

The Prisoners Have a Long Road to Freedom

“In the forenoon we got away for Demopolis, and after a six hours’ ride found ourselves at that town, distant from Selma about 40 miles. Six miles and a half an hour was pretty good time over that road. On the road the rumor spread among us that we were destined for some point in Texas.

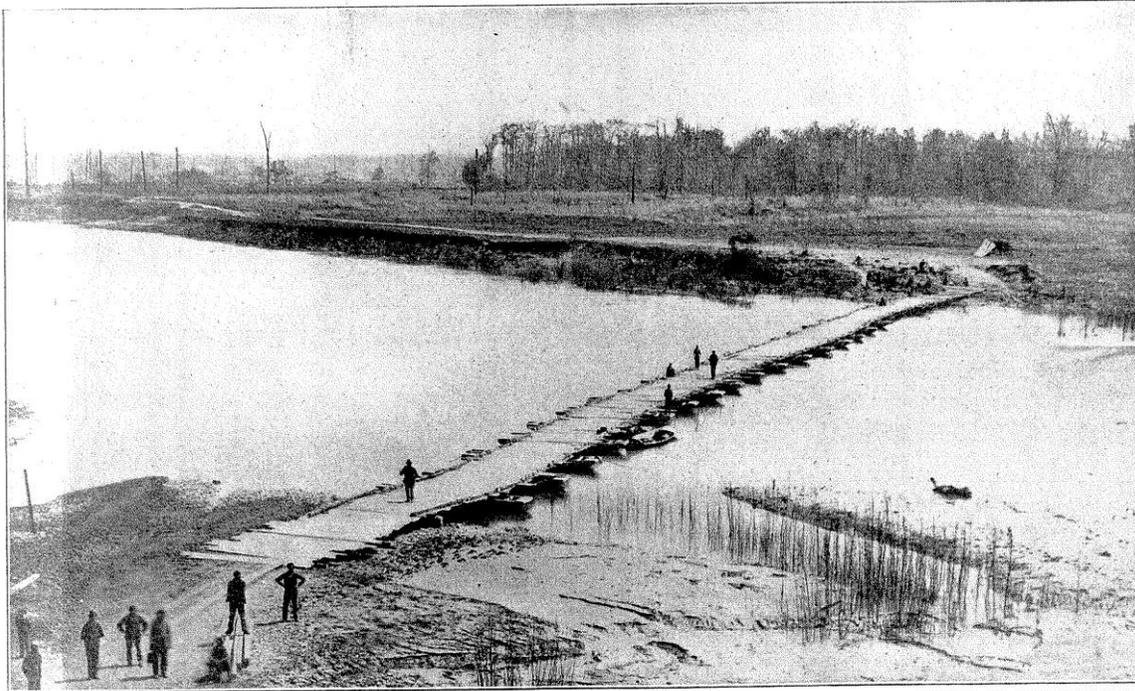
An indifference and despair had settled over us. We felt that we couldn’t do much worse than we had been doing for the past two weeks, but we hoped that if they tried to take us over the Mississippi in small boats, some providential gun-boat would come along just at the right time and recapture us.”

Hawes recalled that when they “came to the valley of the Black River. This valley was completely overflown with water, varying in depth from a few inches to a foot. For a distance of two or three miles we waded through this water, and just as the sun was setting behind the hills we came in sight of the river across which was the beautiful, yes, dear old flag, the Stars and Stripes, a line of nice white tents, and good, clean, strong, soldierly-looking men.

My heart came up into my throat, and tears of deepest emotion gathered in my eyes. I could have cried heartily at the sight if I had only been alone, but surrounded as we were by our comrades, each man checked back the tears and pressed on to the bank of the river, which, from a little higher than the ground over which he had just travelled, was above water and comparatively dry.”

“I hastened immediately to the point designated by my friend, and there found one of our own Union men calling the names of those who were to be received on parole, and as each man answered to his name, he started over a long pontoon bridge that extended across the river at this point.

This pontoon bridge, which crosses the Big Black River might easily have been the one that the soldiers would have crossed to their walk to freedom.



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THE FIRST FEDERAL CROSSING—SHERMAN'S PONTOONS

At the near end was a Confederate; at the farther end was a Union soldier. So persistently had we been deceived by the Confederate guards whenever we were moved from one prison to another, that I doubt if there was a man in all our hundreds who felt certain of his liberty until he was past the last Confederate and close to a rifle borne by a Northern soldier. With sluggish steps and aching, dizzy brain, I passed the last Confederate, the last emblem of a captivity which surrounding horrors and soul-sickening scenes had caused to seem an age, and approached a lieutenant who looked with pity and commiseration upon our rags and squalor and weakness.

