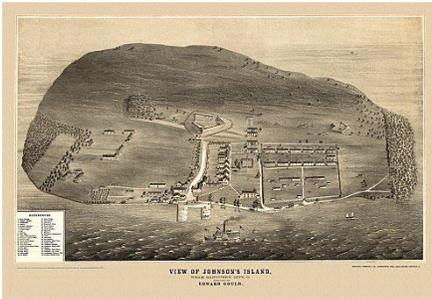


A visit to the Johnson's Island Prison

By Leslie Korenko

In December 1860, Kelleys Islander Wm. S. Webb visited the mainland and took a side trip to the new prison facility at Johnson's Island, which was already under construction. This was fast work considering the location survey was only completed in October. The Army leased 40 cleared acres on Johnson's Island and the depot was in operation from April 1862 to September 1865.

THE SITE UNDER CONSTRUCTION



“December 19, 1860, Sandusky – “...Many speculations were current as to the most prominent points in our Lake Frontier, which would require occupancy and defense; the transformation of some of our propeller fleet on the Lakes into vessels of war; the facility with which they could be rendered serviceable; and their ability when fitted for the purpose of making or resisting attack.

Among the points spoken of as being necessary to put in a state of defense, ‘Kelley’s Island’ was not the least prominent as it was admitted by all that the armed possession of the Island would be an absolute necessity and many questions were asked as to its capabilities in reference to defensive works as to what extent these works could be made to protect and command the entrance to Sandusky Bay, or to command the channels on either side of the Island. The question of the location of a naval depot is also again agitated and Sandusky Bay is...in the opinion of the people here, the only point suitable for that purpose. In a conversation with the proprietor of Bull’s Island, he utterly condemned the selfishness of individuals who would, to use his own words, speculate upon the necessities of our country by taking advantage of those necessities to obtain an enhanced price for articles furnished the Government or services rendered.

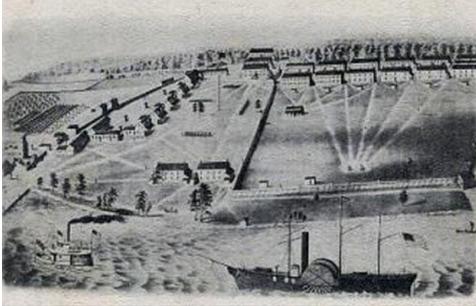
He very patriotically says that if a naval depot is located here, he will sell the Island to the Government. His price however, he did not mention, this part of the matter, he perhaps considered of so little moment, as not to require a reference. At any rate, such of your readers as enjoy his acquaintance will be well aware that he would be extremely liberal in the latter respect...

This morning in company with several acquaintances, I stepped on board the yacht *Mist* and in 18 minutes [from Sandusky] was landed on the wharf at Bull’s Island. Clambering over a heterogeneous mass of bricks, stone, lumber, shingles and sawdust, piled promiscuously as high as our heads, we wended our way to the site of the intended Rebel Prison.

The grounds selected for the location of the buildings is a piece of meadow land situated north of the wharf and extending from near the wharf on the south to the woods that skirt the water’s edge around the north east point of the Island. We found a number of men at work and the din of saw and hammer was continuous and so deafening that we were glad to make our escape from the inside of the buildings to the open air.

THE GROUNDS

The grounds are laid out as follows. An avenue of about 200 feet in width runs North and South, or parallel with the shore of the Bay. This avenue is crossed by another at right angles of similar width to the first. North of the East and West Avenue are four buildings, two 129 ft. long by 24 ft. wide, two stories in height. Two of these buildings are East on the Bay side of the North and South Avenue and the other two are on the West side of it. One side of each of these four buildings is boarded up tight with no windows, presenting a blank barn-like appearance on that side. The second story is reached by flights of steps (three in each building) on the outside of the front or avenue side. They are divided into three large rooms. The partitions running crosswise of the building in these rooms, are to be erected the sleeping bunks in tiers one above the other like the berths in the *Island Queen’s* cabins. There is no plastering in any of the buildings, the walls being ceiled up with pine flooring.



The lower stories are to be used as dining rooms as well as sleeping apartments. The tables to occupy one side of the centre of the room, the bunks the other side. Attached to each end of each of these four buildings is a shed-roofed addition, intended for use as a kitchen. These are included in the total length above given, viz. 129 feet.



Looking Eastward to Sandusky from the fort at the Johnson's Island prison.

These four buildings are exclusively for the use of the common soldiers or common rebels. South of the East and West Avenue are four buildings, situated as are the first named, viz. on each side of the North and South Avenue. (I should have stated that these eight buildings front on the North and South Avenue.) They are similar in construction to the other, except that they have windows on both sides, are divided lengthwise into rooms as well as crosswise (thus making one room into two) and have no shed additions at the end. They are 116 ft. long by 29 ft. wide. The upper stories of these, like the others, are entered by flights of steps from the outside, and also by flights of steps at each end of two of them. These buildings are designed for the Rebel Officers and other prisoners of note, and are therefore built with more regards to comfort and convenience. Some of the rooms will probably be furnished by the occupants themselves.

