

Libby Prison

by Robert W. Waite

Official Publication #12, Richmond Civil War Centennial Committee, 1961- 1965

The most famous prison of the Civil War was located in Richmond, Virginia, on the western half of a block bounded by Cary and Dock Streets at 20th. It consisted of three tenement (loft style) buildings, each 110x44 feet, 4 stories high.

They were built between 1845 and 1852 by John Enders Sr., a founder of the tobacco industry of Richmond. Enders was killed instantly when he fell from a ladder thru a hatch in the construction of the central building. Previously he had been a leader in developing real estate in the dock area and with his in-laws, the Ege family, owned much property there. Several of his slaves burned down all the buildings between 21st and 22nd Street when they found that his will did not set them free as they had expected.

Captain Luther Libby leased the west building on 3 year terms from the Enders family and erected the now renowned sign, L. LIBBY & SON, SHIP CHANDLERS. Libby was a native of Maine and with the outbreak of war, since most of his business was with Northern ships, he closed down the operation. He continued to maintain the lease which had started in 1854.

Following the Battle of First Manassas (Bull Run) so many prisoners were coming into Richmond that these buildings were among a number which were commandeered for prisoner and hospital use. General Winder gave Libby only 48 hours to vacate the premises. Some say because he was suspected of Union sympathy, tho a son served with the Confederacy. At any rate, so rapidly was the building converted to its new use that the sign was not removed and thus the name LIBBY PRISON came into use.

It is alleged that the first Union prisoner to enter the prison was Mr. Philander A. Streater of Holyoke, Massachusetts. More than 50,000 men passed thru this prison while it was used by the Confederacy. The three buildings were connected by inner doors, but the different buildings went by the designations of East, Middle and West.

The prisoners were not kept on the ground floors. The west ground floor was used as offices and guard-rooms and the middle as the kitchen. There are prisoner references to rooms called by them, "Streight's Room", "Milroy's Room", and Chickamauga Room". The cellars contained cells for dangerous prisoners, spies and slaves under sentence of death, and a carpenter shop.

For most of the time, its commandant was Major "Dick" Turner. Its capacity was reported as 1, 200, though it is certain that at times this was exceeded.

Many escapes occurred. The most spectacular was one, led by Colonel Thomas E. Rose (77th Penna. Vols.) assisted by Major A.G. Hamilton (12th Kentucky) on 9 February '64, in which 109 officers tunneled their way out. 48 were recaptured and 59 were able to reach Union lines, but 2 drowned. Rose was one of the unlucky, finding himself back in Libby. He was later exchanged on 30 April 1864. The only tools which they had to use in the long tunnel digging were an old

pocket knife, some chisels, a piece of rope, a rubber cloth and a wooden spittoon. They constructed the 53' long tunnel, of which there are no remains, in 17 days.

Miss Elizabeth Van Lew, the Union agent in Richmond, was a frequent visitor to Libby, bringing food and reading material. It is stated that she obtained much valuable information from the men there and passed it thru her efficient agents to the Union. She is also credited with arranging for a number of men to escape, tho no tunnel existed between the prison and her Church Hill home, as has been said. In the Van Lew Collection at the New York Public Library there are several items made by the Libby prisoners and given to Miss Van Lew. One is a well carved little wooden book with the inscription "E. V. L. - A Friend In Need."

The best known prisoner housed in Libby was the eccentric Union Cavalry Commander, General H. Judson Kilpatrick, who led the unsuccessful raid on Richmond.

Following the occupation of Richmond (3 April 1865), the Federal authorities used the prison until 3 August 1868 as an incarceratory for former Confederates. The West Building was sold to the Southern Fertilizing Company and the other two continued as property of the Enders family, being owned by Mrs. George S. Palmer.

The buildings were purchased in 1888 by a Chicago syndicate, composed of W. H. Gray, Josiah Cratty, John A. Crawford and Charles Miller, and the architectural firm of Burnham & Root, for \$23,000. The Richmond firm of Rawlings & Rose handled the negotiations.

The famous Philadelphia architect, Louis M. Hallowell, came to Richmond to supervise the removal operations. The work commenced in December 1888, and as the building was taken apart each board, beam, brick, timber and stone-cap was numbered and lettered in such a manner that there was not the least trouble about placing these parts correctly together again. The removal of Libby from Richmond to Chicago was a project never before equaled in the history of building moving and one that was not to be surpassed for many years later.

The contract for hauling the material was given to the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway Company, which kept box cars on side-tracks of the old York River Line near the building. As soon as a carload was ready, it was sealed and sent on its way to Chicago an amazing total of 132 twenty-ton cars.

