

September 1, 1863 - Douglas O. Kelley is Captured and Sent to Libby Prison

By Leslie Korenko

Douglas O. Kelley, of the 100th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, was one of those soldiers in the thoughts of the Soldier's Aid Societies. Douglas was the son of Julius Kelley (38th Ohio, Co. B) and Julius was the brother of Datus Kelley, OF Kelley's Island. Douglas was a student at Hobart College when he enlisted in the United States service in August 1862 as a Private. He was later commissioned First Lieutenant, but shortly after, he was taken prisoner in East Tennessee.

"Lieutenant [Douglas] Kelley was one of the officers who was put under our fire at Charleston, and was kept there until the yellow fever had victimized 50 of their number. They were sent to Columbia, and while there he made his escape and traveled about two weeks, by night, barefoot and coatless. He was fed and aided by the negroes on his way. He asked the negroes what they thought about being armed and put into the rebel army. They would grin and say 'we hope massa will try it.'

Lieutenant Kelley was retaken at Hendersonville and taken back to Columbia in company with about 50 other prisoners whom the rebels picked up on the way. When taken to headquarters, Lieutenant Davis, the commandant of the prison, pleasantly remarked, 'it is your business to get away and ours to keep you.' He seemed to think it all fair play.

Lieutenant Kelley says [that] S. P. Davis on Johnson's Island, and condemned as a spy, is the same one who had charge of the prison, and is the most decent rebel he ever saw. Lieutenant Kelley came to Charleston to be exchanged on parole about the 15th of December 1864. He is anxious for his exchange, as his regiment is on its way to join Sherman and he would like to visit Charleston under different circumstances from those of last summer."

Douglas wrote many letters home, but rarely wrote about his time in prison. Kelley would have been a captive for over three months when he wrote this letter. "The following letter from a Soldier in Libby Prison, Richmond shows the spirit of our Soldiers, how much they will endure without complaint and their unflinching loyalty and pride in the honor of the Government.

The author of the letter was a Second Lieutenant in Co. B., 100th Reg't, O. V. I. His Company, in a skirmish at Lime Creek, was ordered in a detachment of 300 of the Reg't to attack a certain point. They supposed that there was only a small force guarding it, but on reaching it were met by a force of 1800 Rebels. Nothing daunted, they went at it, fighting desperately for two hours, when overpowered by numbers and finding that six of the 'chivalry' was a little more than equal to one Yankee, they were obliged to surrender.

The Captain of Co. B told his boys to get away if they could, or they might run the risk of being captured. Some 20 or 25 (the writer of the letter among the number) concluded to try it, most of them escaped, but his lieutenant's uniform was too conspicuous and he was soon halted and compelled to visit Richmond under military escort. He was captured Sept. 1, 1863 a short time before the battles of Chattanooga and is still in Libby Prison. He does not express much hope of immediate release but keeps up good spirits. All honor to our brave boys in field hospital or prison!" [Another report indicated he was reported as a POW on September 8, 1863 in action at Limestone Station, TN.]

Douglas wrote from Libby Prison, Richmond, Virginia, Dec. 17, 1863 – "Dear Cousin – It is just two weeks since I sent a letter to A---- [likely Addison or Alfred], in which I promised to write to you soon. You don't know how much I look forward to your kind letters. I yesterday received a letter from Father, and one from Mary who says Grand Ma K--- [probably Kelley] was in very poor health when she last heard from the Island. I am very anxious for further tidings.

The authorities here are tightening the reins considerably. They will not let us have any more clothing and rations from our Government, though that does not affect us, only the poor enlisted men. But I am glad to know that they have been pretty comfortably provided with clothing already by the United States.

