Thunder for drunkenness and disorderly conduct. Libby authorities sent G.W. Goodman and John Ford of the 25th Virginia Battalion, and James Bevill of the City Battalion to Castle Thunder after seemingly permitting a large-scale escape at the Libby prison while they were on duty.³³

Enlisted men were not the only persons incarcerated for wrong-doing. Winder's detectives also found officers guilty of various military offenses. Military authorities arrested William H. Murphy, Captain of the 1st Louisiana for acting as a substitute agent. Officials also arrested Lieutenant J. J. Cox for holding forged passes and a commission from the Federal government to arrest Confederate deserters and recruit them for service in the Union army.³⁴

One of the most interesting aspects of commitment to Castle Thunder was the opportunity for individual commanders to send soldiers to Castle Thunder for punishment or just "safe-keeping." Regimental commanders camped around Richmond had the opportunity to commit unruly or mutinous subordinates to Castle Thunder, possibly because of the proximity of the prison to their command. Therefore, no need existed for a regimental stockade.

³³Ibid., Nov. 22 and 25, 1862.

³⁴Ibid., Feb. 6, 1863; Feb. 5, 1864.

It appears that the commandants of the prison throughout the war had no trepidation in committing soldiers as almost a favor to the particular commander. These soldiers were not usually recorded in the prison book. The reasoning behind this is confusing but may be related to personal favors for individual commanders. If the reason was given for incarceration it was frequently simplistic. For instance one commander committed his soldiers, Thomas Mes, John H. Stephens, and William A. Godfrey, for safe-keeping. Few records also exist as to what happened to these individuals and when and if the authorities released them. This is unique to Castle Thunder because no other common occurrence took place at Old Capitol.³⁵

One of the military offenses most prominent among those who were inmates in both Old Capitol and Castle Thunder was desertion. Separated from the other prisoners, this group was the most despised type of prisoner on both sides. This contempt occasionally led to substantial periods of imprisonment if the desertion was from that government's armed forces. When deserters arrived from the enemy's armed forces, loyalty and motive were still a questionable aspect, although the treatment of these individuals was much less harsh.

³⁵Richmond Daily Dispatch, Nov. 25, 1862; Order, J.W. Harwood to the Commandant of Castle Thunder, July 5, 1864, Department of Henrico Papers; John H. Cassin to G.W. Alexander, Sept. 21, 1863, Ibid.

Governmental authorities, at one time or another, filled the prisons with large numbers of deserters.

In the North, military courts sentenced Union deserters. Punishment of this offense normally involved long term imprisonment at Old Capitol. This included hard labor, occasionally in a ball and chain, and forfeiture of pay. This offense was a common occurrence in the Northern armies and navies. Therefore, Old Capitol was always guaranteed a constant number of individuals in this regard. Desertion would occur for various reasons in the North. War weariness, a death in the family, the restructuring of regiments, and numerous other occurrences could cause a soldier to leave his unit. While Dennis Mahony was at the Old Capitol, 200 members of a Pennsylvania regiment deserted when they learned that they were not to receive their bounties for enlisting.³⁶

Desertion in the Confederacy was equally prevalent. Military courts regularly sentenced repeat offenders to either long-term imprisonment or, in extreme cases, hanging. Castle Thunder Prison did not seem to hold as many deserters as did its Northern counterpart. Owing to a lack of manpower in the Confederacy, officials were always prompt in returning these individuals to their regiments. There they would find

³⁶Henry B. Todd, Provost Marshal's office, to Superintendent of the Old Capitol Prison, July, 1863, Record Group 393, Entry 2129, National Archives; Mahony, Prisoner, 237; Doster, Episodes, 99-101.

themselves in the front lines of a battle and under the watchful eyes of their commanders.³⁷

Aside from military inmates, Castle Thunder and Old Capitol Prison also held a variety of other individuals on numerous charges. Some prisoners like the regimental sutlers were not classified as military personnel, since they had not enlisted. Other groups who proved to be confusing, at least for classification purposes, were foreigners, newspaper reporters, refugees, and trial witnesses.

Washington, D.C., attracted various sorts of personages during the Civil War. Old Capitol Prison confirms this in revealing at least a portion of those who were incarcerated and who deserve special note. The most common group of foreigners were British subjects accused of crimes ranging from blockade-running to being a Rebel sympathizer. All of these subjects of the crown could call on the British consul in Washington for protection. If the crime was not too serious, they would gain eventual release. Another group, refugees, streamed into Washington when armies ravaged their homes and farms during battle. Unable to enter Washington without a pass, Federal officials allowed them to enter the city only by being held at Old Capitol. Obviously, officials

³⁷Morning report of Castle Thunder, Feb. 8, 1864, Record Group 249, Roll No. 851, National Archives; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Mar. 11 and July 25, 1863.

did not hold all refugees at the prison but some stayed there while awaiting their fate. In addition, courts held trial witnesses at Old Capitol for their safety and to make sure they appeared usually for "Major Turner's Investigation."³⁸

Castle Thunder also held its share of interesting individuals. Many times citizens of Germany, France, and Britain were held for being suspicious persons or for not taking part in the draft. At one point during the war, a large portion of Germans living on the outskirts of Richmond refused to fight for either side. The Eastern District detectives arrested over fifty of their number and committed them to Castle Thunder. One of the most interesting groups held at the prison were newspapermen captured in or near a battle. Confederate authorities were unsure of what to do with these "Bohemians;" therefore, officials held them in prison until their classification could be determined. They were not soldiers, but they were enemy aliens. Confederate officials held these individuals for long periods, but their

³⁸George Alfred Lawrence, Border and Bastile (London, 1863), 163; Provost Marshal's office to Superintendent of the Old Capitol Prison, Aug. 10, 1863, Record Group 393, Entry 2129, National Archives; Docket of rebels and citizens in the Old Capitol Prison, Record Group 393, Entry 2139, National Archives; Old Capitol Prison, Washington, D.C., Register of Prisoners, Compiled by the Office of the Commissary General of Prisoners 1863-65, Microfilm Roll 110, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

treatment was extremely good.³⁹

Blacks also found themselves caught up in a civil war that directly affected their existence in the former United States. Incarceration of this group apparently differed because the particular attitudes toward blacks changed from government to government.

In the North, detectives examined black contrabands to determine their loyalty. After the interview, military authorities gave them papers which entitled them to the protection of the military forces. Many of these individuals were destitute and had little opportunity to find shelter or employment. In the beginning of the war, prison officials allowed these men and women to stay in a portion of the prison until they desired to leave. The superintendent of Old Capitol supplied these individuals with food and jobs in the kitchen, washrooms, hospital, and quartermaster's divisions of the institution. Some received pay for the first time in their lives. Wages usually ranged from \$.50 to \$1.00 per day. Occasionally, provost marshals held blacks in Old Capitol Prison for other reasons, particularly when they would follow their masters into the prison.⁴⁰

The situation in Castle Thunder was much different.

³⁹Richmond Daily Dispatch, Mar. 21 and May 17, 1864.

⁴⁰Doster, Episodes, 164-65; Washington Evening Star, Aug. 8, 1864.

Blacks were held either as criminals or they were waiting for masters to pick them up after they had been captured. Officials accused some blacks of aiding the Yankees by piloting them around Virginia or assisting in fifth-column activities. For instance, detectives arrested a free black man named J.E. Jackson on suspicion of being the individual who burned the Meadow Bridge near Richmond under direction of the enemy. Many times officials arrested blacks and confined them for long term imprisonment for petty crimes. The theft of government wood or attempts to escape to the enemy seemed to be very common offenses.⁴¹

Prison officials also held women at both prisons during the war. Arrested for various offenses, the female populations in the prisons were very high from time to time. From spy activity to disaffection and disloyalty, women became integral parts of the home front in assisting both governments.

Most of the women held in Old Capitol Prison were well-known spies of the Confederacy. As mentioned earlier, officials incarcerated Rose O'Neal Greenhow and Belle Boyd at the prison. The War Department also held other less-known female Confederate spies. The military governor's office charged a Mrs. Augusta Morris with giving intelligence to the

⁴¹Richmond Daily Dispatch, Nov. 4, 1862; Apr. 21 and May 6, 1863.

enemy. Provost Marshal Doster saw her as an "exceedingly fascinating and a pretty little woman, of a temper so good that even imprisonment did not sour it." ⁴²

Baker's detectives around Washington arrested many women who were wearing men's clothing or Federal uniforms and acting in a suspicious manner. Sarah Mitchell, alias Chady West of the 18th Virginia, was arrested after "loitering around our camps dressed in a United States uniform." Many of the Rebel mail carriers in Washington were women. This intricate Confederate system in the Federal capital was extremely hard to detect. It became almost impossible to arrest the perpetrators. When the Provost Marshal's office finally uncovered the mail system, they found it almost totally run by women. In fact, Ms. D.M. Dietz of Alexandria, who had been arrested in the past for another minor unrelated offense, was an integral component in the system. Federal officials released her not knowing her connection until it was too late.⁴³

Women incarcerated in Castle Thunder were held for more reasons than those in Old Capitol. Military authorities held hundreds of women at Castle Thunder for treason, disloyalty, disaffection, demoralization of soldiers, and a host of minor

⁴²Doster, Episodes, 82-83.

⁴³Washington Evening Star, Sept. 1, 1864; Doster, Episodes, 96-97.

offenses. Brigadier General H.A. Wise arrested Mrs. Mary Ann Pickett, her son, two daughters, and thirty four slaves and had them taken to Castle Thunder. Similar to cross-dressing women in the North, officials arrested women in the South for wearing men's clothing and accused them of being spies. One of the most interesting accounts of women in uniform is the story of Mary and Mollie Bean, cousins from southwestern Virginia. At the outbreak of war, the cousins joined a cavalry unit after disguising themselves as men. Later, the women joined the 26th Virginia and performed their duties with distinction--so well that Mollie was promoted to corporal. After the battle of Cedar Creek, a lieutenant discovered their identity, and sent them to Castle Thunder to be held as spies. After review of their records, they were only kept at the prison "to await further arrangement for their welfare."⁴⁴

Courts occasionally convicted some women of disloyal activity and held them at Castle Thunder for long periods. Mrs. H.L. Knox was committed to the prison for "communicating treasonable information to the enemies of the Confederacy." A local provost marshal sent a Mrs. Forward and her servant to Castle Thunder from Gordonsville on charges which questioned her loyalty as a citizen of the Confederate States. It is evident on the morning roll calls that many women came from

⁴⁴Richmond Daily Dispatch, Nov. 3, 1862; Oct. 31, 1864.

across Virginia committed for treasonable propensities. This indicates that Castle Thunder was not wholly a prison for the disloyal in Richmond but all of Virginia and to a great extent the whole Confederacy.⁴⁵

When a town or section of an occupied area fell to Confederate forces, occasionally the occupying forces would arrest Union persons. Frequently, wives and families would follow their husbands closely when on campaign. This practice was more regular during the beginning of the war than later. For instance, when the town of Winchester fell one of its numerous times, Confederate commanders arrested many woman and children for being Union sympathizers. In the end of June and beginning of July, 1863, military officials sent thirty-eight women and children to Castle Thunder as being either connected to the Yankee army or being the families of Union officers. One of the better-known female prisoners in Castle Thunder was Dr. Mary Walker. Arrested as a prisoner of war because of her connection to the Union army as an assistant surgeon, Walker had attracted a lot of attention because of her pantaloons which resembled male attire.⁴⁶

Although Old Capitol Prison and Castle Thunder Prison were two distinct institutions in countries with two different

⁴⁵Ibid., Jan. 7, 1863, Mar. 10, 1864.

⁴⁶Ibid., June 26, and 27, July 9, and 18, 1863; Apr. 22, 1864.

ideologies, the process and reasons for commitment were remarkably alike. Officials at each prison made a concerted effort to keep their populations consistent. The growing number of subversives, political prisoners, and military offenders all were results of civil war on American soil. Although there were deviations in the prison population because of extenuating circumstances, these prisons almost mirrored each other in terms of each institution's character during the war.

Various situations and factors caused the imprisonment of thousands of persons. The suspension of the writ of habeas corpus became the direct link, in terms of commitment, to Old Capitol and Castle Thunder. Governmental authorities created the prisons to deal with the transgressors of the suspension--the disloyal. Each government believed that it had to imprison those it saw as being detrimental to its war aims and goals. Each government also had its various personalities and departments which sought out these individuals. The abusive but efficient natures of persons like John H. Winder and Lafayette C. Baker led sometimes to unfounded and arbitrary arrests. Yet the majority of arrests were for good reason because of the serious nature of their crimes.

These attitudes on the part of governments and certain persons led to a complex group of inmates which few other Civil War prisons experienced. All persons in both prisons

became subject to the rules and living conditions that both prisons offered. Officials arrested both the rich and poor, and old and young for disloyal practices. The conglomeration of the educated and imbecilic, female and male, made these prisons unique but inherently alike. The mode and means of commitment brought all of these persons together for better or worse. All had to learn how to survive in an atmosphere of confinement.

CHAPTER TWO

"EXISTENCE IS MEANINGLESS"¹

Confinement is never a pleasurable experience. No matter what the circumstances, it is difficult for a captive to have a positive attitude toward his or her jail or jailers because of negative feelings about captivity. Prisoners spoke of leaving hope behind upon entering these military compounds, and there was a concurrent feeling that existence was a blank. One prisoner in Old Capitol commented that "none can tell the desolate feeling which at times overwhelms those immured in confinement." No doubt exists that imprisonment was a horrible experience, but treatment at Old Capitol and Castle Thunder was not bad in comparison with other Civil War prisons. Occasionally, prisoners overcame the tedium of life because of the genuine efforts of prison officials.²

Treatment of inmates, whether good or bad, was attributable to the administration of the prisons. The superintendents, guards, and the established rules and regulations were the vehicles which could make prison life more or less endurable, no matter what the offense. These individuals set the tone of prison life in Castle Thunder and

¹Memorandum Book, A.D. Payne, May 17, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

²Virginia Lomax, The Old Capitol and Its Inmates (New York, 1867), 93.