All these buildings are back from the water, the rear of each now being perhaps 15 rods distant there from, with an easy descent to the intervening slope of grass land between them and the shore of the Bay. A picket fence nine feet high extends the entire length of the water front, of the prisoner's quarters some 60 to 80 rods. The fences running back to and in the rear of the quarters, is to be built of boards set edgewise closely together, or in other words, to be a tight board fence. On top of this fence is to be a walk for the guards, with sentry boxes placed at such points as may be required. There will be enclosed within this fence about 25 acres of land. The eight buildings above described are all to be devoted to the use of the Rebel prisoners and are all that are inside the enclosure at present. I say at present for the North fence of the enclosure has been removed some 20 rods further North than it was at first located in order to make room for two more long buildings on each side of the Avenue, as it is now supposed they will be needed in the spring. The fences in the South West and North sides are not yet built. The posts only set for a portion of it. [Later reports indicated that the compound was enclosed with a 12 ft. high wall, along with an inside wall with a wooden walkway for patrolling. At first there were a total of 12 2-story barracks constructed in two rows, but later a 13th was added.]

Passing out of the gateway from the prisoners quarters, on the South side (or at the termination of the North and South Avenues), we find directly in front of and about 30 feet from the gateway, a building designed for a Block House.

THE BLOCKHOUSE

This Block House is 20 ft. by 20 ft. in the lower story and 22 by 22 ft. in the upper. The upper story having a projection of one foot each way over the lower. The walls are of two ft. pine plank set up edgewise and retailed at the corners on the side next the gateway and loop holes for musketry, about the height of a man's breast from the ground. These loopholes are two in number and are made by sawing a piece of the edge of a plank say three inches wide (or four) and about seven or eight feet long. The lower story is about eight feet high, the upper 7½. This enables the Guard in the Block House to command the gateway entirely while the upper story commands the North and South Avenue its entire length even if the gates are closed. There is to be another Block House at the North East corner of the enclosure which will command the entire area of the waterfront, as also the line of the North fence of the enclosure.



Adjoining the Block House to the West and in close proximity to it is the Guard House. Lower story, if such it may be called, is only about five feet high and has no floor. The upper story is divided into two rooms closely ceiled up with only one small window to each apartment. These apartments are reached by flights of steps from the outside. It is about 20 to 30 feet in size.

To the South West of the Guard House and nearly in a line with the West row of prison buildings, is a long building similar in construction to those of the prisoner's quarters. It stands facing the Bay, is about 100 ft. long by 25 wide, two stories high. Entrance to second story as in the others, by outside steps. This is intended for the quarters of the soldiers composing the Guard. In the rear of the line from this latter building and to the South of it some eight rods, stands the hospital, a one story building about 60 ft. long by 25 wide, designed for the use of patients from the prisoner's as well as soldier quarters.

OFFICERS QUARTERS



East of the Hospital or between it and the water are three 1-story buildings with dormer windows, or windows projecting from the roof. These buildings are all in line and all face toward the North with fronts looking to the enclosure of prison buildings. Each of the three is intended as a double house, and are designed for quarters of the officers in command of the guard, where the latter will reside with their families. These buildings are about 60 by 25

feet each and have a very pretty cottage-like appearance.



Still further on towards the Bay shore and wharf are located first the Commissary's office or quarters next the storehouse and lastly the bakery which is only a short distance from the Bay shore.

There is as yet no fence enclosing these buildings though one is in process of erection. There is another building to be erected, viz. the quarters for the Major. This was not contemplated at first. It was supposed that one company under command of a Captain was all

that was necessary as a Guard. It has been determined that a battalion will be needed and therefore a Major was necessary to command it. Wm. S. Pierson, formerly Mayor of this City [Sandusky], has been appointed to the command and is consequently now Major (not Mayor) Pierson, at least so says the Register. Major Pierson and Captain Follett!! The Country is safe!

I saw some 12 or 14 large boilers (kettles set into stoves made on purpose for them) lying near the bakery. The question was asked are these boilers for the wash house? The reply was No. 'They are for boiling vegetables in, of all kinds such as pork and beans' &c. and one of these is to occupy a place by the side of each cook stove in every kitchen.

A more handsome or more finely situated location than the one described, it would be difficult to find and many a denizen of our cities would not ask for anything better than to be boarded, free of expense during the heat of summer in a place so pleasant as is the location of the Rebel Prison Quarters on Bull's Island. (I neglected to state that the accommodations as at present disposed are sufficient for 1,000 prisoners.)

I have given above a hasty and therefore imperfect sketch of the now noted Secesh Prison of Bull's Island. If it does not prove of much interest to you readers, it may at least relieve the Editor of the Islander of an hour's labor in making up the current number of their paper. Should the opportunity occur, you may again hear from, yours &c, W. S. W."

When the call came for volunteers for the Ohio militia, later known as the 100-Day Men, Webb would serve as Captain of the island company. They were stationed at Johnson's Island for a short time.

Submitted by Leslie Korenko, from her book: Kelleys Island – 1810-1860, The Courageous, Poignant and often quirky lives of Island pioneers. Leslie is a Board Member and Secretary for the Kelleys Island Historical Assoc. and the Erie County Historical Society.