Gentlemen of the White Apron: Masonic POWs in the American Civil War

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Approximately 410,000 soldiers were taken prisoner in the Civil War, and about 56,000 died in prison.[1] The ordeal of these captives received much study immediately after the war, and renewed scholarly interest in the last twenty years. Much has been published about Civil War prisons, yet only tantalizing fragments show the influence of Freemasonry inside prison walls. Notwithstanding its paucity, the evidence shows the Masonic tenets of brotherly love and relief found a perfect field of expression in Civil War prisons, where food, shelter, and compassion were in short supply. Although ignored by scholars, there is considerable evidence that Freemasons in prison went to great lengths to care for their own. Remarkably, this fraternal concern transcended Union or Confederate affiliation. The vignettes here make plain that apart from being a social phenomenon, Freemasonry was a lifeline to prisoners of war, nearly all of whom were confined in unwholesome and unsanitary conditions. The Fraternity provided not only moral and spiritual consolation, but also actual necessities that sustained life under the bleakest of conditions.

"I Immediately Commenced my Free-Masonry"

Just as in actual combat, many Freemasons resorted to appealing for aid from the enemy when captured, or to avoid capture. Lt. Colonel Homer B. Sprague, 13th Connecticut Volunteers, was taken prisoner by Ramseur's Brigade in the 3rd Battle of Winchester on 19 September 1864. Following a long march with his fellow captives, Sprague's strength failed him and he collapsed in a roadside ditch. A rebel officer took pity on him and he was allowed to ride in an ambulance,

> [I]nto the ambulance I climbed with some difficulty, and immediately commenced my free-masonry on the driver. He responded to the signs.… He gave me some nice milk and some fine wheat bread. "As a Mason," said he, "I'll feed you; share the last crumb with you; but as a Confederate soldier, I'll fight you till the last drop of blood and the last ditch."
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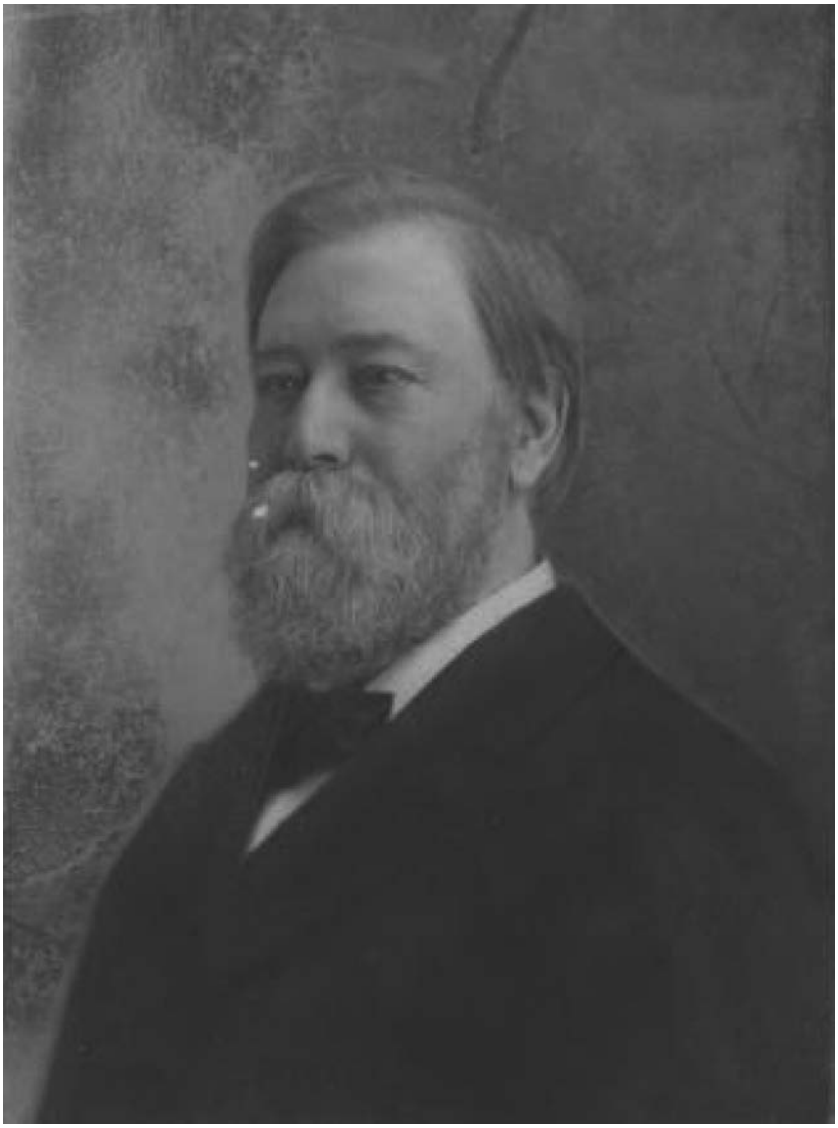
> "I hardly know which to admire most," Sprague replied, "your spunk or your milk."[2]