Old Capitol. Occasionally, exterior forces caused difficulties for the prison authorities and sometimes affected the treatment of prisoners overall. Provost marshals, military governors, and secretaries of war all had a hand in what would affect life in the prisons. Yet the prison superintendent was the ruling force most of the time in his institution. The unique setting of a prison which held primarily civilian prisoners made for interesting circumstances.

Authorities confined a wide range of personalities in both prisons. Soldiers were acclimated to the rigors of life in the field. This may have contributed to their increased adaptability toward prison life. Those confined in Castle Thunder and Old Capitol were not all soldiers. Some prisoners were men and women of social prominence, and therefore they were unprepared for the sights, sounds, and lifestyle of a prisoner. For these civilians, prison life was a living nightmare.

After arrest, authorities typically brought the accused directly to the prison. The soon-to-be inmates always remembered their first sight of the prison. Alexander Hunter noticed the imposing bars on the Old Capitol windows and the number of guards in and around the institution. The officials of each establishment immediately recorded the name and classification of the prisoner along with any known offense.

Authorities thoroughly interviewed all incoming persons to establish either loyalty or guilt. One prisoner deemed this process a trial, for "here one man [the questioning official] is judge, jury, and witness."³

Prison authorities confiscated all "contraband" articles or other belongings which could harm the prisoners. Additionally, items which might assist in an escape were also taken. The two prisons differed, however, on the confiscation of money. Officials at Old Capitol Prison recorded the amount of money taken from incoming individuals. The administrators of the prison allowed the inmates access to their valuables (money, watches, etc.). This was a way of drawing credit if they wished to purchase such supplementary articles as food, clothing, and furniture.

Castle Thunder permitted prisoners to retain articles like money to purchase accessory supply from the prison commissary. In fact, by 1863, when Lucien W. Richardson had become the superintendent of Castle Thunder, this unwritten rule was placed in official guidelines posted around the prison. His rules and regulations stated that "no monies to be received [by prison officials from prisoners] except in cases where the charge relates to money, then to be taken and

³Hunter, Johnny Reb, 456; Williamson, Prison, 41.

sent to the Provost Marshal."⁴

Prison regulations, stated or unstated, were the true means of government at the prisons. Rules in these institutions were meant to keep order, of course, but they were also intended to protect inmates. Orders stated when roll call would be, or what to do during a fire.

The Castle Thunder Prison had a very strict set of rules and regulations. Holding desperate characters of a newly created state, Castle Thunder administration needed to establish a set of regulations to protect those who were weak or new to the prison. George W. Alexander, the first commandant of the prison, established whippings for those who breached any of the rules. This system provoked much criticism but also brought order to a group of ruffians. In August 1863, Castle Thunder's second commandant, the able administrator, Lucien W. Richardson immediately posted throughout the prison signs outlining "The Rules and Regulations for the Government of Castle Thunder."⁵

Old Capitol had no posted rules. Transfer of information came by word of mouth only and seemed constantly to change. The only way "fresh fish" could learn the rules was by

⁴Broadside, Rules and Regulations for the Government of Castle Thunder, Virginia State Library.

⁵O.R., V, 875; Broadside, Rules and Regulations for the Government of Castle Thunder, Virginia State Library.

breaking them or through the beneficent guidance of a veteran prisoner. James J. Williamson commented that "there are no printed rules for our guidance placed where they can be seen, and no official instructions as to how we are to act, or to whom we shall make known our necessities." The continual creation of rules seemed to lie with the superintendent, William P. Wood. Prisoners frequently mentioned two rules with which everyone had to become familiar: the stifling of all communication with others in the prison, and no intercourse with outsiders through windows. When prisoners broke the rules they were usually sent to the guard house, a small, poorly ventilated shack where prisoners might be confined for up to three days.⁶

The superintendents may have created this system of rules for the prisons, but guards and other employees were expected to enforce the policies.⁷ Prisoners interacted with guards more than an other official at either prison. Attitudes toward sentinels were either totally good or totally bad.

The guard system at Old Capitol was extremely important because the prison "depended more upon the vigilance and care of the guards for the safekeeping of prisoners than upon bolts

⁶Williamson, Prison, 53-54, 79; Mahony, Prisoner, 151, 311-14; Belle Boyd, Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison (New York, 1865), 178.

⁷Other employees included kitchen, washroom, hospital, and commissary workers.

and bars." One inmate commented that a man of average knowledge wielding a common pocket knife, could dig through walls and escape through the old plaster. Yet, he continued, "unwatched you never are. The passages are not more than thirty feet long, and there is a sentinel in each who can hear almost every sound from within."⁸

Additionally, prison officials had guards escort prisoners whenever they were out of their rooms. In fact, the sheer number of guards caused a great commotion when they went on duty or were relieved. One prisoner became so entirely irritated he commented that the loud clanking of arms resulted in his sleep being "of short duration and very unsatisfactory."⁹

From 1861 to 1863, guards at Old Capitol were primarily soldiers from nearby regiments. About sixty men, under the command of a captain or lieutenant, performed regular guard duty consisting of two hours on and four hours off, day and night at the prison. Units from the 178th New York, 135th Pennsylvania, and the 14th New Hampshire, along with other regiments, executed guard duty at Old Capitol. One inmate believed a regiment to be full of "insolent Germans." Another

⁸Colby, Annals, 503; Lawrence, Border, 173.

⁹Robert E. Park, "Diary of Captain Robert E. Park, Twelfth Alabama Regiment," Southern Historical Society Papers II (1876), 310.

inmate described a regimental commander at the prison to be a "jovial and good-hearted a fellow as ever lived." Good and fair treatment produced compliments, while the opposite brought about condemnation.¹⁰

By late 1863, the composition of the guard at Old Capitol changed. Although some regular regiments would continue to perform guard duty at the prison, the task fell to the Veteran Reserve Corps (V.R.C.) or Invalid Corps. Men who were unable to fight in battle because of injuries but wished to continue serving their country joined the Veteran Reserve Corps. Though wounded, these men could still perform such standard duties as guard duty. The 6th, 12th, and 20th V.R.C., along with others, rotated among various duties in the nation's capital. Their behavior at Old Capitol seemed to remain on the same high level. No one V.R.C. soldier was singled out in any account for harsh treatment.¹¹

The guard at Castle Thunder remained more consistent than that of Old Capitol. The 1st Battalion Second Class Militia (City Battalion), more commonly known as the Second Virginia

¹⁰Colby, Annals, 503; Wayland F. Dunaway, Reminiscences of a Rebel (New York, 1913), 105; Mahony, Prisoner, 246; Hunter, Johnny Reb, 484; Williamson, Prison, 35-37; W.H.T. Squires (ed.), Last of Lee's Battle Lines (n.p., 1984), 33.

¹¹Guard Reports, Dec. 4, 1863-Mar. 21, 1864, Record Group 393, Entry 2135, National Archives; ibid., Mar. 24, 1864-Feb. 2, 1865, Record Group 393, Entry 2136, ibid.; ibid., Feb. 3-Aug. 20, 1865, Record Group 393, Entry 2136, ibid.

Reserve, garrisoned the prison for a majority of the war. This guard was primarily made up of boys between the ages of sixteen to eighteen and men between forty-five and fifty-five. The Richmond Daily Dispatch found the guards of the prison to be green "apologies for soldiers," unconcerned with duty, and "lamentably deficient in the requisite knowledge" of performing the most simplistic tasks. The city of Richmond was nervous about the constant vigilance that was needed to take care of the large numbers of prisoners throughout the city. Citizens did not feel that the Reserve was up to the task.¹²

Castle Thunder guards also encountered the same difficulties that the guard at Old Capitol faced. Officials expected them to be the bolts and bars of the makeshift prison. Because the building was rather dilapidated, it was easy for inmates to attempt escape. With this in mind, prison officials ordered the guards to be extremely vigilant. Occasionally, guards became too vigilant. In two instances, carelessness and irresponsibility led to the wounding of innocents. On March 3, 1864, a guard shot Detective Joseph L. Woeters by mistake, believing he was an escaping prisoner. Another instance involved James M. Carter of the City Battalion. Carter was shot while lounging in the barracks

¹²Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 25, 1862; Jan. 16, 1864.

after another guard attempted to remove a loaded rifle from the stack. The ball passed through Carter's leg and lodged in the second floor ceiling. These may have been random occurrences, but these situations demonstrated the inexperience of the Castle Thunder guard.¹³

It is safe to say that William P. Wood¹⁴, the superintendent of Old Capitol Prison during the war, was a kind, attentive, and generous person. Additionally, he was an able administrator. Many of the prisoners frequently commented on his fine attributes. Virginia Lomax believed he was the "civil head of the prison" and that he would go out of his way to assist the prisoners. Dennis Mahony, a consummate pessimist, had equally good feelings about the superintendent. Mahony commented that Wood "manifested some good will for the unfortunate victims of despotism." Mahony also believed that Wood had a good heart, was reasonable, and rarely succumbed to partisan feelings. In fact, Wood took part in a farewell

¹³Ibid., June 1, 1863; March 3, 1864.

¹⁴A native of Alexandria, Virginia, Wood was devout to the Union cause. He professed to be an infidel and was a leader in the Know-Nothing Party before the war. He was also a veteran of the Mexican War serving as a mounted rifle under Samuel H. Walker. A good friend of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, he was appointed head of Old Capitol and later became the first Chief of the United States Secret Service when it became part of the Treasury Department. Williamson, Prison, 33-34.

dinner to Mahony and a few others in Room 16.¹⁵

The superintendent of Old Capitol consistently interacted with the prisoners. Wood often entered the various rooms in the prison and conversed pleasantly with the inmates. Yet he "always had an eye to business, and if you uttered an unwary word, he would seize upon it and follow it up." William E. Doster even stated that Wood "was always the personal friend who would get any one released provided he confessed," yet he always had a jovial manner and was always willing to bend the rules if he thought an individual would not take advantage of him. In one instance, Wood allowed a few Confederate soldiers time to stroll around a cemetery after a funeral, while he took care of business nearby.¹⁶

Soldiers invariably saw him as courteous and of good intention. Upon entrance into the prison, Charles Squires had his gauntlets confiscated as contraband of war. Squires wrote an eight page letter to Supt. Wood proving "that gauntlets could not shoot, cut, nor blow anyone up. The next day he came to our room and called 'Where is that man Squires?' I stepped forward. He threw my gloves to me, saying as a broad smile overspread his face, 'Take your d---d gauntlets.'"

¹⁵Lomax, The Old Capitol, 107; Mahony, Prisoner, 258, 392, 405.

¹⁶Lomax, The Old Capitol, 131-32; Doster, Episodes, 128; Dunaway, Reminiscences, 104.

Another time Wood supposedly told a soldier that if Lee should take the District of Columbia, he would be willing to keep the prison for Jefferson Davis.¹⁷

One of the most pressing issues for a prison administrator was food for his inmates. Wood, in this regard, was very able. At one point during the war, War Department authorities told Wood not to issue bread at Old Capitol. The superintendent would not hear of this outrage. On September 6, 1862, when the commissary began distributing hardtack to the prisoners, the superintendent went to a nearby bakery and bought fresh loaves with money from his own pocket. For the rest of the war, one of the things most mentioned about Old Capitol was the freshness and amount of bread inmates received.¹⁸

Bread was not the only thing Wood bought for the prisoners. He also purchased tobacco and whiskey for the occasional prisoner who could not afford these luxuries on his own. Wood also went out of his way to pay for repairs on the building and to make prison life as comfortable as possible for the female prisoners. Wood even loaned a paroled prisoner \$35 so that he could survive in Washington for a little while.

¹⁷Squires, "Last," 34; S.A. Ashe, "Unusual Experiences as a Soldier and Prisoner," Confederate Veteran XXXV (1927), 342.

¹⁸Mahony, Prisoner, 229-30.

After Federal authorities released Belle Boyd, who became engaged during her stay at the prison, Wood promised to get her a European dress for her wedding. Weeks later, while in Richmond, she received the gown.¹⁹

One thing was true about William P. Wood; he hated Federal deserters. He usually went out of his way to find the most uncomfortable place for such individuals. Frequently he shuttled them into the yard with only minimum shelter. Wood would curse and threaten them with violence, for he believed them to be the lowest forms of life.²⁰

Sometimes prison guards became overzealous and shot at prisoners who stuck their heads out of windows (a transgression of a rule). Wood continually instructed the guard to be vigilant but not to injure anyone carelessly or without reason. In one instance, however, "it seemed that some hasty words of the Superintendent, reflecting on the remissness of the soldiers on duty, had been the proximate cause" of the death of an Englishman who had looked from a window. Wood asked another Englishman to assist him in recording the dead man's valuables to be sent to his family. The superintendent also bought a coffin and held a funeral for

¹⁹Expenditures Book of William P. Wood, Record Group 393, Entry 2134, National Archives; Doster, Episodes, 103.

²⁰Mahony, Prisoner, 225.

the individual. This was not an uncommon act for Wood.²¹

Authorities and prisoners sometimes accused Wood of releasing prisoners for money, or of not returning valuables when other prisoners were released. These accusations were not widespread and may have been an attempt to slander the superintendent or at least to sap his credibility.²²

Above the difficulties Wood faced in administering the prison, he was also constantly fighting with military authorities who attempted to tell him how to run his compound. The prison was under dual control. Both civil and military authorities oversaw Old Capitol. The superintendent at Old Capitol was a citizen who derived his authority directly from the Secretary of War. His power and responsibilities included possession, control, and management of the prison. The second-in-command, the captain of the guard, answered only to the military governor and provost marshal. His primary duty was the safe-keeping of the prisoners. Therefore, the number one and two authorities of the prison had different bosses.²³

Wood was very powerful. He was fair to the prisoners, but it was dangerous to interfere with him as an administrator. A usual phase of the day was that "Stanton was

²¹Lawrence, Border, 199-200.

