

THE GOVERNMENT INVESTIGATES CONFEDERATE PRISON SITES – October 1861

The war comes yet closer to the little island. On October 7, the Quartermaster-General's Office in Washington wrote to Lieut. Col. William Hoffman, 8th Infantry, New York, directing Hoffman to investigate suitable sites for the location of a depot or prison for Confederate soldiers. Few people realize that Kelley's Island might easily have been chosen for the Confederate prison instead of Johnson's Island.

Hoffman's orders read: "Colonel: Having been appointed commissary of prisoners and having reported to this office for instructions by order of the Secretary of War, I have the honor to request you to proceed to the group of islands known as the Put-in-Bay and Kelley's Island, off Sandusky in Lake Erie, and to examine them with reference to the lease of the ground upon some of them for a depot for prisoners of war. You will report which of the islands affords, on the whole, the greatest advantages for the location of such a depot, the price at which a suitable tract of land can be leased during the war and such other matters as may be of importance. Should other localities in that vicinity appear to you to be better fitted for the purpose you are authorized to visit them also. You will complete this duty as soon as practicable, and returning to this city, report in writing the result of your examination, making a report, also upon the steps necessary to establish a depot and prepare it for the reception and safe detention of prisoners. The locality selected should not be in a higher latitude than that of the west end of Lake Erie in order to avoid too rigorous a climate. I am, respectfully, your obedient servant, M. C. Meigs, Quartermaster-General."

The final report was submitted on October 22 and included some interesting observations on human nature and the potential for successful military operations on the various islands under consideration.

"Washington, October 22, 1861. General M. C. Meigs, Quartermaster-General U. S. Army, Washington: General - I have the honor to report that immediately on the receipt of your instructions of the 7th I proceeded to the Put-in-Bay Islands, in Lake Erie, with the view of selecting one of them for a depot for prisoners of war, and the following is the result of my examination: On the steamer *Island Queen*, which is engaged in the trade of those islands, I passed round the outer ones known as the North and Middle Bass, and passed the night at Put-in-Bay on South Bass Island.

NORTH BASS is about a mile across in any direction; has upon it sufficient cleared ground for a depot owned by different persons who are engaged in cultivating the soil and fishing, who as I am informed, would not be willing to give up their farms for any reasonable rent at all as they have made their homes there. The boat did not stop long enough to permit me to consult them. But the position of the island is such as to preclude its occupation as a depot. It is only four to five miles from the nearest of the Canada islands, the boundary lines being midway between them, which would afford a too inviting opportunity for their friends to attempt their rescue. Besides being so remote from the mainland and being almost entirely cut off from communication with it for weeks or even months at a time during the winter, it would be necessary to confine the prisoners within secure walls or the guard would have to be confined within a very defensible work to insure that the prisoners could at no time overcome them and make their escape into Canada. Further, the island is so distant from Sandusky, the nearest port, that it would not be possible before the navigation closes to erect the necessary quarters, hospital, store-houses, &c, which the depot would require.

MIDDLE BASS, which is a mile within the outer island, has all the objections to it, which apply to North Bass, besides having no suitable cleared land upon it. I remained at PUT-IN-BAY till the next morning and visited the only ground which seemed available for the purpose. On the northwest point, which forms the bay, there is a space, which by including some timbered land, about 10 acres may be cut off by a fence or wall 200 to 300 yards long from the lake to a slough. The point is a cold, bleak place in winter, exposed to all the prevailing winds. On the other side of the slough is an open piece of ground, about 20 acres, but it could not readily be included. The northeast point of the island could at little expense be cut off from the rest of the island, but it is occupied by a number of families who have planted vineyards which yield at the rate of \$200 to \$400 per acre and they could not be induced to rent their farms.

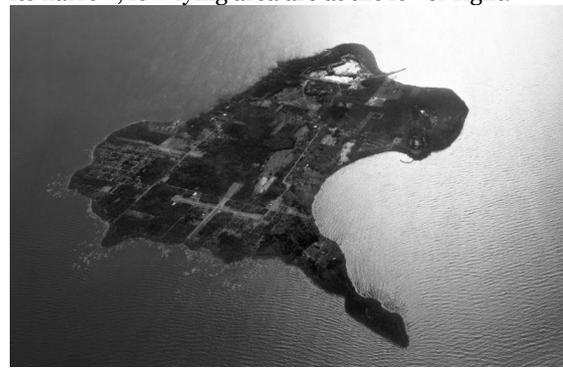
At the extreme point is a cleared space of two acres belonging to a tract of 40 acres, but if it were suitable for the purpose and could be obtained, the presence of the soldiers there would ruin all the vineyards on the island, there being only 20 to 30 families living there who could offer no resistance to the depredations of lawless men. Put-in-Bay is 24 miles from Sandusky, too far distant to afford a reasonable hope that the necessary buildings could be put up this winter when it is remembered that the navigation closes ordinarily during the first week in December. This island is also almost entirely cut off from communication with the mainland during the winter and special arrangements would have to be made to secure the guard against a sudden rising of the prisoners.

