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Columbia's Two Civil War Prison Camps—Camp Asylum and Camp Sorghum

By Chester B. DePratter, James B. Legg, and Kalla E. DePratter

During the early years of the Civil War, Columbia was far removed from the fighting in the Virginia area and that taking place in Tennessee and surrounding states. Union forces captured Port Royal Sound on the lower coast and laid siege to Charleston by June 1863, but that fighting had little direct impact on Columbia and its residents.

In the spring of 1864, Union forces commanded by General Ulysses S. Grant were fighting their way south through Virginia toward Richmond, the Confederate capital. Fearful that the large number of Union prisoners housed in Danville and Libby Prisons would be freed in the event of Richmond's fall, enlisted prisoners were transported to Andersonville prison in southwestern Georgia, and officers were taken to a prison in Macon, Georgia,

As Union forces under General W.T. Sherman made their way south from Chattanooga and then through Atlanta, which surrendered in September 1864, Confederate officials became concerned about what to do with the large number of Union prisoners being held at Andersonville, Macon, and elsewhere. Rather than leaving them in Sherman's path, an effort was made to shuttle the POWs ahead of the Union army's advance.

Beginning in July 1864, contingents of troops were moved from the central Georgia prisons. Some were shipped to Camp Lawton, near present-day Millen, Georgia, while others were sent to camps in Savannah and Charleston. As Sherman's army continued its advance to the south from Atlanta in November and December 1864, the prisoners were transported once again. Enlisted men were shipped to the newly erected Florence stockade, and some of the officers were sent to Columbia.

Camp Sorghum, the officers' camp, was a hastily built facility in what is now West Columbia. When the first prisoners

arrived there in early October 1864, the prison contained no buildings and it had no surrounding wall. It was little more than a five acre clearing with a line of guards posted around its perimeter. Soon after this "prison" opened, it contained more than 1,500 Union officers. The prisoners were forced to dig holes to live in, and food was in short supply. Winter conditions were harsh, but surprisingly

build additional barracks, and still others resided in holes in the ground.

Camp Asylum operated from December 12, 1864 to February 14, 1865, when the rapid approach of Sherman's army toward Columbia caused the prisoners to be moved once again. This time they were transported to Charlotte, and then to Union-held Wilmington, North Carolina. Shortly thereafter the war ended



Drawing made of Camp Asylum soon after it was abandoned in February 1865. (Photo in Frank Leslie, 1896)

few men died. Escapes were frequent, and in the two months the prison was in operation, hundreds of men escaped. Most of these escapees were recaptured before they were able to reach Union-controlled territory.

By early December 1864, prison officials had found a place to move their charges. A walled enclosure on the grounds of the State Lunatic Asylum on the northwestern edge of Columbia was seen as the perfect alternative to the open setting of Camp Sorghum. Surrounded by a 12-foot high brick wall and with several barracks already completed, the new camp, Camp Asylum, was made home to around 1,200 officers. Some were housed in the new barracks, some worked to

and the prisoners on both sides were freed.

The Archaeological Research Trust Board funded our research on the two Columbia prison camps, and that process has now begun. On-line and archival searches have led to the discovery of an almost overwhelming mass of relevant documentary records including an abundance of primary accounts written by the inmates themselves. This material will allow for an unmatched accounting of the prisons' history and the sufferings of their occupants. At present, fieldwork has not begun, but the process of obtaining access to the two prison sites is underway. We anticipate being in the field soon, and we will present a full description of that work in the next issue of *Legacy*.