²²Williamson, Prison, 38; O.R., V, 375-76.

²³Doster, Episodes, 77-78; O.R., V, 429.

at the head of the War Office and Wood at the head of Stanton." Supposedly Stanton respected Wood and trusted him as a friend. In various instances, Wood defied higher authorities and did as he pleased. He consistently ignored orders from unrecognized authorities and proclaimed that "according to his own statement, the prisoners are better treated than the powers above him desire." In the end, his defiance may have benefitted the prisoners.²⁴

External forces always kept the prison under a watchful eye. The War Department and military governor's office regularly sent spies to question inmates. According to one prisoner, there was at least one spy per room in Old Capitol, and "the spies, assuming the air and bearing of injured victims mingled freely with the prisoners, and obtained their confidence with the intention of betraying it." These spies reported the conversations to either Wood or Lafayette Baker, a special agent for the War Department. In addition, the military governor occasionally sent undercover individuals into the prison to ensure that Wood and his subordinates were doing their jobs.²⁵

Now and then, external authorities were beneficial to

²⁴Doster, Episodes, 105; O.R., V, 400-403; Mahony, Prisoner, 239.

²⁵John A. Marshall, American Bastille (Philadelphia, 1870), 326; Mahony, Prisoner, 157; Margaret Leech, Reveille in Washington (New York, 1941), 146-47; Colby Annals, 505.

the prisoners. William E. Doster, Washington's provost marshal, showed genuine concern for those individuals he had committed to the prison. He stated: "I was obliged to visit daily all the prisoners. I could not see them innocently imprisoned without making an effort to have them released." Yet this was usually not the case.²⁶

Letters, which inmates relished, found thorough scrutiny at the provost marshal's office and War Department. Prison authorities allowed only one letter a day; it was to be limited to twenty lines. This was the situation for most of the war. The superintendent of Old Capitol made every effort for the speedy delivery of letters, but the offices of the provost marshal and Judge Advocate delayed them for days. Sometimes they never delivered the correspondence.²⁷

Government and military authorities also suppressed prison passes. Prison authorities scrutinized each bearer of communication. Wood informed guards and commissioned officers repeatedly of the process to be followed in each instance when issuing passes or accepting visitors. If someone wished to see a prisoner, he or she had to go through extensive military protocol. He was interviewed first by a lieutenant and, if

²⁶Doster, Episodes, 105-06.

²⁷Lawrence, Border, 189; E.L. Cox, Diary, July 18, 1864, Virginia Historical Society; Benjamin Temple to son, Aug. 26, 1862, ibid; Mahony, Prisoner, 325-29.

issued a pass, was observed during his visit by military personnel. Prison authorities limited each visit to fifteen minutes and required that the visit deal with either family matters, identification (if identity was questioned), religious matters, a hospital visit, or business matters. By 1864, authorities had restricted prison visits even further. On August 8, 1864, the Washington Evening Star announced that "hereafter Provost Marshal Ingraham will issue no passes to parties desiring to visit prisoners of war confined in the Old Capitol prison, except upon the direct order of the Secretary of War."²⁸

George W. Alexander²⁹ was the commandant of Castle Thunder. At the establishment of Castle Thunder (the Eastern District Military Prison), Alexander became the assistant provost marshal and assistant adjutant general. His immediate

²⁸Register of Passes issued, 1863, Record Group 393, Entry 2133, National Archives; Mahony, Prisoner, 167-68; Old Capitol Prison, Washington, D.C., Register of Passes Issued to Visitors, Mar. 1864-May 1865, Microfilm Roll 110, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; Washington Evening Star, Aug. 8, 1864.

²⁹Alexander, a native of Georgia, had served in the U.S. Navy from 1848 to 1861. Enlisting as a private in the C.S. Army, he participated in the capture of the U.S.S. St. Nicholas. He was captured in Maryland and sent to Fort McHenry where he was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death. Alexander escaped from prison after acquiring a Federal uniform from his wife. Detected during his escape by a guard, he leaped from the ramparts, sprained his ankle and swam ashore. He was heralded in Richmond as a hero and General Winder made him a part of his police force. Parker, Prisons, 18.

and only boss was General John H. Winder. Unlike Old Capitol, this was a prison administered strictly by military forces. Attitudes toward Alexander's administration were mixed, but all agreed that he was a stern disciplinarian whose treatment of the prisoners was sometimes brutally rough and at other times pleasant.³⁰

John Adams, a prisoner at Castle Thunder, related one incident when Alexander commented during a whipping: "Damn him, give him hell; if he don't need it now he will." The prisoner went on to say that the commandant took "delight in punishing us and he had a very rough manner in the administration of his punishments."³¹

Alexander's attitudes toward punishments may have been justified because the character of the prisoners was so bad. Many accounts exist of the prisoners pelting guards with bricks and hambones and abusing new prisoners. Further, fights among prisoners were commonplace. Corporal punishment (whippings, bucking and gagging, barrel shirts, and tying prisoners up by their thumbs) seemed to be necessary to bring order to these ruffians.³²

For the most part, Winder and the press were pleased with

³⁰O.R., V, 907.

³¹Ibid., V, 874-75, 886, 902; Richmond Daily Dispatch, May 16, 1863.

³²Ibid.

Alexander's administration. The Richmond Daily Dispatch noted that Castle Thunder "is one of the neatest prisons to be found in the Confederacy. The floors are all clean, the furniture in good order, and everything betokens attention to small as well as grave matters." One of General Winder's detectives added that "the prison is kept very clean--as clean as it well can be. The printed rules require this."³³

In addition, Alexander established a hospital at the prison and placed his wife in charge of the sick and wounded. Reportedly, the commandant himself paid for the establishment of this hospital, and never received retribution for his expenses. Alexander also did favors for certain prisoners who needed things outside the prison. Inmate Dennis O'Connor asked Alexander to purchase him some clothing and other articles for him.³⁴

The seriousness of the punishment at Castle Thunder became a grave topic, especially since the prison held civilians and women as well. In the spring of 1863, reports of Alexander's treatment reached the Confederate Congress. Members of the House called for an official investigation into the alleged cruel and inhuman treatment of inmates. The committee, consisting of five representatives, questioned

³³Ibid., June 26, 1863; O.R., V, 872.

³⁴O.R., V, 887, 897, 901.

guards, detectives, prisoners, commissary and hospital employees, and all others who in any way assisted with the prison.³⁵

The majority report (three members) believed that some of the punishment was cruel and inhuman but necessary to bring order to some of the inmates. In fact, the committee exonerated Alexander of any wrong-doing and voiced satisfaction that "he has exhibited such traits of character as in our opinion eminently fit him for such a position."³⁶

One of the minority reports found some of Alexander's punishment unjustifiable, improper, and unwarranted; however, in the eyes of one member, the results of this punishment seemed to be beneficial and lacked any profound harm on the average prisoner. He recommended that Alexander not be punished and that "no further action be taken by the House."³⁷

The last minority report was scathing. A House member believed that both Winder's and Alexander's superintendence revealed a lack "of judgement and humanity in the management of that prison deserving not only the censure of Congress but prompt removal" and punishment of the perpetrators. Acquitted

³⁵Ibid., 866.

³⁶O.R., V, 919-924.

³⁷Ibid.

of all charges on May 1, 1863, Alexander remained in charge of Castle Thunder.³⁸

Nevertheless, in December, Alexander was brought up on charges again. This time he was accused of malfeasance in office and confined to his quarters at the prison. His alleged offenses were extensive trade in greenbacks and accepting heavy bribes from prisoners. On December 19, 1863, Winder relieved him of his command of Castle Thunder, but both officers demanded an official investigation. On February 15, 1864, a court decreed that the charges against Alexander were "not sustained by the evidence." However, Winder replaced him with Lucien W. Richardson. Alexander shortly thereafter went on a mission into the Deep South.³⁹

Lucien W. Richardson⁴⁰ was the second and last commandant of Castle Thunder. Very little is known about him, but it is evident that he was an able administrator. Establishing a strict set of rules and regulations, Richardson never seemed to have the difficulties with inmates as did Alexander. Richardson had a low-key personality, and he tried

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Richmond Daily Dispatch, Dec. 17, 18, 19, 1863; Feb. 15, 1864; Lynchburg Virginian, Dec. 21, 1863.

⁴⁰Richardson was a former member of both the 1st Battalion Virginia Light Artillery and the James City Artillery. His experiences with these units fostered a sense of responsibility and administrative talent. Parker, Prisons, 59.

to keep himself and the prison out of the limelight. He succeeded so well in both areas that material relating to the treatment of prisoners almost disappeared after 1863. C. McRae Selph, Assistant Adjutant and Inspector General and Archer Anderson, Lieut. Col. and Assistant Adjutant-General inspected the prison on June 6, 1864. The institution passed their scrutiny. They also noted the commandant's "laudable desire to promote the comfort for the prisoners under his charge." In addition, the inspectors noted that Richardson was applying for retirement. He apparently did not receive it.⁴¹

Unlike Old Capitol, Castle Thunder received external pressure from only one official, General John H. Winder. He took great interest in what was going on at Castle Thunder because he was ultimately responsible for that institution. This may be the reason he replaced Alexander with a person who seemed to have been very responsible in managing the prison and keeping attention away from what was going on there.

Winder's office issued all passes for visitors to the prison, inspected all outgoing and incoming letters to prisoners, and generally determined who would receive paroles. For instance, on October 9, 1863, Winder ordered Alexander "not to allow lawyers to visit the prisoners confined in

⁴¹O.R., VII, 204-7.

[Castle Thunder] except upon a pass from these [Head] Quarters." The Richmond Daily Dispatch regularly announced happenings at the "Castle" in the "Local Matters" section of the newspaper. An announcement on April 30, 1863, was characteristic: "By order of General Winder, unless in special cases, persons are prohibited from visiting Castle Thunder save on Wednesday and Saturday." It is evident that Winder was as interested in the management of Castle Thunder as were the authorities in Washington in regards to Old Capitol.⁴²

Prison authorities at both institutions attempted to make the rooms as comfortable as the situation would allow. Authorities permitted many prisoners to furnish their quarters with things from home. If home was too far away, many of the long-term prisoners bought furniture from either a sutler, or they received permission to purchase items from outside businesses. For the most part, articles already in the prison were crude and dirty from overuse, and if a prisoner did not have the means to purchase new materials, he or she had to live with what was available.

Rooms in Old Capitol ranged from "18 by 22 feet" to "thirty feet square." When the prison was overcrowded there was "scarcely room for one to put his foot down without

⁴²Order Book, John Winder to G.W. Alexander, Oct. 9, 1863, Museum of the Confederacy; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Apr. 30, 1863; John Johnson to Genl. Winder, July 4, 1863, Dept. of Henrico, Virginia Historical Society.

tramping on someone." Prisoners slept on bunks, beds, the floor, or platforms which were in some of the rooms. Authorities tried to supply each prisoner with at least one wool blanket and a bed tick filled with straw. Sometimes prisoners used wooden boards for pillows, but this was under the worst of circumstances. Officials afforded many prisoners with quilts, in addition to other standard articles for each room, this included pine tables, chairs, benches, and "home-made apologies for seats." Some rooms were well-ventilated with large windows. For instance, Room Number 16 had a large window which was above the entrance to the prison (this was the window which had lighted the Senate Chamber).⁴³

Several of the women's rooms were very extravagant for a prison cell. Rose O'Neal Greenhow's cell had a single bed, feather pillow, chairs for reading, and a mirror. Prison authorities also brought her books, pictures, and a trunk full of clothes and other things from her home. Belle Boyd's accommodations included a bed, washstand, table, mirror, and two chairs. Many of the women received gifts from other prisoners in the form of food, pictures, and other comforts.

Old Capitol had standard utilities for use by the prisoners. Water pipes ran hot water from the boiler

⁴³E.L. Cox, *Diary*, July 17, 1864, Virginia Historical Society; Mahony, *Prisoner*, 149, 153; Williamson, *Prison*, 24-25.

throughout the prison, and gas was also used at the prison for cooking and illumination. All rooms in the prison had either a cylinder stove for heat and cooking or heating grates from the furnace. The superintendent also procured coal for the stoves and ovens in the winter. Authorities also permitted the soldiers to use the washing machines.⁴⁴

Prison officials at Castle Thunder also afforded the prisoners some standard amenities. Rooms in the prison could hold up to 100 prisoners each. Inmates here could buy furniture to make the prison more like home. Stoves heated almost every room, but the amount of wood for heating and cooking on occasion was extremely low. Authorities tried to supply as many prisoners with blankets as they could. However, many prisoners used their blankets to make ropes for escaping. Others new to prison life or weak lost their blankets to thievery. A detective at Castle Thunder commented that the authorities were hesitant to supply furniture for the average ruffian because "they would break and burn them up." However the citizen's room seemed rather comfortable, and prisoners did not have many complaints about

⁴⁴Receipt of Chas. Donnelly for repair done to boiler, Record Group 393, Entry 2129, National Archives; Receipt of Edgar Steever for work done on gas and water pipes at O.C.P., *ibid.*; Williamson, *Prison*, 24-25; Expenditure book of William P. Wood, Record Group 393, Entry 2134, National Archives.

accommodations.⁴⁵

Food at the two prisons was a topic of constant discussion. Many individuals at each prison were unaccustomed to prison rations, but what they received was better than what most other prisons rationed. Both governments were to supply prisoners with the same rations given to their armies in the field. This understanding seems to have been directed more toward prisoners of war. At Castle Thunder and Old Capitol, authorities supplied the inmates on average with more rations than the standard military prison.