On the following morning I proceeded to KELLEY'S ISLAND where I remained a day. This island is the largest of the group and is extensively cultivated in grapes, being occupied by about 100 families. There are only two locations on the island which seem adapted to the purpose. One is the northeast point embracing about 60 acres [Long Point]. A wall of a hundred yards in length would cut off 40 acres of this, of which about 30 acres, mostly covered with timber, would answer pretty well for the depot. A narrow neck of land divides two tracts into two parts, and the neck being low, is covered with water during the prevalence of the northeast winds to which it is completely open, and during these storms as the sea breaks with great violence on the rocky shore the spray must cover a great part of the point. The soil is shallow on a bed of rock, and when the trees are thinned out to make room for the buildings, the large trees which remain would be very apt to be blown down by the high winds. I noticed many on the ground blown down in this way. This point is about three miles from the cultivated part of the island and is connected with the usual landing by an indifferent road. In moderate weather a vessel might lie at a dock on the northwest side of the point. The number of people on this island and the distance from the vineyards would afford some protection against depredations by the guard, assuming that the prisoners could be restricted to this point, but the chances are that trouble would grow out of the proximity of so great a temptation. This land can be obtained for \$250 a year including the use of the wood as fuel.

The northeast 'peninsula' of Kelleys Island, Long Point, was one site considered for the Confederate prison. Its rocky shore is quite formidable.



This picture of Kelleys Island was taken from the east end of the island, looking west. Long Point and its narrow, low-lying area are at the lower right.



There is another tract on the southwest point of the island of 30 to 40 acres very suitable, except that it would have to be enclosed on three sides [Carpenter's point]. A greater difficulty is that it is adjoining large vineyards and a wine and brandy establishment which I fear would be too great a temptation to the guard to be overcome by any sense of right or fear of punishment. This ground can be had for \$5 per acre.

The people who live on this island are very willing to do all in their power to serve the Government at this time even at some sacrifice to themselves, but I would be very reluctant to advise them to receive even well-disciplined troops on their island with such powerful and convenient inducements before them to lead them astray. This island is 12 miles from Sandusky and though there may be enough of the season left to give time for the erection of the buildings and getting out a supply of stores for the winter, it is a very doubtful matter, barely possible. During the winter months, the mail is carried over generally twice a week by a man much experienced in such matters who is most of the time obliged to use a boat, which he hauls over the ice when it is strong enough and in which he crosses the open places.

I cannot therefore advise that an attempt be made to establish a depot on any one of the Put-in-Bay islands this winter, and there are serious objections to their being occupied for this purpose at any time. Kelley's Island, which may be considered one of the

Just to the left of the causeway is the Johnson's Island Historical Marker.



The best way to get to Johnson's Island now is by causeway (on the left). Johnson's Island appears in the distance.



group, is only four to five miles from the nearest British Island, call the East Sister.

I examined also an island in Sandusky Bay opposite the city. It is $2\frac{3}{4}$ miles from the city and on the other side, it is a full mile from the mainland. It contains about 300 acres, $\frac{1}{2}$ of which, with the privilege of using the fallen timber as fuel, can be leased for \$500 a year with the entire control of the remainder of the island, so that no person would be permitted to land on it except by permission..."

That small island was Johnson's Island, originally named Bull's Island. The island was part of a tract of land owned by Epaproditus Bull. Bull died in 1812, but his family retained ownership until 1852 when Leonard B. Johnson bought the island and renamed it Johnson's Island. Today, Johnson's Island is connected to the mainland by a causeway.

At the entrance to the causeway is an historical marker which reads: "Johnson's Island – Military Prison Camp. In 1861, the United States Army established a prisoner of war camp on Johnson's Island, approximately one mile south of this point. The camp, which housed captured Confederate officers, was maintained until 1865 when it was dismantled. The camp cemetery contains the graves of 206 men who died as a result of disease, wounds or by execution while incarcerated."

By Leslie Korenko, author of Kelleys Island – 1810-1861 – The courageous, poignant and often quirky lives of Island pioneers