While the chances of a modern soldier meeting any success by "commencing his Freemasonry" is undoubtedly slim, but in nineteenth-century America, the Fraternity, and its reputation for solidarity between Brethren was well known. During the Petersburg campaign, John Floyd, a captain in the 18th South Carolina Infantry described a successful sortie against Federal troops which illustrates the reputation of Masonry among front-line troops,

> I directed my men to move forward stealthily so as not to attract the attention of the enemy, who were busy reversing the works, until they arrived [with]in 30 yards of the enemy, then to halt. The men were then ordered to yell with all their might and then to fall flat on their faces. Every Yankee fired his gun when he heard that yell, but their balls went harmlessly over us. I then ordered my men forward at the run, and before the enemy could reload their guns we were on them. They commenced begging for quarter and inquiring for Masons and Oddfellows. We captured all of them.[3]

Floyd doesn't comment on whether the men he captured were actually affiliated with either fraternity, and his affiliation with the Craft is not known. It is possible that these men were actually members of the Fraternity, or, that they were not members but were aware that the qualities of Masonic mercy were not strained.

On 12 April 1864, near Tuscumbia Landing, Alabama, Confederate troops from the 27th and 35th Alabama regiments captured the entire complement of Co. G, 9th Ohio Cavalry in a midnight raid on a farm where the Federals were camped. Retreating back across the river with their captives, the raiders



Lt. Col. Homer B. Sprague (1829–1918). Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, http://digital.library.und.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/und25years&CISOPTR=86&DMSCALE=6.82827&DMWIDTH=600&DMHEIGHT=600&DMMODE=viewer&DMTEXT=&REC=19&DMROTATE=0&DMTHUMB=1 (accessed June 18, 2008).

realized that they had not captured the Federal officers who had been sleeping apart from their men,

> We were about to go away without the captain, when Col. [Samuel S.] Ives learned that he and one or two other officers were quartered in the family residence. Taking a small guard with him, Col. Ives, lantern in hand, rushed the into the room where they were, finding them still asleep, notwithstanding what had just transpired in the [farmyard]. He aroused them from their slumbers and dreams of conquests and Rebel scalps to the wakeful consciousness of the fact that they were in the gentle grasp of chivalrous Southrons. The captain made the Masonic sign of distress, thinking that his life was in immediate peril. Col. Ives answered him that he was in no danger of personal violence, but that his presence was needed instanter within the Rebel lines.[4]

Dewitt Gallaher, a former Confederate staff officer who resigned his commission and enlisted as a private soldier in Company E, 1st Virginia Cavalry, related a conversation with Dr. Hunter H. McGuire regarding the Southern physician's escape from Union forces in 1865. Dr. McGuire, formerly surgeon to Stonewall Jackson and at the time attached to Confederate General Jubal Early's staff,[5] was captured by a Union officer following a pursuit on horseback,

> [Dr. McGuire] told me he was trying to escape and had reached a piece of woods… and finding his pursuers very close behind him tried to jump his horse over a low rail fence and get into the woods. But alas! His horse fell with him! An officer told the fellow to put his gun down, saying 'He's MY prisoner'.The Dr. told me he was a Mason and that he made a Masonic sign and the Yankee officer being a Mason also had saved his life. He said the enemy treated him very nicely and paroled him.[6]

A Southern man with a wagon-load of sorely needed cloth and fabric ran afoul of a Union patrol in Patterson, North Carolina. Clem Osborne, a private citizen and Confederate sympathizer, had prepared the load of supplies to be taken to Rebel troops nearby, when Union cavalry under the command of General George Stoneman, Jr. arrived, seized his wagon and team, and attempted to capture him. Osborne ran and hid in the bell tower of the woolen mill in town,

> A diligent but fruitless search was made for the man. Failing to find him the searchers returned and reported their failure to their officers, who commanded that the building be fired. Realizing that there was nothing else to do.… Osborne made known his hiding place and the Yankees brought him down. The command was that as they reached the last step

> he was to be shot. Before reaching this last step, however, Mr. Osborne gave the Masonic distress sign and a member of the enemy forces who was also a Mason gave the order that no harm come to him."[7]

Sometimes confusion resulted from all these secret signs and gestures. Lieutenant Alonzo Cooper, of Co. F, 12th New York Cavalry was captured at the Battle of Plymouth (North Carolina) on 19 April 1864. He was imprisoned at Andersonville for a brief period before being transferred to Camp Oglethorpe in Macon, Georgia. A few months later, due to Gen. William T. Sherman's advance through Georgia, he was moved to Columbia, South Carolina. On 12 October 1864, Cooper and his comrade, Captain Robert B. Hock, also of the 12th New York Cavalry, escaped through the connivance of a rebel guard. The pair traveled through North Carolina for eighteen days, posing as Confederate soldiers returning home. Stopping at a farmhouse to beg for food, Cooper determined to make a fraternal appeal,

> I being a member of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, gave [the farmer] some signs of that order, which he thought was a clumsily given Masonic sign, and, as he belonged to that fraternity, he tried to test me in the signs of that society. I told him I was not a Mason, but was an Odd Fellow, and he could trust me just as freely as though we both belonged to the same order.[8]

Despite the confusion, the appeal worked, and Cooper and his companion received a good breakfast and traveling directions; unfortunately Cooper was recaptured shortly thereafter by a Confederate provost. He was exchanged for a Confederate prisoner on 20 February 1865.