At Old Capitol, prisoners could supplement their diets with food from either the prison sutler or from items sent from home. Superintendent Wood made constant attempts to supply the prisoners with what they needed, especially with respect to food. One group of prisoners always complained about food, while another group always found the amount and quality either good or at least sufficient.

Prisoners of war at Old Capitol rarely had negative things to say about their prison fare. When authorities transferred prisoners from Old Capitol to another compound like Fort Delaware, they always commented on the good food available at Old Capitol. Most soldiers could not supplement their diet with food from the sutler. Still, William H.

⁴⁵O.R., V, 873, 876, 882, 901.

Morgan, a Confederate officer commented, "while at the Old Capitol Prison we were well treated and the rations were all we could wish." H. M. Brown, a private captured at Mine Run, also thought that prison authorities fed them well. The mess room opened two or three times a day and the average meals included beef or pork, beans, rice, bread, sugar, coffee, and molasses.⁴⁶

The other group of inmates, prisoners of state, never had anything good to say about the prison rations. These individuals usually had the means to form their own messes in their rooms from supplies purchased from the sutler. In fact, J. J. Williamson was so disgusted with the prison mess room that he found it impossible to determine the material of the tables because of the filth. Dennis A. Mahony compared the meat in the prison to "a piece of thick sole leather steeped in grease, those that had good teeth could masticate it with an effort, but, even then, they could not swallow it."⁴⁷

Prisoners like Williamson and Mahony, however, always took advantage of the prison mess, consistently taking those

⁴⁶David Edmundson to Sallie Munford Edmundson, Nov. 4, 1864, Edmundson Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Isham Randolph to Lt. Thomas H. Randolph, Book 23, Lewis Leigh Collection, U.S. Military History Institute; William H. Morgan, Personal Reminiscences of the War of 1861-5 (Lynchburg, VA, 1911), 225; H. M. Brown "The Battle of Mine Run," The Confederate Veteran XVII (1909), 338-39; E.L. Cox, Diary, July 17, 1862, Virginia Historical Society.

⁴⁷Williamson, Prison, 22, 26; Mahony, Prisoner, 261.

things which they believed were edible (usually the bread) and adding them to meals in their rooms. Meals in Room Number 16 included biscuits, ham, sausage, butter, and tea along with other "delicacies." While Belle Boyd was at Old Capitol, her bill of fare included soup, beef, steak, chicken, boiled corn, tomatoes, Irish stew, bread and butter, cantaloupes, peaches, pears, and grapes. Obviously these prisoners, for the most part, had nothing about which to complain when it came to prison fare.⁴⁸

Of special note is a situation which was entirely unique to Old Capitol: outside assistance from sympathizers in the form of food and supplies. Many prisoners, both civilian and soldier, mentioned such aid in a very positive light. Reverend William F. Broaddus commented that "our prison experience had been so much modified by the kindness of our Baltimore and Washington friends that we look back on the whole affair with comparative pleasure."⁴⁹

A Confederate officer related an incident during a previous Christmas which some of his soldiers spent at Old Capitol. The officer noted that the sympathizers in Washington "gave them a big dinner, turkey, oysters,

⁴⁸Boyd, In Camp, 180.

⁴⁹Lucille Griffith, ed., "Fredericksburg's Political Hostages" Virginia Magazine of History and Biography LXXII (1964), 429.

champagne, etc." He added to his wife that "I write you this so that you may know if the Yankees should happen to catch me, that I will have a good time." A prison official went so far to say that many times prisoners left the prison in better shape than they entered because of the assistance of these Rebel outsiders.⁵⁰

Prison rations at Castle Thunder were also above that which soldiers received in the field, at least for most of the war. Like Old Capitol, those with some means could also supplement their diets.

During 1862-1863, Castle Thunder prisoners were receiving more food than the average Confederate soldier got. In fact, the commissary of Castle Thunder commented: "I consider their rations better in quantity and quality than the soldiers in the field." Marion C. Riggs, a former warden, also stated that "there was plenty of food, a pound of meat and a loaf of bread each." In addition, those who were lodged in the citizens room formed their own messes, which were infinitely better than the prison mess.⁵¹

During 1864-1865, the prison rations were reduced to that

⁵⁰Richmond Daily Dispatch, Nov. 18, 1861; Doster, Episodes, 87-88; Downman to Mary Alice Downman, Apr. 12, 1863, Downman Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Mahony, Prisoner, 240-41; Memorandum book, A.D. Payne, May 5, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

⁵¹O.R., V, 886, 899, 901, 907.

of the prisoner of war institutions in Richmond, Libby and Belle Isle. Castle Thunder inmates received "one pound of corn bread, one-third of a pound of bacon, and eight quarts of peas or ten pounds of rice to the hundred rations made into a palatable and nutritious soup." Another inspector noted that "meat was only issued five or six days in May."⁵²

To supplement this deficiency, prison authorities supplied the prisoners with one and three-quarter pounds of bread. It also became increasingly difficult for inmates to afford to buy from the sutlers because of rising inflation. The last two years of the war were painful for the prison populations in Richmond. Both prison officials and inmates suffered.

The daily routine at the two prisons was very similar: extremely monotonous. First call came early in the morning when the guards flung the doors open and announced breakfast. Officials permitted inmates to wash and clothe themselves before all went to the mess hall for breakfast. Sick call was at nine o'clock. Not until dinner (lunch) was any prison routine required of the inmates. After each meal there was a half hour for exercise in the yard. At this time, captives looked forward to the fresh air and the conversation with others. A few hours after dinner, supper was served in the

⁵²O.R., VII, 204, 207.

mess room. Just before dark, the guards took the roll. With taps came guards yelling "Lights out!" Aside from this standard routine, prisoners had to find ways to occupy their time.⁵³

Consuming time became difficult, especially if a prisoner had been in captivity for many months. Dennis Mahony commented that his time in Old Capitol "was spent in sitting near the barred window of our apartment, looking out on the busy world and reflecting on our situations." Helplessness and uncertainty were the worst enemies, and inmates combated them however they could.⁵⁴

In both Castle Thunder and Old Capitol, prisoners read newspapers, the Bible, and other books. When reading became too boring, captives debated current issues, held mock trials, and sang songs. J. J. Williamson characterized his time at Old Capitol as "spent in reading, card playing, dominoes, or checkers. Some devote much of their time to smoking, others to relating stories of adventures, with an occasional song and dance." Playing games of chance was extremely popular in both prisons. Bluff poker, "Muggins" or "Old Capitol" (a dominoes game), and piquet (a British game) all occupied the prisoners

⁵³Williamson, Prison, 25-26, 54-55; Lawrence, Border, 168; E.L. Cox, Diary, July 18, 1864, Virginia Historical Society.

⁵⁴Mahony, Prisoner, 216, 293-95.

time. A constant battle against time was always underway.⁵⁵

At Old Capitol, many wrote about the pleasant aspects of their incarceration. G. A. Lawrence, a British subject, believed he had not truly encountered any hardships except "the prevention of free air and exercise." Many inmates commented that the rooms at the Federal institution were adequately ventilated and that administrators went to great lengths to allow windows and doors to be left open. Certain rooms in the prison were not well-ventilated, but officials moved prisoners to more comfortable rooms when the situation allowed. Superintendent Wood moved E. L. Cox and a few of his associates to a better ventilated room. Whereby Cox stated, "we do not suffer with heat as we did," and time went by quicker "so much so that it scarcely appears like prison life compared with my former situation."⁵⁶

One prisoner, Charles Lee, found his situation so pleasant that he wished to live in Washington, D.C., the rest of his life. He asked his wife to move the family to the Federal capital; but if she did not wish to come he asked her

⁵⁵Memorandum Book, A.D. Payne, May 9, 1863, Virginia Historical Society; Williamson, Prison, 47-48; Boyd, In Camp, 190; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Nov. 4, 1862; Lawrence, Border, 183.

⁵⁶Lawrence, Border, 208-9; Hunter, Johnny Reb, 458; Memorandum Book, A.D. Payne, May 11, 1863, Virginia Historical Society; E. L. Cox, Diary, July 21 and 22, 1864, Ibid.; Mahony, Prisoner, 237.

to keep quiet and destroy the letter.⁵⁷

Some of the privileges administrators allowed were unprecedented for a Civil War prison. Prison officials at Old Capitol generally allowed inmates on the third floor to remain unguarded. The individuals, mostly hostages and prisoners of state, could converse with each other and form messes for meals. While Belle Boyd was at Old Capitol, Wood and his subordinates afforded her the services of a "maid" whom she called an "intelligent contraband." Receiving attention from many men at the prison and luxuriously supplied with food and "pleasantries," Boyd's stay at the prison became "practically a holiday." Unfortunately, it was not a holiday for others at Old Capitol.⁵⁸

Occasionally, Old Capitol prisoners were subjected to cruel and unnecessary conditions. Prison authorities placed the "sinks" (toilets) in the back of the building. The smell of these articles constantly filled the prison. The toilets became especially bad in the summer months when the heat was oppressive. Mahony decried that "nothing but the providence of God preserved the prisoners from the natural effects of the filth, heat, and their crowded contact with each other."

⁵⁷Charles Lee to wife, Oct. 27, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

⁵⁸Mahony, Prisoner, 166; Boyd, In Camp, 178-80; Robertson, "Old Capitol," 402.

Mahony added that "the stench of the place was so sickening that no one could endure it without vomiting the first time he entered the place."⁵⁹

Many prisoners commented about the filth of the prison. Henry Clay Rowe, a political prisoner from Fredericksburg, stated that Old Capitol "resembled the Negro jails in Richmond;" prison authorities did not make effort "to strengthen 'its decayed walls, broken partitions, or creaking doors or stairways.'" The filth seemed to be infinite. One prisoner continually attempted to clean his room, but, he said, "you might brush till you were weary, and ten minutes afterwards things would look as though brooms had never been." On entering her room, Virginia Lomax noticed that it "was one mass of dirt; spiderwebs hung in festoons from the ceiling, and vermin of all kinds ran over the floor." In fact, an official inspection of Old Capitol in December, 1864, termed the kitchen "anything but creditable." The floors, tables, and walls were all dirty and "blackened with smoke." The inspector recommended a whitewash.⁶⁰

Lice, also called chinchies, were an onerous problem. Almost all accounts of Old Capitol mention this plague. Some

⁵⁹Williamson, Prison, 55; E. L. Cox, Diary, July 20, 1864, Virginia Historical Society; Mahony, Prisoner, 213.

⁶⁰Griffith, "Political," 398; Dunaway, Border, 166; Lomax, Inmates, 66-67; O.R., VII, 1183.

wrote of prisoners "actually scraping lice from their persons with knives and sticks." These malodorous and blood sucking insects invaded at the most inopportune times. At bedtime the wretches usually attacked. All concurred with the sentiments of one prisoner: "We could expel them from our bunks, but not from the walls and the ceiling, from the holes and cracks of which they swarmed at night, rendering sound sleep impossible."⁶¹

Overcrowding was the largest problem at Old Capitol. Occasionally, Federal officials routed large amounts of prisoners of war through the prison. If there was already a considerable amount of inmates, overcrowding resulted. Officials were forced to place much of the overflow in the prison yard. This caused two problems: exercise time in the yard was either restricted or eliminated, and the conditions in the yard were usually not fitted for constant use.

Authorities attempted to remedy the situation by erecting Sibley tents (large wigwam type enclosures) in the yard for protection from the elements. Sometimes even these measures were insufficient. At one time, over 2,000 Confederates from Rappahannock Station were placed in the yard. While Dennis Mahony was at Old Capitol, he commented that the crowds in the

⁶¹Griffith, "Political," 408; Mahony, Prisoner, 298-301; Dunaway, Reminiscences, 105; Jas. N. Bosang, Memoirs of a Pulaski Veteran (Pulaski, VA, 1912), 14-17.

yard prevented all recreation in the yard and one could only "gather in a crowd together, and elbow one's way through it." These situations were frequent in the months of August, September, and October. During the rest of the year, the superintendent placed Federal deserters in the yard because of his inherent hatred of that class.⁶²

Inmates at Castle Thunder had some good things to say about their time at the prison. Many enjoyed the opportunity of reading newspapers and receiving privileges not offered at other Civil War prisons. Dr. Mary Walker wrote the Washington Evening Star that "she has plenty to eat, a clean bed to sleep in, and the rebel officers are all very kind." She stated further: "I am much happier than I might be in some relations of life, where I might be envied by other ladies."⁶³

Unlike Old Capitol, Castle Thunder seems to have been cleaned regularly and not as filthy as its Northern counterpart. The commissary and various prisoners commented about the cleanliness of the prison. One official stated that "no filth is allowed to collect in the prison. It is I will venture to say one of the cleanest prisons in the State." In

⁶²Marshall, American, 328; McHenry Howard, Recollections of a Maryland Confederate Soldier and Staff Officer under Johnston, Jackson, and Lee (Baltimore, 1914), 393; Leech, Reveille, 275; Mahony, Prisoner, 227, 290.