In the meanwhile massive stone walls of native artesian stone, quarried within the city limits of Chicago, had been erected on the block of Wabash Avenue, between 14th and 16th Streets, which had been selected as the famous old prison's new home. These stones now form part of the wall of the Chicago Colliseum and probably are the basis for the false story that that structure is built from Libby Prison remains.

The enterprise was incorporated as the Libby Prison Museum Association, T/A GREAT LIBBY PRISON WAR MUSEUM, on 4 February 1888, with a capitalization of \$400,000, to which was added the extensive Civil War collection of Charles F. Gunther, a wealthy candy manufacturer. The cost of dismantling and moving was in excess of \$200,000. The re~rection was completed in September 1889.

Altho the Museum was in Chicago during the year of the Columbian Exposition (1893 World's Fair), it had no connection with that Fair, and was never considered as a Fair attraction. It was quite some distance from the Exposition Grounds. The Museum was highly profitable and continued so until 1899. At that time the venture was disbanded and the Collseum erected on the site.

Many of the bricks were disposed of as souvenirs and to builders. A large number went to the Chicago Historical Society, along with the collection and other parts of the building. The Society constructed the north wall of their Civil War Room from these bricks. This building is located at North Avenue and Clark St., Chicago.

The beams, timbers and most of the wood were sold to an Indiana farmer named Davis and he used these to build a massive barn on his farm at Hamlet (La Porte County) Indiana. The barn still stands and is owned by his daughters, Miss Ella J. Davis and Mrs. Charles Dowdell of Chicago. Most of the timbers still show the stenciled words 'Second Floor M' or "Third Floor E.," together with the pathetic names and initials carved by the men while in prison. Miss Davis has presented the City of Richmond recently with a gavel made from this wood.

With the exception of the above mentioned relics, all that is known to remain of the old prison are: a door and keys in the Confederate Museum, Richmond; some miscellaneous items in several institutions in Vermont and Massachusetts; and its major records in the National Archives, Washington, with some minor records in Vermont.

The. City of Richmond has located an interpretive sign on the Libby Prison site at 20th and Cary Streets, now occupied by a salvage company.[1963-64]

* * * * *

Other CIVIL WAR Prisons in RICHMOND

During the course of the CivilWar, many buildings and areas were places of internment within Richmond. Some were used for only short periods, others were recurrent and some were in constant use. It is, therefore, impossible to enumerate all of them and trace their stories within a short brochure. We will mention only those whose names figure with some frequency in Civil War accounts. Due to inadequate records and the fluctuation of usage only general statements be made about them.

CASILE GODWIN

This was probably the City's Lumpkin's Jail, located east of Lumpkin's Alley and just north of Franklin Street. One of the first lock-ups for war prisoners, It became used more and more for women suspected, accused and/or convicted of disloyalty, spy activities or harboring deserters.

CASTLE THUNDER

A large tobacco warehouse that was located on the northside of Cary Street between 18th & 19th Streets. Mainly used for civilian prisoners, it was geneally packed with murderers, cut-throats, thieves and other desperadoes. Males suspected of disloyalty, spies and Union sympathizers were

incarcerated here. A large number of its inmates were under sentence of death. A few women were held here, including the famous, Dr. Mary E. Walker. Used by the Federals for Confederate civilian "war criminals" after the surrender.

CASTLE LIGHTNING

Directly across the street from Castle Thunder, it also was a former tobacco warehouse. It was generally well filled with Confederate soldiers who had committed crimes or were deserters, AWOL, disorderly, drunk, held for any number of miscellaneous things of which soldiers in war-time are involved. Thunder Lightning were both seriously threatened by destruction from fire during the conflagration which leveled the Confederate Coffee Factory in February 1864.

BELLE ISLE

This was a small island at the west end of the City in the James River. Used as an incarceratory for enlisted men, it had a few shacks and some Sibley tents. A hospital for prisoners and an iron factory also occupied the island. The men were allowed to swim in the river and some escaped in this manner. Cannon and rifle pits effectively discouraged many attempts of this nature. By 1863, almost 10,000 men were imprisoned here. The old Richmond & Petersburg Railroad bridge to the island was called by the prisoners "Bridge of Sighs". It has long been a center of dispute. The South claimed a low death-rate; the North, a very high one.

OTHERS

MILITARY PRISON FOR OFFICERS - Northside of Cary, west of 18th Street.

SEABROOK'S PRISON HOSPITAL (later General Hospital #9) - Northside of Grace Street, between 17th and 18th Streets.

STATE PENITENTIARY - South end of Adams Street. Still standing with many additions.