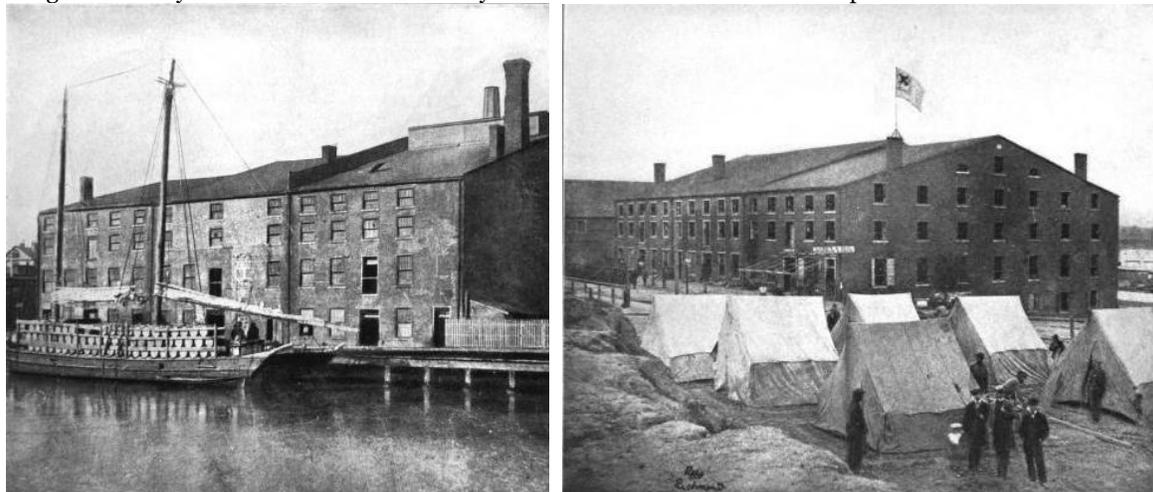
I can see no hope of getting out of here very soon. How long must this last! But we will stay here five years rather than to have our Government back down from any stand it has taken. Love to all, write soon. Your Aff. Cousin, Douglas O. Kelley"

Libby Prison was actually the former warehouse of Libby & Sons, ship chandlers. It was located on the James River at the corner of 20th and Cary streets. The large 4-story building contained eight rooms and no furniture. The prisoners slept on the floor.

Although it was never mentioned, Douglas Kelley was wounded at Libby Prison on April 13, 1864. Every prison had a 'dead line' where, if the prisoner leaned or stepped over the line, he was shot, no questions asked. At Libby, the prison windows were the 'dead line.' "The windows were without glass, but instead had heavy iron bars. Shortly before I went to Libby [as reported by St. Clair Augustin Mulholland, another prisoner], Captain [George] Forsythe, of the 100th Ohio Volunteers, was shot dead by a sentinel while standing at one of the windows. The guards having instructions to shoot any one putting his hands on sill or bar." It was this shot, fired by a guard that passed through Forsyth and wounded Douglas Kelley.

Almost 30 years after Forsythe's death, the New York Times, March 8, 1891, carried a first-hand report of the incident. "And here one of the saddest incidents of my Libby experience comes to my mind...Col. Carlton and all the captured officers of the 100th Ohio had their quarters in the north end of the Upper Chickamauga Room, as close to the barred windows as it was safe to get. Nearly every hour in the day the guards in the street below would raise their rifles to fire at the prisoners, who, in the surging throngs, ever moving to keep warm, were frequently thrown beyond the danger line. The guards were acting under orders, but they always shouted a warning, which was quickly headed. It was the morning after [a] mock court-martial, and Forsyth and Lieut. Kelley of the same regiment chanced beyond the danger line. There was a guard below who had never fired at a Yankee in battle, or he would have given some warning of his purpose.

Douglas O. Kelley was wounded while at Libby Prison. Here are two views of the prison.



The crack of a rifle rang out on Carey Street. A death cry thrilled through the Upper Chickamauga Room, and a crowd of ragged men, trembling with horror and burning with indignation, gathered around two comrades prostrate on the floor. One raised the young Captain's head to his knee, he was a comrade who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him in many a battle. He called his name, but the sound fell on the ears of one who had answered another call.

The bullet that pierced Forsyth's brain and passed through it, struck Kelley in the throat, and so great was the flow of blood that it seemed for a time that he, too, must die. Young Kelley belonged to the family after who Kelley's Island, in Lake Erie and not far from Sandusky, is called. Major Turner came up with a doctor and a guard, and Kelley was taken down to the hospital, where he recovered in a few weeks. The Captain's body was carried down to the dead cart – and that was all. The guard, who was neither arrested nor relieved, said that when he raised his piece to warn the prisoners back, 'it went off by accident.' He had murdered a Yankee, but before the indignation of the veteran Confederates, he did not care to boast of the deed.

Douglas Kelley spent 15 months in prison. He was released in April, 1865. After his service, he studied law and was admitted to the bar. In 1867, he moved to California and following an earlier calling, was ordained Deacon in 1872 and Priest in 1874. An avid writer, he compiled and published a comprehensive history of the Diocese of California in 1914.

Leslie is the author of six books about the history of Kelleys Island including Kelleys Island 1862-1864 – The Civil War, the Island Soldiers & the Island Queen