⁶³Richmond Daily Dispatch, Nov. 4, 1862; Washington Evening Star, July 11, 1864.

fact, William P. Wood, on Federal business in Richmond, inspected Castle Thunder and found it clean, comfortable, and well disciplined.⁶⁴

Henry Edenborough felt that the treatment at Castle Thunder was fine. He had regularly received his meals from a nearby hotel and believed that other prisoners also received certain privileges. He stated: "I have seen prisoners leave the prison who would take an affectionate and cordial leave of the captain and express regrets to him at parting." Yet this was not the sentiment of all when departing the place.⁶⁵

One of the main problems at Castle Thunder revolved around the actual character of the prisoners, at least through 1863. Repeated accounts exist of prisoners preying on prisoners. The character of the degenerates led Arthur Dutertre, a Frenchman, to write General Winder. Dutertre believed that "a man of principle and education suffers [a] thousand tortures daily, by beeing [sic] in contact with a set of miserable wretches who glory in their vices." This was one of the reasons Alexander resorted to corporal punishment.⁶⁶

Occasionally, officials placed inmates in the prison pen or yard as punishment. In one instance, a roomful of captives

⁶⁴Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 11, 1862.

⁶⁵O.R., V, 886, 901.

⁶⁶Arthur Dutertre to General Winder, Sept. 23, 1863, Dept. of Henrico, Virginia Historical Society.

were sent to the yard after exploding a canteen of powder. The prisoners explained that it was to frighten a group of North Carolina soldiers and not an attempt at an escape. The authorities questioned the inmates to find out who was responsible, but none would admit guilt. Hence, punishment was meted out to all. Many prisoners testified that the soldiers had no protection from the inclement weather, only their clothes and a small fire. They remained in the yard for three days during November, 1862, whereby many became sick and a few died from exposure. Many of those imprisoned at Castle Thunder considered this situation cruel and unjust.⁶⁷

By 1864, conditions in Richmond directly affected Castle Thunder. The quality and quantity of food had rapidly diminished as prices soared. It also became increasingly difficult to maintain the prison structurally. Many prisoners were subjected to the cold of winter and the heat of summer without much protection. Henry Brown, a chaplain from Camp Lee, visited the prisoners to satisfy their spiritual needs. On January 19, 1865, Brown asked the Secretary of War to send wood for fires to the prisoners and to make regular repairs to protect the soldiers from the weather. In particular, Lee found the building holding Federal deserters in dire need of firewood. Authorities discovered that certain officers were

⁶⁷O.R., V, 872.

at fault and that they "have not made proper provision." Officials remedied the situation for at least the time being.⁶⁸

The largest complaints about treatment at Castle Thunder related to the guards. These inexperienced young boys and older men frequently took advantage of their position and seemed to be quick to fire at a prisoner for minor offenses. Recorded instances involved wounding prisoners for abusive language to guards, and guards firing before warnings were given (a standing rule). In addition, no guards were to fire at prisoners who were escaping if they could be recaptured without harm. Yet there were various situations when a guard shot a prisoner when it became evident that the prisoner could be recaptured without injury. Early in 1863, a prisoner was shot as he was crawling over the second story balcony. A guard killed him even though it was impossible for him to escape without trying to pass other guards.⁶⁹

Occasionally, guards argued among themselves. In one situation, Richard Morris of the City Battalion was shot and killed during an argument with another sentry. Captain Alexander informed the Richmond Daily Dispatch that Newson, the guard who killed Morris, was only doing his duty by

⁶⁸Ibid., VIII, 93-94.

⁶⁹Richmond Daily Dispatch, Apr. 8, 1863; O.R., V, 872, 886.

ordering the guard away from the building because he believed he was communicating with a prisoner. A newspaper stated that "the orders to the sentinels were imperative, and strictness was absolutely necessary, to prevent persons from talking with or making signs to the prisoners."⁷⁰

It is evident that prisoners at these two prisons enjoyed privileges that few other Civil War prisons allowed their inmates. The superintendence of William P. Wood seems to have made all the difference between the two prisons at least when George W. Alexander was commandant of Castle Thunder. When Lucien Richardson assumed the supervision of the Eastern District Military Prison, conditions got better. Alexander was known for a system of strict rules and regulations where transgression led to severe punishment. While a group of ruffians dictated this situation, Alexander's handling eventually resulted in his dismissal.

Prisoners, for the most part, did not suffer unduly at these prisons. Food, supply, and exercise were sufficiently available at both institutions. Yet by 1864 food and supply in Richmond was unaffordable and scant. Richardson attempted to remedy the situation the best he could. A solution was beyond his grasp and both the jailed and the jailor suffered for food and supply.

⁷⁰Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 5 and Nov. 6, 1863.

Inmates frequently commented that existence became a blank at these two prisons. Nevertheless, many of the imprisoned had positive experiences of life at these prisons which occasionally did not resemble incarceration. Alexander Hunter, a prisoner at Old Capitol, said it best: "Each man was left to follow at will the devices of his fancy, so barring the restraints of captivity, the prisoners had nothing of which to complain." Yet confinement could never be a truly pleasurable experience.⁷¹

⁷¹Hunter, Johnny Reb, 458.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRISON HOSPITALS

Castle Thunder and Old Capitol both had hospitals on their grounds. Governmental authorities created makeshift hospitals to remedy an increase in the sick and injured, including prisoners. Personnel in prison hospitals and regular hospitals demonstrated the same concern and care for their patients. Doctors and nurses in both hospitals, Castle Thunder and Old Capitol, worked diligently to restore their patients to health. Yet the sheer number of patients combined with rudimentary medical knowledge, untrained personnel, and poorly educated physicians led to common themes found elsewhere in the Civil War: suffering and death.

At the outbreak of war, the lack of sufficient hospital organization was of serious concern to both sides. Confederates and Federals devised a hospital system after the first major battle of the Civil War. Men such as Surgeon-General Samuel Preston Moore, C.S.A., and Surgeon-General William A. Hammond, U.S.A., were brilliant in the organization of governmental medical departments. Within their domain were the prison hospitals at Castle Thunder and Old Capitol. Hammond, Moore, and their associates believed that prison hospitals should receive the same care and attention that

other general hospitals received.¹

Authorities established hospitals shortly after the creation of the prisons. It was deemed necessary not only to keep the inmates under constant medical care but also prison guards, because many of the diseased and wounded attempted escape and could be dangerous to their fellow patients. In addition, the superintendents of the prisons exercised total control of these hospitals.

In the beginning of the war, Old Capitol Prison (O.C.P.) Hospital occupied the third floor of the building. As the hospital expanded, prison authorities moved it to a building on the perimeter of the prison yard. Very little is known about the Old Capitol Prison Hospital because it did not treat many individuals. Yet the O.C.P. Hospital did have the standard amount of personnel. Directly in charge of the hospital was a civilian surgeon. The rest of the staff consisted of assistant surgeons, stewards, nurses, special hospital cooks, and matrons. Many of the stewards, nurses, and matrons were convalescing prisoners.²

Surgeon W. D. Stewart directed the Old Capitol Prison Hospital for most of the war. An unpopular man with persons

¹George W. Adams Doctors in Blue (New York, 1952) and H. H. Cunningham Doctors in Gray (Gloucester, MA, 1970) offer excellent views of medical treatment during the Civil War.

²Doster, Episodes, 75.

like Rose O'Neal Greenhow, Stewart's medical knowledge and care were exemplary. Greenhow termed him a "vulgar uneducated man bedizened with enough gold lace for three field Marshals." His extremely pompous loyalist views and attitudes may have caused Mrs. Greenhow to dislike him. Yet the quality of his medical practice was above average, and prisoners never condemned him for bad treatment.³

Hospital authorities at Old Capitol treated both prisoners of war and civilians with equal care. In fact, Stewart and his associates attempted to accomodate all prisoners who desired to be vaccinated for smallpox. The hospital diet was above average. It consisted largely of lemons, apples, milk, crackers, beef, eggs, and cornmeal. Supply was so abundant that some Rebel prisoners received new Confederate uniforms from Federal authorities after they recovered. When sick, the prisoners experienced great care. In fact, William Doster commented that patients received extensive medical attention to the point of being too thorough. Overall, the hospital treatment at Old Capitol was good.⁴

Castle Thunder Prison Hospital was officially a part of

³Ishbel Ross, Rebel Rose (St. Simons Island, GA, 1979), 171; Doster, Episodes, 75; Robertson, "Old Capitol," 409.

⁴Williamson, Prison, 69; Receipt of Chas. A. Donnelly to Wood for the O.C.P. Hosp., Record Group 393, Entry 2129, National Archives; Doster, Episodes, 88.

the general hospital system in Richmond. Formally, it was General Hospital No. 13, nicknamed "the Lunatic Hospital" because the original hospital at the prison primarily held the mentally incompetent. The original hospital at the prison occupied a room in the Palmer building with a capacity for fifty patients.⁵

By 1863, prison authorities moved all patients to a larger, permanent location on the east side of 20th Street, between Main and Franklin. This building had a maximum capacity of 150 patients. Personnel included a surgeon, assistant surgeons, two or more stewards, twelve or more nurses, four or more cooks, six laundresses, and a series of chief matrons, assistant matrons, ward matrons and ward masters. A detail of fifteen or more guards was also sent to the hospital from the prison. Like Old Capitol, many of the assisting personnel were prisoners recovering from disease or surgery.⁶

At General Hospital No. 13 (Castle Thunder Hospital Prison), the surgeon-in-charge for a majority of the war was Dr. W. W. Coggin. He and his staff showed the same concern their Northern counterparts demonstrated. In fact,

⁵Robert W. Waitt, Confederate Military Hospitals in Richmond (Richmond, 1964), 14; Record Book, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., 1862-1865, Record Group 109, vol. 256, National Archives.

⁶Ibid.

cooperation with the regular prison officials was even better at Castle Thunder. This increased sense of interaction assisted Southern surgeons lacking in medical supply.

George W. Alexander, the prison commandant, and Dr. Coggin frequently experimented with cleaning practices to stop the spread of smallpox which had ravaged Richmond in the fall of 1862. The Richmond Daily Dispatch reported that officials had "adopted the practice of spreading loam and lime on the floors of the prison, which proved such an excellent absorbent of noxious gasses, that since its introduction, no case of small-pox has been reported."⁷

On January 23, 1863, prison and hospital authorities burned tar and scrap leather "to keep away the small-pox." The newspaper commented: "very few, if any, cases having occurred in [the] prison since the remedies have been used."⁸

In November, 1863, Confederate military officials made an effort to bolster their ranks with hospital cases deemed fit for active service. Hospital officials at Castle Thunder would not hear of releasing prisoners unfit for duty. M. T. Bell, Assistant Surgeon at General Hospital No. 13, told General John Winder that many prisoners, in particular Confederate deserters, were not ready to be returned to their

⁷Richmond Daily Dispatch, Jan. 12, 1863.

⁸Ibid., Jan. 24, 1863.

regiments. Bell stated that relapses had occurred with prisoners he had already released and that he did not have the room for return patients. The overcrowded situation at the hospital prompted him to ask that patients be examined before a medical commission because "so great has been the number of sick sent us from the Castle for the last ten days that we have been compelled to put some (too many) on the floor." The commission recommended that the convalescent be offered an oath of allegiance and, if loyal, employed for light duty on Richmond's infrastructure.⁹

Confederate authorities supplied inmates at Castle Thunder Hospital Prison with clothing and other supplies that they would not have received at the prison. These articles included jackets, shirts (cotton and flannel), trousers, and shoes. Hospital authorities insured that patients received quality food even when shortages existed elsewhere. Requisitions included cabbages, Irish potatoes, eggs, chickens, soup, wine, oysters, beef, jelly, and many other ingredients to make a person feel better. Richmond hospitals did suffer for supply during the Civil War. However, excellent organization on the part of the Confederate Medical Department made supply more abundant than other areas of

⁹M. T. Bell to John H. Winder, Nov. 9, 1863, Department of Henrico Papers, Virginia Historical Society; M. T. Bell to John H. Winder, Nov. 11, 1863, ibid.

Richmond.¹⁰

Early in the war, the Confederate Congress established the "hospital ration." In order to supply soldiers with nourishing food under any circumstances, additional government funds went to buy supplies not rationed from the Subsistence Department. The surgeon-in-charge was to purchase rations outside Richmond and have them delivered by rail, therefore buying at lower prices and not drawing from Richmond's meager resources. The Confederate Congress proportionately increased the hospital ration as inflation increased.¹¹

At General Hospital No. 13, officials utilized this hospital ration to its fullest. Even after purchasing flour, meal, rice, sugar, and salt, the hospital frequently had large sums of money remaining. During December 1863-January 1865, an average of \$5,000 existed in the hospital fund. This is slightly misleading though because the lowest amount was \$171.67 in January 1864, and the highest amount in the fund was \$11,824.39 in December 1864. Supply was sufficient. For instance, beef was available during twelve of fourteen months. Only in March and April, 1864, was beef not on requisition

¹⁰Record Book, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., 1862-1865, Record Group 109, vol. 256, National Archives; Accounts and Register of Surgical Cases, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., Record Group 109, Chap. VI, Vol. 467, ibid.

¹¹Cunningham, Doctors in Gray, 80-82.

lists, but correspondingly there was an increase in salt pork. For the most part, patients never suffered for lack of food at the Castle Thunder Prison Hospital. Yet the lack of medical supplies constantly plagued the Confederates.¹²

In regards to the number of patients each hospital treated, the totals are quite different. Old Capitol Prison Hospital treated prisoners strictly from that institution. Thus, the number of patients was smaller than that of its southern counterpart. From September 19, 1862, to November 24, 1865, the hospital had a total of 976 patients. Hospital authorities sent 128 prisoners to general hospitals around Washington. Reasons for sending patients elsewhere included overcrowding, and treatment at specialty hospitals for special cases (smallpox and typhoid hospitals). Authorities frequently sent certain cases to General Hospitals including Stanton, Lincoln, and Carver.¹³

During July, 1862-June, 1864, Castle Thunder Prison Hospital had approximately 5,000 patients. This number is

¹²Rations Issued by Commissary, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., Record Group 109, Chap. IX, Vol. 231, National Archives; Abstract of Provisions Drawn from Commissary, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Virginia, Record Group 109, Chap. IX, Vol. 231, *ibid*.

