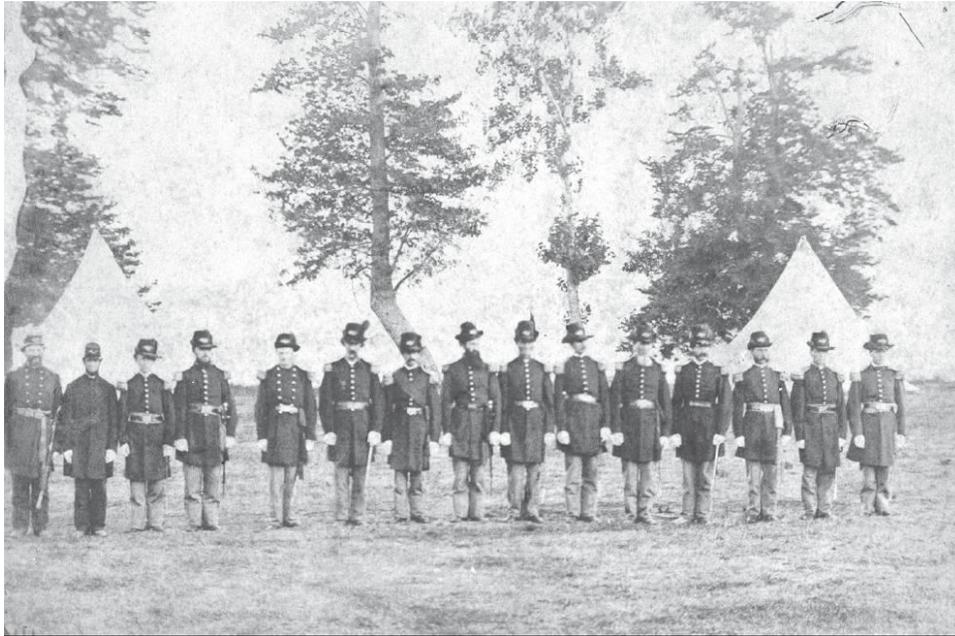


JOHNSON'S ISLAND Home to the Civil War POW

BY RANDY KOCH



Provided photo/MAGGIE MARCONI

Johnson's Island became the home of more than 3,000 Confederate prisoners in 1864.

SANDUSKY

These days, Johnson's Island is rimmed with scores of comfortable cottages and quaint homes, not to mention the luxurious condominiums rising from the southern end of the isle. Casual visitors might also pass a black, wrought iron fence surrounding a shaded cemetery that holds the remains of more than 200 Rebel captives. Guarding the main gate, facing Sandusky Bay, is the imposing statue sculpted by renowned artist and Confederate veteran Moses Ezekiel. Nothing else reminds the casual visitor of the prison, conceived in 1861, that came to life in the spring of 1862.

In the fall of the first year of the Civil War, orders were issued to locate a site on a Lake Erie island suitable to hold captured Confederate soldiers.

Officials eliminated the Bass islands and Kelleys Island because their proximity to Canada invited escape or rescue. Supply and transportation could also pose a problem in the winter, plus the islands' prosperous wine industry could inhibit the garrisoned soldiers' discipline. Johnson's Island became the logical choice.

Sandusky, about 3 miles across the bay, provided regular rail service and numerous vessels to transport prisoners and supplies to the installation.

In November the war department finalized the island's lease with Leonard Johnson.

Fellow Sanduskian W. T. West, who also owned the West House near the foot of Columbus Avenue, submitted the low bid to build the compound.

According to the Commercial Register's account, "about 200 rebel prisoners arrived from Columbus about 6 p.m. on April 10, 1862, aboard Sandusky, Dayton & Cincinnati railcars. Some men wore butternut uniforms; others wore blue coats, or coats of no particular color. All wore hats or caps. "Some had the bearing of gentlemen; others had the 'don't care a dime' swagger of bloods. Some were sullen, some seemed to forget themselves in the curiosity of new sights. All were officers. "The average man appearing about 30 years old, stood 5'9" tall, and

weighed about 140 pounds.” The newspaper concluded: “Had they more good sense and less chivalry, they might be at home now.”

A short ride across the bay aboard the *Island Queen* delivered them inside the stockade’s 14-foot-tall whitewashed walls. Thirteen two-story dormitories, each with a kitchen, provided modest housing.

Leonard Johnson, the sutler and island owner, provided delicacies, toiletries, writing materials, playing cards and other comforts to prisoners who had U.S. money, albeit at inflated prices.

While nothing filled the void separating them from home and family, the prisoners arriving in the early stages of the war seemed to enjoy a brief respite away from the dangers of combat.

As the war reached its latter stages, prisoners began experiencing a more difficult existence, largely in retribution for the perceived atrocities committed intentionally against Union captives in the South.

To the dismay of those incarcerated on both sides, prisoner exchanges officially halted in 1864.

With a sparse white population, the Confederacy constantly struggled to place sufficient men in the field to counterbalance the North’s enormous advantage in manpower.

General Grant, who became general-in-chief in 1864, questioned the practicality of exchanges, which gave the South the opportunity to replenish its most scarce military asset: manpower. To eliminate the practice without appearing inhumane, the North demanded that Black soldiers receive the same consideration for exchange as white soldiers. As anticipated, the South refused. Exchanges ended.

Prison overcrowding in both the North and the South immediately became an issue.

Johnson’s Island was originally constructed to comfortably house 1,000 prisoners. At one time in late in 1864, the number exceeded 3,000. To add to the misery, rations for Rebel prisoners were reduced when rumors circulated that incarcerated Union prisoners were dying of starvation. At that time, food became scarce for everyone in the South — soldier, civilian, and prisoner alike.

Prisoners on Johnson’s Island felt the same pain. One man’s diary stated that in the later stages of the war, he could never remember a time when he was not hungry. As health deteriorated, Johnson’s Island commandant Col. Charles Hill requested a modification of the orders mandating limited rations. Secretary of War Stanton flatly refused.

Various diaries refer to supplementing the reduced food supply with rats. Col. B. F. Johnson wrote: “Rats never were exchanged or paroled, nor did they escape. But they did disappear.” While the rats served as a source of meat, the actual activity of hunting rats to break the mundane routine seemed the most positive benefit.

Fortunately, other activities filled time, too. Entrepreneurial prisoners did laundry or sewed for a fee. Other men developed the skill of crafting unique jewelry, most of which went home to loved ones. Prisoners fluent in French gladly taught the language to fellow prisoners.

Group activities became especially popular. Minstrel shows and theatrical programs were common occurrences. Baseball’s popularity grew throughout that era and inside the prison walls. One winter, the prisoners even divided into two separate armies for a gigantic snowball fight, complete with rules to determine a winner.

As with most ordeals in life, the men survived not only by their own fortitude, but also with support of those suffering common deprivations.

When the war ended, almost 10,000 men had passed through Johnson’s Island prison.

More than 400 never left alive.

On Sept. 5, 1865, the few remaining prisoners were transferred to Fort Lafayette in New York City, thus ending a unique saga in Sandusky history.

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