Upon the western side of Black River was a small hill. As I passed the Federal officer an ex-captive said to him, 'If that hill were solid gold and you could give it to me to return to the horrors of a month ago, with all its uncertainties, even for a week, I would not consider it for a moment.' He only expressed the feeling of every man I knew."

"It was past mid-day before all names had been called and the formal transfer of the prisoners had been accomplished. Then all were placed upon cars that had been sent out from Vicksburg, and in an hour we were at the 'Four-Mile Bridge,' east of Vicksburg, where it was designed for us to go into a temporary camp."

Camp Fisk was located at Four Mile Bridge. Officers from both sides met daily to negotiate the exchange of prisoners.



THE LAST EXCHANGE. CAMP FISK, FOUR MILE BRIDGE (VICKSBURG), APRIL, 1865

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Rush described the scene as they first saw the Stars and Stripes and realized that they were actually being released. "The next morning we left for Vicksburgh, where we arrived on or about the 12th of April. Words could not express our joy when the head of our column came in sight of the Stars and Stripes. They were hoisted on a signal station on the bank of the Big Black, eight miles from Vicksburgh. As we came in sight, the flag was waved and the boys started up a shout that could be heard for miles. This was kept up all that night and the next day, as our men were still coming in and the head of the column had to wait there until they all came up, before being allowed to cross the River." It is important to recall that less than two weeks earlier the men were still cleaning up after the flood and suffering from exposure, lack of food and a variety of illnesses.

Hawes wrote that there were far more prisoners than were expected and the accommodations for them were lacking. "By some misunderstanding, preparations for the comfort of the prisoners were entirely inadequate for the large number of which our body consisted. There, however, was no lack of food for those who were able to eat it. To a large number of us, however, the question of food was of minor importance; to men burning with fever at one moment and chilling the next, whose mouths were bitter and pasty, whose bodies were emaciated by long months of scanty diet and long weeks of disease, the most palatable food might be loathsome.

Many, like myself, had eaten nothing since leaving Jackson, two days before, and only cared to barely taste what might be obtained at the quarters of the commissary. What should have been prepared for the reception of our multitude were long lines of comfortable hospital tents, dozens of good nurses, and a body of cooks who knew how to prepare such food as sick men could eat. But, as mentioned before, only the most meagre provision was made. We were told that no one knew of our expected arrival until a very short time before we came, and no intimation was given that our numbers would exceed a few dozen."

Rush, however, wrote about the more positive impact of their arrival and praised the food. "The next day we encamped four miles from Vicksburgh where we received rations from our government. The first thing issued us was Sauer Kraut and pickles of all kinds. This was given us before we received any cooking utensils. The boys carried it off in their hats, pockets, arms and on pieces of boards. In fact, any way they could get away with it so that they could sit down to eat it. You may imagine how well this tasted to men that had been prisoners from one to

two years and still longer, and who had all that time lived on cornmeal with now and then a little beef.

We camped here near Vicksburgh two weeks. On the 24th of April, orders came to fall in and march to the landing to embark on the Steamer *Sultana* for home. Again, shout after shout arose and the songs 'Home Sweet Home' were struck up all over camp. We were not long in getting ready and after we were drawn up in line awaiting orders to move forward, the company commanders were sent for to report at headquarters and receive their mail. Here we found about 5-6,000 letters piled up before us. The Adjutant said that there was not time to distribute the mail but we might help ourselves to such as we knew belonged to the boys. In the first hand full that I picked up I found a letter for myself. This was the first letter I received since the day before my capture in September, the year before, being over seven months without hearing a word from home, although my friends had received letters from me and written me in return. Strange to say this most welcome letter was from the same lady friend from which I received one previous to my capture. I had not time to look any further and do not know how many more may have been stored away for me."

"This ends the sketch of a prison life so horrible that no pen can describe and do it justice, especially one so feeble as my own. J. Rush."

The Doctor, Jesse Hawes, made an effort to keep in touch with those men who were prisoners with him at Cahaba. "As the result of careful inquiry, I estimate that of the 3,000 persons confined in Castle Morgan during the winter of 1864-65, more than 2,500 were dead a year later, and less than 70 are now alive [in 1888]." One of those men was Jacob Rush who contributed his stories to Jesse Hawes' book. That book, *Cahaba-A Story of Captive Boys in Blue*, is one of the few detailed chronicles of Cahaba prison. Dr. Jesse Hawes dedicated his book to all those who called Cahaba Prison home during the war.