¹³Record Book, Old Capitol Prison Hospital, Sept. 19, 1862-Nov. 24, 1865, Record Group 94, Register 557, National Archives; Old Capitol Prison, Washington, D.C., Register of Prisoners, Compiled by the Office of the Commissary General of Prisoners 1863-1865, Volumes 349-50, Microfilm Roll 110, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

larger than its Northern counterpart because not only did this institution treat prisoners but also wounded and diseased Confederate soldiers from its armies. Approximately 2,500 patients went to a specialty hospital (Howard's Grove or Hospital No. 9), or were paroled, furloughed, discharged, or released. Dr. Coggin, the surgeon-in-charge, constantly avoided overcrowding the hospital. For most of the war, the prison hospital population was under the 150 patient limit. Transfer became a common occurrence.¹⁴

Illnesses that caused inmates to be admitted to these hospitals were varied. The most prominent sicknesses were pneumonia, smallpox, and typhoid fever. These three maladies accounted for most of the deaths at the prison hospitals. Yet hospital authorities made every effort to relieve suffering and bring patients back to health.

Prisoners in Old Capitol Hospital suffered from a variety of ailments including intermittent fever, diarrhea, scurvy, and the three sicknesses mentioned above. Each time the prison became overcrowded, smallpox broke out among the incarcerated. Two instances particularly stand out, one in

¹⁴Miscellaneous Rolls of Federal Prisoners, Jan. 6, 1864, Record Group 249, Entry 107, Item 837, National Archives; Morning Report, Feb. 16, 1864, Record Group 249, Entry 107, Item 853, *ibid*; Report of Sick and Wounded, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., Chap VI, Vol. 256, *ibid*; Medical Department Register of Patients, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., June 2, 1862-Jan. 31, 1864, Record Group 109, Chap. VI, Vol. 230, *ibid*.

March, 1863, and January, 1864. In each case, prison authorities quarantined the rooms, sent the prisoners to the Kalorama Hospital, and cleaned and whitewashed the interior of the hospital.¹⁵

Of 848 patients, records indicate that forty-eight persons died at the Old Capitol Prison Hospital. Deaths were mostly attributable to typhoid fever and pneumonia. It is difficult to determine how many died of smallpox because these individuals were sent elsewhere. Forty-eight deaths among only 848 patients is a 5.7% mortality rate. This figure indicates that the surgeons and assistants were quite successful in treating these diseases. Federal authorities frequently supplied the hospital personnel at Old Capitol with medical supply and sufficient food. Subsistence authorities complimented the prison hospital personnel's diligent concern with proper supply, therefore restoring most patients to health.¹⁶

Disease was equally common at Castle Thunder Prison Hospital. Inmates suffered from intermittent and typhoid fever, measles, diarrhea, bronchitis, and smallpox. Prison authorities at Castle Thunder were quick to quarantine

¹⁵J. J. Williamson, Prison, 84; Doster, Episodes, 165; O.R., VI, 856-57.

¹⁶Record Book, Old Capitol Prison Hospital, Record Group 94, Register 557, National Archives.

smallpox rooms and remove prisoners to Howard's Grove for treatment. Unlike Old Capitol, Castle Thunder surgeons performed twenty-three operations on soldiers, citizens, and slaves. Almost all of the cases survived.¹⁷

Of 2,500 patients treated at General Hospital No. 13 during the war, about 350 died of wounds or sickness. This is a mortality rate of 14 percent. Battlefield casualties brought to the hospital are factored into this number, therefore making this number much higher. In regards to the Southern hospital, all numbers are approximate because there are conflicting and different record books which are extremely dualistic. While the treatment at the Castle Thunder Prison Hospital was average, prison hospital authorities did not work with an average situation.¹⁸

The inadequate supply of medicine because of the blockade constantly hindered the hospital's attempt to assist patients.

¹⁷Report of Sick and Wounded, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., Chap VI, Vol. 256, National Archives; Richmond Daily Dispatch, Jan. 5, 1863; Morning Report, Castle Thunder Prison, March 11, 1864, Record Group 249, Entry 107, Item 858, National Archives; Register of Surgical Cases, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., Record Group 109, Chap. VI, Vol. 467, ibid.

¹⁸Medical Department Register of Patients, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., Record Group 109, Chap. VI, Vol. 230, National Archives; Record Book, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., Record Group 109, Chap VI, Vol. 257, ibid; Report of Sick and Wounded, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., Record Group 109, Chap. VI, Vol. 256, ibid; Record Book, General Hospital No. 13, Richmond, Va., Record Group 109, Chap. VI, Vol. 249, ibid.

With this in mind, the mortality rate is not bad. In fact, the number under the circumstances should have been much higher. That it was not is a tribute to the hospital personnel, who persevered under difficult situations.

Medical treatment was a part of everyday life at Old Capitol and Castle Thunder. These hospitals reflect the standard situation of medicine during the Civil War, which was deficient of many techniques that may have saved more lives. In addition, they demonstrate that prisoners suffered from the average plagues of the nineteenth century.

Medical personnel at these two hospitals showed the same concern and care for patients that soldiers and civilians received at hospitals like Kalorama and Chimborazo. When comparing these prison hospitals, General Hospital No. 13 in Richmond seemed to be very responsible in care for the sick and wounded, even under the pressures of a failing government. Old Capitol Prison Hospital functioned superbly, keeping mortality rates low and successfully restoring hundreds to health.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE STRUGGLE FOR RELEASE

Inmates at both prisons constantly sought release. There were four modes by which officials released prisoners from these institutions: exchange, transfer, parole, or by administering an oath. If a prisoner did not gain release as soon as he deemed proper, he sometimes took the situation into his own hands. Attempted escapes from both Old Capitol and Castle Thunder were common. Successful escapes were unlikely, and many prisoners knew this fact. Therefore, prisoners continually tried to obtain release through standard channels.

Constant pleas went out from inmates at the two prisons asking either for release or for a trial to determine loyalty or innocence. During the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, governmental authorities were not obliged to offer trial, and in many instances they did not. Yet hundreds of pleas for release went to Confederate Gen. John Winder and Union Secretary of War Edwin Stanton.

In one letter to Winder, three prisoners at Castle Thunder stated "We would be glad to get a trial of some kind[.] We are willing to stand any trial knowing that there is nothing against us legally[sic]."¹

¹Reed, Underwood, and Tefft to Gen. Winder, Aug. 5, 1863, Record Group 249, Entry 107, item 627, National Archives; Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 28, 1863; Phesanton B. Marlow to Maj. Carrington, Jan. 9, 1864, Department of

Some prisoners wished to be tried so that their imprisonment would have meaning and a specific ending-point. C.W. Nelson, a Confederate deserter at Old Capitol, sent the Washington Intelligencer a letter entitled "How We Live at the Old Capitol." Nelson asked why officials held Confederate deserters for long periods even after their loyalty had been established. Nelson wanted to be released and sent North to start a new life.²

Occasionally, prisoners appealed to the humanity of their captors. William Dutton, a Federal prisoner at Castle Thunder, wrote James A. Seddon to "give my case a favorable decision, the reward of which will be the heartfelt thanks of a poor prisoner and prayer and blessing of my widowed mother." Pleas like this were not uncommon.³

Inmates could gain freedom only from the authority that had incarcerated them. Yet in many instances, higher authorities overruled certain persons and released prisoners. At both prisons, military governors, provost marshals, secretaries of war, and superintendents could liberate the incarcerated. However, each mode of release in both

Henrico Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

²Neely, Fate, 85.

³William Dutton to James A. Seddon, Aug. 13, 1863, Record Group 249, No. 966, Box 11, National Archives.

governments required the proper authority.⁴

Exchange was the first mode of release authorities liked to utilize. Exchange commissioners were the proper officials to facilitate this type of liberation. On July 23, 1862, the two governments, finding a need for an official exchange agreement, met at Haxall's Landing on the James River. Deliberation mostly dealt with the fair exchange of military personnel. In this regard, exchange officials held prisoners of war at both of these prisons to facilitate a group movement to the agreed upon exchange point, resulting occasionally in overcrowding. The only mention of citizens was in Article Three: "If citizens held by either party on charges of disloyalty or any alleged civil offense are exchanged it shall only be for citizens."⁵

This article gave persons like Colonel Robert Ould, Confederate Commissioner of Exchange, and Colonel William H. Hoffman, Federal Commissary-General of Prisoners, the opportunity to relieve both Old Capitol and Castle Thunder of disloyal inmates. Although disputes interrupted the exchange cartel throughout the war, the commissioners did make an

⁴Commitment, Exchange, Transfer, and Release Books, Record Group 393, Entry 2132, National Archives; Old Capitol Prison, Washington, D.C., Register of Prisoners, Compiled by the Office of the Commissary General of Prisoners 1863-65, Volumes 349, 350, Microfilm Roll 110, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

⁵O.R., IV, 266-68.

effort to relieve the numbers of inmates at these two prisons.

At Old Capitol, authorities exchanged all sorts of civilian prisoners. Women, sutlers, and the disloyal all found exchange one of the ways to leave Old Capitol. On May 16, 1863, military authorities arrested George Adams, a disloyal Prince William County farmer, and included him for exchange a month later. Federal authorities sent hundreds of alleged disloyal women to Richmond in exchange, sometimes as a group and other times as part of a larger exchange. The infamous Belle Boyd was exchanged with 200 other prisoners upon leaving Old Capitol.⁶

Castle Thunder also had its wide variety of civilian exchanges. Confederate authorities classified certain civilians as alien enemies⁷ and included these individuals--Federal officers' wives, sutlers, and newspapermen--for exchange. Others accused of disloyalty were exchanged for similar personages.⁸

Another mode of release was parole. The secretaries of

⁶Old Capitol Prison, Washington, D.C., Register of Prisoners, Compiled by the Office of the Commissary General of Prisoners 1863-65, Vols. 349, 350, Microfilm Roll 110, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; Doster, *Episodes*, 84; Boyd, *In Camp*, 198.

⁷This classification was much better because it meant one could not be tried for treason.

⁸Major Carrington to W.S. Winder, Sept. 16, 1863, Interrogation Statement, Record Group 249, Entry 107, National Archives; Richmond *Daily Dispatch*, Feb. 27, 1864.

war in both governments issued paroles to inmates for three reasons: 1) overcrowding in the prison, 2) the individual had been incarcerated for a long period, or 3) the inmate had completed his or her sentence. Governmental authorities were wary of releasing prisoners on parole. Each government dealt with the paroled prisoners differently.⁹

Paroled from Castle Thunder, many Federal deserters sought work in Richmond. Authorities allowed these individuals to remain in the city if they did not cause problems. Some were indispensable to Richmond's industries. A man named John Bacon became an important worker in "a large mill and carding machine." Bacon's employer stated that "his services were valuable to the local community and the Confederacy as a whole." This was an exception, since paroled prisoners frequently resorted to crime and sometimes sabotage. The Richmond city council went so far as to request that parolees from Castle Thunder be recalled because of the increase in violence. The parolees were subsequently recalled in February 1864, adding to the growing number of prisoners in Richmond.¹⁰

⁹Richmond Daily Dispatch, Sept. 23, 1862; Mar. 15, 1864; Jan. 23, 1865; O.R., IV, 108; Williamson, Prison, 56-58; Memorandum Book, A.D. Payne, May 15, 1863, Virginia Historical Society.

¹⁰T.W. Philips and William M. Philips to Adj. Gen. Samuel Cooper, Dec. 10, 1863, Department of Henrico, Virginia Historical Society; Louis H. Manarin, Richmond At

Confederate soldiers released on parole from Castle Thunder expressed interest in returning to the service, but not as foot soldiers. Frequently, in letters to friends, soldiers tried to join the navy or the cavalry. Many wished to avoid the growing numbers of casualties in the field and saw these branches of the service as a possible refuge. Occasionally authorities allowed some to join the navy, if there was a need.¹¹

Federal authorities required that paroled prisoners return home and not assist the Confederacy in any way. If the prisoners did not wish to return to the South, the Secretary of War directed that they leave Washington as soon as possible and take up residence in the North and not go south of Washington for the duration of the war. This policy seemed to be much more practical. Former prisoners, deserters and the disloyal, would not be able to wreak havoc as similar prisoners in Richmond did during the war.¹²

Prisoners in both institutions could also take oaths to gain release. The most common vow was an oath of allegiance

War (Chapel Hill, 1966), 433.

¹¹Charles R. Gaston to John H. Winder, July 3, 1863, Department of Henrico, Virginia Historical Society; Henry Avery to "Dear Friend," Nov. 20, 1863, ibid.

¹²John Henry Martindale to Supt. of Old Capitol Prison., Record Group 393, Entry 2129, National Archives; Washington Evening Star, Aug. 15, 1864.

to either government. Upon entering either prison, officials offered the arriving prisoners the oath of allegiance. This option was offered frequently throughout the time of imprisonment. This was a way of determining loyalty in the eyes of governmental authorities, while at the same time relieving overcrowded conditions. Many refused the oath, believing that their conduct did not require an explanation or statement of beliefs. Others surmised that taking the oath would only admit guilt. Yet many a proud spirit succumbed to taking the oath when faced with long-term imprisonment.

Federal authorities from Old Capitol and the provost marshal's office in Washington offered the oath to all prisoners. When a prisoner who wished to take the oath of allegiance was identified, an interrogating official asked that person a series of questions in order to issue a certificate. The certificate indicated rank (if a soldier), place of birth, age, residence, offense, the reason for taking the oath, and if compelled to fight, for which army the person would fight. The oath stated that they would be released "upon their engaging upon honor that they will render no aid or comfort to the enemies in hostility to the Government of the United States."¹³

Upon taking the oath, the prisoner was released shortly

¹³Interrogation papers, Record Group 393, Entry 2129, National Archives; O.R., II, 238.

afterward and perceived to be now loyal in the eyes of the United States Government. However, not all officials believed the oath to be genuine. William E. Doster, a provost marshal, wrote: "My experience was that this oath was regarded as straw, and merely the means of deliverance, and that as soon as these gentlemen were tired of doing nothing, they turned up again under Lee."¹⁴

This was common knowledge among the prisoners. Inmate J.J. Williamson believed that many who were released "say they do not regard the oath--that it is unconstitutional, unlawful, and not in any sense binding." Yet the prisoners continued to utilize this method to gain freedom.¹⁵

Prison authorities in Richmond also required that inmates who wished to take the oath go through extensive military protocol before gaining release. Prior to administering the oath, officials at Castle Thunder were required to make certain that Yankee deserters and the disloyal would honor the statements in the oath. Civil authorities in Richmond constantly questioned the release of Yankees into their streets. This reservation was not without reason. As with parole in Richmond, many desperate characters had resorted to crime and, in some cases, given information to Federal spies.

¹⁴Doster, Episodes, 104, 139; Lawrence, Border, 206-7.

¹⁵Williamson, Prison, 62.

However, prison authorities in Richmond were faced with overcrowded conditions, which dictated that those wishing to take the oath be given it. They had to assume the oath was genuine.¹⁶

Although not the type of liberation prisoners wanted, transfer was another form of release from these two prisons. Officials in both governments continually attempted to route certain groups of the incarcerated to prisons more suited for that sort of inmate.

During the summer of 1864, Federal authorities made a concerted effort to transfer prisoners of war to established military prisons in the North. Charles A. Dana, the Assistant Secretary of War, directed that "all prisoners of war now in the Old Capitol Prison be removed thence to such permanent place of confinement as may be deemed suitable, and that in the future prisoners of war be not retained for any length of time in that prison."¹⁷

Like clockwork, the commissary-general of prisoners and the provost marshals ordered that all prisoners of war "be immediately sent to Fort Delaware." Old Capitol rolls indicate that hundreds of prisoners of war not only went to Fort Delaware but other places like Elmira, Johnson's Island,

¹⁶Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 17 and Nov. 3, 1863.

¹⁷O.R., VII, 1207.

and Fort Warren. In the eyes of these prisoners, this was not the favored way of leaving Washington. They would repeatedly remark about the good times at Old Capitol Prison.¹⁸

General Winder also directed that prisoners of war at Castle Thunder be continually routed to a more suitable location. Usually such transfers led to places like Libby, Belle Isle, and Andersonville. Authorities primarily sent disloyalists to Salisbury, N.C., especially if the inmate had been convicted of a crime against the Confederacy. Prison officials in Richmond believed that the Salisbury Prison was more suited to hold convicted persons. Additionally, Salisbury could retain more prisoners and transfer there would relieve the growing problems of prison space in the capital of the Confederacy.¹⁹

When the opportunity for official release was not offered, some prisoners attempted escape. In fact, both governments expected prisoners of war to attempt escape. The situation at Castle Thunder and Old Capitol was very conducive to escape. The dilapidated conditions of the two prisons

¹⁸Col. Ingraham to W.P. Wood, June 7, 1864, Record Group 393, Entry 2129, National Archives; Washington Evening Star, June 9 and Aug. 11, 1864; Old Capitol Morning Roll Books, Record Group 393, Part IV, Entry 2129, National Archives.

¹⁹Interrogation Statements, Record Group 249, Entry 131, National Archives; Richmond Daily Dispatch, July 19, 20, and Aug. 24, 1864.

sometimes made escape extremely tempting. Prison authorities remedied this by posting extra guards at key points and strictly enforcing the prison's rules and regulations. Inmates continued to persevere in finding ways to leave the prison. Their creativity and ingenuity deserve special note.

Accounts relating to escape from Old Capitol are few. All indications are that prisoners did not often attempt escape. This may have been due to three factors: escape was too difficult, conditions at Old Capitol were not bad, and most prisoners believed their stay there would be short.

No matter what the reason, escape attempts were low. However, some efforts were successful. During G.A. Lawrence's imprisonment, a few of his prison neighbors, including a minister, planned an escape from Old Capitol. Their route included passing through a floor into the prison attic, crawling over eighty feet of shingle roof and through a window into an abandoned building not attached to the prison. The minister had fashioned a pair of nail-studded sandals for the climbing portion of the venture. It was these "miserable machines" and untimely hesitation which caused their discovery and further imprisonment.²⁰

The Washington Evening Star reported two other attempts. One involved George Peterson, a Rebel spy and mail carrier.

²⁰Lawrence, Border, 191-95.

On November 16, 1864, Peterson received permission from the guards to go to the yard. Disguising himself, he proceeded to break into the employees' mess-room with a chisel acquired from a friend. He crossed into the female department of the prison, picked a lock, and entered the storeroom. Breaking through the door, he entered the front office and walked into the street. There are no reports of Peterson's recapture.²¹

Another reported escape involved two Rebel soldiers. They "succeeded in effecting their escape by lowering themselves from the window of their apartment by means of their blankets." The sign of blood indicated that one had injured himself, but they apparently made it to safety. Alexander Hunter also devised plans for escape. Imprisoned on the first floor, he decided to saw the bars in his room with a crude knife acquired from the mess room. Yet he had to hide his progress from both the guards and his roommates because each room housed "a spy, generally some recreant, traitorous Southern soldier, whose business it was to watch and report attempts of the kind to the authorities."²²

Hunter sawed away at night, after his roommates had fallen asleep. At daylight he disguised his progress with grease and soot. A week later the bar was ready to fall, and

²¹Washington Evening Star, Aug. 17, 1864.

²²Ibid., Nov. 17, 1864; Hunter, Johnny Reb, 459-60.

he prepared for his flight. Unfortunately, the day before his attempt, he was transferred with hundreds of other prisoners of war to another prison.²³

Escape attempts were more prevalent at Castle Thunder. The reasons for this are more evident. Prisoners frequently commented that punishment (particularly under Alexander) was brutal, the guards were careless and inexperienced, and by the end of the war the lack of food and supply had almost forced the inmates to escape to find sustenance.

The Richmond Daily Dispatch recorded escapes from Castle Thunder. Breakouts began almost immediately after authorities established the prison. On October 9, 1862, James Jennings, a substitute deserter, took "French leave by jumping from one of the windows on the western side of the building and running off." A few days later, detectives arrested him in a Richmond cigar store. On October 10, 1862, a few prisoners attempted to dig a wall through the eastern side of the prison. Soon after their work had begun, prison authorities heard noise. Informers had pinpointed the tunnel, and officials prepared themselves for the escape. The prisoners burrowed a hole through four feet of debris. The digging took two nights. When the first inmate emerged, a pistol was put to his head, and he was told not to make a noise. Thirteen men were

²³Hunter, Johnny Reb, 459-60.

arrested in this fashion. One obese prisoner got stuck and alarmed the others, but those captured were placed in the guard house and fed on bread and water.

Some prisoners performed acrobatic feats to gain release. David W. Rogers escaped by lifting the window of his room and then proceeded to climb onto the old tobacco drying porch. Finding a wire to climb down, Rogers swung himself to the ground, grabbing hold of an iron bracket which supported the porch. The sentinel below was only alerted after the prisoner's impact on the ground made a noise. Yet it was too late, since Rogers had already ran to safety.²⁴

By 1863, more experienced and reinforced guard details forced prisoners to be even more crafty. On January 5, 1863, seventy prisoners plotted an escape from Castle Thunder. Each individual had somehow armed himself with a dagger and a revolver and planned to escape through various holes in the walls. They were determined to kill any guard who obstructed their flight. Informers notified the prison officials of the plan. The ring-leaders were interrogated and punished.

In another case, Captain A.C. Webster, a Union officer charged with murder, attempted escape repeatedly. Condemned to die, he received assistance from various prisoners trying to save his life. A guard discovered his first attempt when

²⁴Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 9, 10, and 21, 1862.

he sought to file off his leg irons and handcuffs. On March 30, 1863, his last attempt, the prison doctor had committed him to the hospital on the grounds of indisposition. Prison authorities chained Webster to his bed and placed a sentinel at his foot. Yet miraculously he got free and made for the window. He leaped from the third floor and sprained his ankle as four guards tried to fire at him. Soon recaptured, Webster was placed under double guard. The Daily Dispatch commented: "It is said he can undo any [iron] placed on him by the use of a small stick. Whether he can undo himself from the gallows next Friday remains to be seen." He did not.²⁵

In November, 1863, the largest escape from Castle Thunder occurred when thirty-five Yankee deserters fled from the institution. Simultaneously, the prisoners began digging two tunnels, one in north and one in the east side of the prison. They evaded detection by concealing the dirt under tobacco fixtures. Prison officials, wary of an escape, reinforced the guard at suspicious places. This foresight prevented a mass escape which may have totaled into the hundreds. A week later, military personnel had recaptured twenty-nine prisoners. Only six prisoners got away.²⁶

With food and supply dwindling and overcrowded conditions

²⁵Ibid., Jan. 5, Mar. 9, 27, and 30, 1863.

²⁶Ibid., Nov. 16 and 21, 1863.

prevalent, Castle Thunder inmates stepped up escape attempts. Prisoners on the lower floor sought to flee "through the culvert which carries off the refuse matter into the dock below Cary Street." Officials discovered the plan after the prisoners had dug ten feet. The incarcerated cut holes in the ceilings to transfer the dirt onto the roof. The newspaper commended the "Castle" guards for extreme vigilance.²⁷

Another incident involved a Federal scout named James Hancock, who escaped by faking his death and later jumping from the cemetery cart. For days he alluded his captors by putting up residence at a fine hotel from money he had saved. When recognized, he changed his facial expression so much that he then became unrecognizable. He was later recognized again, but this time he was taken to Castle Thunder for observation. He proceeded to change his facial expression for days even under interrogation. Yet after a period, he could no longer put up the facade. "The Confederates admired his nerve and perseverance fully as much as did his fellow prisoners," a newspaper stated. Recorded escapes for 1864 indicate that at least fifty-seven Castle Thunder prisoners escaped. Only eighteen made successful escapes, or at least were not

²⁷Ibid., Jan. 11, 16, 18, 20, 27, Feb. 10, 13, 23-25, and June 18, 1864.

returned to Castle Thunder.²⁸

Late in the war, escape attempts became more prevalent. Although the guard was more efficient and knowledgeable, military officials consistently decreased their number because of manpower shortages in the armies. This became so bad that certain parts of the prison could not be guarded and sentinel posts became spread out. After one escape, a report noted "as owing to the insufficiency of the guard allowed, it is seldom that sentinels can be posted on the east side of the building, from which the exit of Yankees was made."²⁹

The only other way to leave these prisons was death. Inmates died in various ways. Some perished from disease, while some eventually died from wounds received in battle. In other circumstances, death was more deliberate. Occasionally, prison authorities hanged prisoners for murder or desertion. Others died at the hands of prison guards who fired on persons who crossed the "dead line" (which meant soldiers were standing too close to the windows in these institutions). Indications are that deaths in both prisons were not very numerous and, for the most part, unintentional.

As one of the more established prisons in Washington, Old

²⁸J.L. Burrows, "Recollections of Libby Prison" Southern Historical Society Papers XI (1883), 91-92.

²⁹Richmond Daily Dispatch, Feb. 23, 1864; Feb. 17, 1865.

Capitol became one of the main institutions in the capital for holding prisoners. The numbers in the Northern governmental headquarters would never be even half the number the Confederate center would hold. Because of its centrality and function, the Old Capitol prison yard was used as a place for hanging military offenders. Prison officials confined those condemned to die in the Old Capitol, and they utilized the scaffolds erected in the yard. From late 1861 to November 25, 1864, officials hanged seven individuals in the Old Capitol Prison yard. Federal authorities hanged six of the seven for murder. Records reveal that only the next-to-last individual, Charles Fenton Beavers, was hanged for breaking an oath of allegiance and rejoining Mosby's guerrillas. Authorities erected the gallows repeatedly, but the President commuted most sentences before the execution date. The gallows were easily erected and taken down, but in one instance "for several weeks after [an] execution, the revolting instrument of death was left standing in the yard--as it was said to be a terror to the prisoners."³⁰

Occasionally the prison guard became overzealous. This attitude resulted in a death. In March, 1862, one of the most notable situations occurred. Jesse W. Wharton, a prisoner of state, was killed by a sentinel from the 91st Pennsylvania.

³⁰Washington Evening Star, Aug. 3, 26, and Nov. 25, 1864; Marshall, American, 331.

Wharton, ordered to move away from a window, felt "that he was violating no rule [and] the guard would not attempt to carry out his threat." Wharton moved briefly but then returned, whereby the sentinel fired, striking the prisoner in the left hand (his hands were crossed) and passing through his spine. Wharton died shortly afterwards.³¹

No matter what the circumstances of the death, Superintendent Wood always made provision to obtain a casket for the deceased. He also held funeral services at a nearby cemetery for all interested parties. Wood was very consistent in his care for the deceased. His expenditures book (his book began in June, 1862, and ended in June, 1865) reveals the approximate number of persons who died at Old Capitol. Although it is difficult to determine how many died each year, it is possible to derive an relative number when knowing the price of one coffin. Wood noted once that the price of the coffin was \$22. Therefore the approximate number of deaths at Old Capitol using these figures indicates that 39 persons died at the institution.³² Wood's duty and concern helps in determining the number of deaths, which was low for a Civil

³¹Williamson, Prison, 35-36; Marshall, American, 343-45; Mahony, Prisoner, 302-5.

³²This number does not include deaths at the prison hospital.

War prison.³³

Death records at Castle Thunder, though incomplete, show similarities to Old Capitol. On October 31, 1862, Confederate officials condemned John F. Parke of the Richmond Zouaves to be shot for desertion in the face of the enemy. A few days later, a firing squad fulfilled the court's order in the Castle Thunder yard. On April 11, 1863, Captain A.C. Webster, the escape artist, was hanged. The Daily Dispatch noted that he died with composure and bravery. Spencer Kellogg, a noted Federal spy from the West, was hanged in late September, 1863, for desertion and espionage.³⁴

Occasionally, military courts made examples of some offenders residing in Castle Thunder. Confederate officials singled out Spencer Deaton to be hanged in the prison yard so that all could see the fate of brutal criminals. Deaton, a member of the 6th Tennessee (Union), had deserted a Confederate regiment and joined a Federal unit. A court-martial found him guilty and sentenced him to death. One register stated: "It is to be hoped that the fate of this man will have a tendency to make all who contemplated violating

³³Memorandum Book, A.D. Payne, May 13, 1863, Virginia Historical Society; Lawrence, Border, 201; Expenditure Book, William P. Wood, Record Group 393, Entry 2134, National Archives.

³⁴Richmond Daily Dispatch, Oct. 31, 1862; Apr. 11 and Sept. 26, 1863.

[laws], respect the laws of the county in which they reside."³⁵

The limited amounts of exchange, transfer, and parole were insufficient to those who wished for immediate release. Prison authorities were suspicious of all inmates, and used intricate scrutiny before allowing release.

The official modes of release concerning Old Capitol and Castle Thunder may have been numerous, but inmates frequently attempted to find other ways out of these institutions. As the war progressed, it became even harder for prisoners in Old Capitol to attempt escape because guards became more numerous and experienced. At Castle Thunder, the opposite was true. As manpower dwindled, the Confederacy was forced to use all available men. That included prison guards. Although the guards at Castle Thunder may have gained experience, they were few in number while inmate populations continued to rise.

It was not the role of the prison superintendents to release prisoners; their primary goals were the retention and protection of offenders. Although Wood, Alexander, and Richardson did have some say, they were not the reigning authorities in these matters. Provost marshals, secretaries of war, and commissary-generals were the proper authorities when it became time for all types of release.

³⁵Ibid., Feb. 18, 19, 20, 1864.

CONCLUSION

In the last months of the war, both prisons faced abnormal situations. The war had heavily influenced both cities, especially Richmond. In Washington the increased number of Confederate prisoners filled Old Capitol to overflowing. As thousands of Federal troops laid siege to Petersburg and later streamed toward Richmond, Confederate authorities attempted every solution to stem this tide.

By the spring of 1864, manpower shortages in the Confederacy had forced prison authorities to seek soldiers from Castle Thunder. Military authorities sought recruits from inmates at the Castle. One newspaper reported: "Another full company, organized among the prisoners in Castle Thunder went into the field Saturday under command of Major Vowles. This makes four companies sent from that institution since operations around Richmond commenced." Interestingly enough, the units adopted the name "Winder Legion." All indications are that they performed well under fire.¹

On April 2, 1865, Gen. Robert E. Lee ordered Gen. Richard Ewell at Richmond to "destroy the stores which could not be removed" and also to start evacuating south "the prisoners from Libby and Castle Thunder." The situation at Castle Thunder on April 2 was bad. Although a gigantic increase in

¹Richmond Daily Dispatch, May 16, 1864.

Federal prisoners had occurred, manpower at the prison was minimal and, to some extent, unarmed. Officers and enlisted men were deserting the prison daily and leaving the inmates unprotected and unsecured.²

The city burned as the Confederates abandoned Richmond. George Alfred Townsend, a reporter from the New York World wrote on Monday, April 3: "There is a stillness in the midst of which Richmond with her ruins, her spectral roof afar, and her unchanging spires, rests beneath a ghastly, fitful glare-- the night stain which a great conflagration leaves behind it for weeks." Townsend added: "Struggling silently with colossal shadows along the foreground, two hideous walls alone arise in front, shutting these gleams. They are the Libby Prison and Castle Thunder." Castle Thunder had survived the fire, as it had survived two other fires during its history as a prison. That same day, Federal authorities placed Confederates in the Castle, "giving them a taste of their own prisons."³

Holding individuals of "treasonable propensities," Castle Thunder continued as a prison for another few months. When it closed, "the front door key at Castle Thunder was sent to New

²A.A. and Mary Hoehling, The Day Richmond Died (New York, 1981), 114; 1st Regimental Reserves Report, Virginia Militia Infantry, Apr. 2, 1865, Virginia Historical Society.

³Hoehling, Richmond, 211, 236.

York, where it was sold at auction to help raise funds for orphans of Union soldiers." George Alexander's dog "Hero," who many accused of killing Federal prisoners, was shipped to the Chicago Sanitary Fair along with "Jack," the dog from Andersonville. At Chicago, these two canines raised \$2,100 for the Soldiers Fund.⁴

Control of Castle Thunder buildings eventually reverted to the heirs of John Enders, the former owner of the tobacco warehouses. When the tobacco industry became profitable again in Richmond, the owners cleaned and refitted the buildings. Yet in 1879, the structures succumbed to fire. Subsequently, the Phillip Morris Tobacco Company purchased the lots. Today, where Castle Thunder once stood, is a parking lot for the employees of the tobacco company.⁵

After the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, authorities paroled most of the prisoners of war in Old Capitol. However, Federal officials decided that its function, the retention of the disloyal, was also suitable for postwar America, at least for the time being. The prison housed some very important personages. Confederate governors Zebulon B. Vance, John Letcher, and Joseph E. Brown resided at the institution until their pardon. After the assassination

⁴Parker, Prisons, 67-68; "Blood Hounds!" Broadside, Virginia Historical Society.

⁵Parker, Prisons, 68.

of President Lincoln, Edwin Stanton imprisoned many suspicious individuals at Old Capitol. In fact, Mrs. Mary Surratt, a Lincoln conspirator, was briefly held there before she was taken to the Old Penitentiary, in another part of Washington, and hanged. Federal officials also held Capt. Henry Wirz, the commandant of Andersonville. Tried for crimes against humanity, he spent his last days at the prison. His stay ended when he was hanged in the Old Capitol yard.⁶

On November 29, 1865, Maj. Gen. C. C. Augur, commanding the Department of Washington, wrote Assistant Adjutant General E. D. Townsend: "The Secretary of War directs that the Old Capitol Prison be immediately broken up and some other suitable place will be selected by you as a place of confinement for prisoners." After a dozen or so prisoners were sent elsewhere, the former prison fell into private hands. Eventually, in the true spirit of capitalism, Old Capitol and Carrol prisons were opened for exhibition "at the moderate charge of twenty-five cents entrance fee."⁷

Mrs. Virginia Lomax, a former inmate, noticed that the

⁶Colby, Annals, 510; Paul H. Bergeron et al (eds.), The Papers of Andrew Johnson IX (Knoxville, 1991), 340-41; Lomax, Inmates, 136-37, 167-68; Old Capitol Prison, Washington, D.C., Register of Prisoners, Compiled by the Office of the Commissary General of Prisoners, 1863-1865, Volumes 349, 350, Microfilm Roll 110, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

⁷O.R., VIII, 819; Lomax, Inmates, 224-25.

new owners removed the prison's iron bars and replaced them with glass and curtains. In addition, "the whitewashed fence was replaced by an iron enclosure which made the grounds more open and picturesque." It truly was a beautiful area of Washington. Mrs. Lomax added that "all about the establishment is neat, bright, and cheerful, and the Old Capitol Prison has forever passed away." Indeed, by 1869 the compound had been demolished. The land remained vacant for a number of years. Now, on the grounds of Old Capitol stands the United States Supreme Court.⁸

The history of Old Capitol and Castle Thunder is truly unique in the annals of the war. These two distinctive institutions were a response to a need to protect each government from treasonable persons. As makeshift prisons, they demonstrated the hurried, ad-hoc situation of how each government dealt with prisoners of state. American officials had never really dealt with a similar situation. Governmental authorities had not questioned loyalties to this extent since the American Revolution. Yet the Revolution is far from being similar to civil war, whereby all individuals were at one point citizens of the United States and everyone's beliefs were examined and questioned.

⁸Lomax, Inmates, 224-25; Robertson, "Old Capitol," 411; James G. Randall, Lincoln the President, III (New York, 1952), 206.

The distinctiveness of these institutions was ingrained into every aspect of the prisons: incarceration, treatment, and release. Governmental authorities in each city constantly scrutinized the prisons, taking added interest in their administration, which, for the most part, led to heightened awareness and better treatment for prisoners.

Within the aspect of commitment, Old Capitol and Castle Thunder were inherently alike in the process and reasons for incarceration. The character of each institution was intrinsically alike. Aside from insignificant deviations, they consistently held the same sorts of prisoners. Seeing the wide variation of prisoners (socially, economically, and militarily) each government was forced to treat these persons well, not wishing to infringe on civil liberties any further.

The superintendence of William P. Wood and Lucien W. Richardson were efforts to treat prisoners properly. In fact, in some circumstances, life at Old Capitol and Castle Thunder did not resemble a prison. The abundance of food, supplies, and exercise provided by the commandants, and some external forces all reveal true concern for the prisoners' well-being. Governmental authorities did not tolerate harsh treatment at these prisons. When George W. Alexander's punishment and conduct seemed excessive (e.g. corporal punishment), he was eventually dismissed. Thorough inspection and congressional interest in both prisons led to above-average treatment of

prisoners. This good treatment included the prison hospitals.

The only situation similar to these prisons, in terms of the incarceration and treatment of civilians, was prison life before the Civil War. Local situations and matter effected antebellum jails, alike in some respects to Civil War prisons. Jails in Ohio and Alabama affected jails in the same way Richmond and Washington affected prisons. For the most part, Old Capitol and Castle Thunder offered more exercise, healthier food, spacious rooms, and luxuries (convenience of a sutler, etc.) than regular civil jails. During the early parts of the nineteenth century, corporal punishment was regularly used in the United States, but by the time of the Civil War this practice was declining. As demonstrated by its limited use in Castle Thunder and nonexistence at Old Capitol, this was definitely the case. Overall, this deviation from civil practices indicates that authorities at these two institutions treated Civil War prisoners relatively well.⁹

Release from Castle Thunder and Old Capitol was difficult to obtain. Governmental authorities were wary of releasing prisoners without justification. Although exchange, parole, and the administration of the oath of allegiance were utilized, they were not offered enough in the eyes of the inmates. This situation led to many attempted escapes.

⁹J. M. Moynahan and Earle K. Stewart, The American Jail (Chicago, 1980), 41, 46, 56, 58-59, 62-65.

Attempted escapes were much more prevalent than successful escapes because guards were numerous and experienced. Supply and the number of guards eventually had a lot to do with the number of escape attempts. The number of attempted escapes was high at Castle Thunder because by the end of the war sufficient supply was limited and at the same time the number of guards was dwindling. Just the opposite was the case at Old Capitol. Prison supply was constant and satisfactory, and the number of guards remained fixed. Therefore the number of escapes and escape attempts were very low.

The uniqueness of these prisons provides a different perspective of Civil War prisons. Disloyal elements, a result of Civil War, caused each government to establish specific prisons for the incarceration of those with treasonable propensities. Similar in many more ways than they differ, Old Capitol and Castle Thunder may have been products of each respective government, yet they reveal a common factor: the preservation of civil liberties. Both institutions had their problems, yet overall, their concern for inmates is evident in how they treated even the most despised of individuals: wartime traitors.

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VITA

Ronald Warren Fischer, Jr., the son of Ronald, Sr. and Janet L. Fischer, was born on March 2, 1969 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Mr. Fischer graduated from Cedar Grove Christian Academy in Philadelphia in 1987. He received his undergraduate degree in History from the Pennsylvania State University in the Summer of 1991. After a year of substitute teaching and retail work, he returned to school to pursue his love of history, particularly Civil War history. Mr. Fischer completed his Master of Arts in May, 1994.

Deeply involved in student government at Penn State, his interests continued upon entering Virginia Tech. His involvements and memberships included: Graduate Student Assembly, Student Insurance Committee, Committee to Establish the Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, Phi Alpha Theta Secretary, Student Budget Board, and the Student Budget Board Task Force. He was awarded the J. Ambler Johnston Civil War Scholarship and a Curtis Research Award.

Ronald Warren Fischer Jr.

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO CIVIL WAR PRISONS: OLD CAPITOL
PRISON AND CASTLE THUNDER PRISON**

by

Ronald W. Fischer, Jr.

(ABSTRACT)

During the early parts of the Civil War authorities created two distinct prisons, Old Capitol in Washington, D.C. and Castle Thunder in Richmond, Virginia. These institutions were reactions to an increase in prisoners of state. Confederate and Union officials established these prisons for this particular group: the disloyal.

Although both structures held prisoners of war, the most vocal and prominent group of prisoners were civilians. The variety and character of both of these prisons are entirely unique in the annals of the war. The conglomeration of the young and old, rich and poor, male and female forced atypical social settings and class antagonisms.

For the most part, governmental authorities took added interest in Old Capitol and Castle Thunder because of the distinctive characters of these prisons and the concurrent feelings that civil liberties should be preserved. Under constant scrutiny, both Congresses, along with prison and military officials, attempted to make sure the prisoners in these two capitals received good treatment.

Inmates at these two prisons did receive above average treatment. In some instances, life in these institutions did

not resemble incarceration. The heightened awareness of officials and prison superintendents were the primary reason for this good treatment.

Yet officials in each state understood that these treasonous persons could be dangerous to each respective government. These feelings were not unwarranted, because many deserved confinement and punishment for their traitorous ways.