Exchanges of this type—a system by which prisoners taken by each army (or navy) were repatriated—began in early1862; by July of that year, Richmond and Washington reached a formal agreement on prisoner exchanges and a system was devised for prisoners from either army to offset one another as they were repatriated, a zero-sum scheme. Prisoners who were released on parole were prohibited from soldiering until formal exchange notification was received. Many Freemasons benefited by this system, and non-Masons complained bitterly that Masonic warders chose Masonic prisoners as the first to be exchanged.[9]

Not all appeals for Masonic aid had the desired effect, however. Belle Boyd, the famous Confederate spy, issued a Masonic appeal to President Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton "as a Mason's daughter" for a furlough from her confinement in Fortress Monroe to attend the funeral of her father. Lincoln was not a Freemason, but Stanton was; despite this, her request was refused.[10]

Another rebel was more fortunate. Confederate Army surgeon Dr. John H. Claiborne was the resident surgeon in charge of medical care at Petersburg, Virginia. During the waning days of the war, he was captured and, while being assembled for transit North, he tried his Masonic luck with a Federal officer,

> I noticed the officer of the guard with a badge pinned on the lapel of his coat, which indicated that he was a Mason, or I thought so, and … I took an opportunity, the first time he came near me, to give the signal of distress. He came to me and asked what he could do for me. I asked what he was going to do with me. He said that the officers were to be sent to Fort Lafayette [a Union prison in New York Harbor]. Then I replied, "I would like to get away." He said "I will do anything for you which is not in violation of my oath as a soldier.… What grounds have you for asking to be released?" I said, "I am a non-combatant." He remarked, "Are you not one of the surgeons who were captured with that artillery that did such fearful execution amongst our men on Saturday night last?" I said, "Yes, but I was not at a gun—I never pulled a lanyard in my life." He smiled and said, "You were in mighty bad company, then, and you will have to take your chances with them."[11]

Dr. Claiborne was paroled a few hours later, although that had less to do with Masonry than with the terms of the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, which had taken place only hours before.

The odyssey of Captain White and Lieutenant Linsley also deserves mention, not so much for the degree in which Masonry figured into their treatment by the enemy as for the sheer bad luck they experienced in trying to escape. Captured with their entire regiment at New Bern, North Carolina, in March 1865, Captain George M. White of Co. E and Lieutenant Solomon F. Linsley of Co. K, 15th Connecticut Volunteers, resolved to escape. During the march, under guard, of their regiment to Richmond, the two officers bolted and made their way to the Staunton River. The pair first contrived to steal a boat and attempt escaping by water. They crossed the river in fine style, landed safely, and prepared to make their way back to Union territory. Unfortunately, it was not until after they cast the boat adrift to prevent discovery that they realized they had landed on an island with more than half of the river left to cross. Undeterred, they made a raft and managed with some difficulty to reach the mainland where they encountered a free black man who—as fortune would have it—operated the local ferry. By inducements of money White and Linsley secured his help, and he, in turn, led them to a party of Confederate deserters who were in hiding nearby. The rebel deserters would have nothing to do with the two escapees,

being convinced they were Confederate Secret Service agents posing as Union soldiers. The pair finally convinced the deserters that they were "genuine Yanks" and hatched a plan which required them to re-cross the Staunton River with the ferryman's help; they would then make their way to Unionist West Virginia,[12]

> The instant the boat touched the landing, up jumped a whole company of rebel soldiers. We heard their muskets cocked and knew they were, every one of them, aimed directly into the boat, and then came the sharp, quick voice of the captain as he ordered the deserters to lay down their arms and march ashore. For half a minute, it was still as death in the boat, not a rebel or a Yankee moved. The captain repeated his command and gave them one minute to lay down their arms and come ashore, or he would give the order to fire.[13]

The deserters obeyed and filed disconsolately off the boat, but White and Linsley remained hidden,

> "Marse," the ferryman whispered to White, "ye's got to go ashore, de capin knows ye's hayr." Then for the first time it dawned on me that [he] had betrayed us. My fingers fairly ached to clutch him by the throat, but I didn't do it. I whispered a selection of "cuss words" in his left ear, and they must have been heavy ones, for he at once sunk out of ear shot, and I never saw him any more…. Linsley and myself walked ashore. The captain had sent the deserters away under strong guard, and he now marched us off to his own quarters.
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> [O]ur captor was Captain Duguid, of a North Carolina regiment.… He gave up his own bunk to us, he being on duty all night, and had the best his stores afforded cooked for a mid-night meal for us. I shall always suppose that a part of his kindness to us was due to the discovery which he made soon after we entered the tent, that I was a brother Mason.[14]

Re-crossing the river a third time, White and Linsley were transported to Libby Prison in Richmond, where, "as a result of our effort to escape," White later recalled, "we arrived at Libby two days in advance of our regiment."[15]

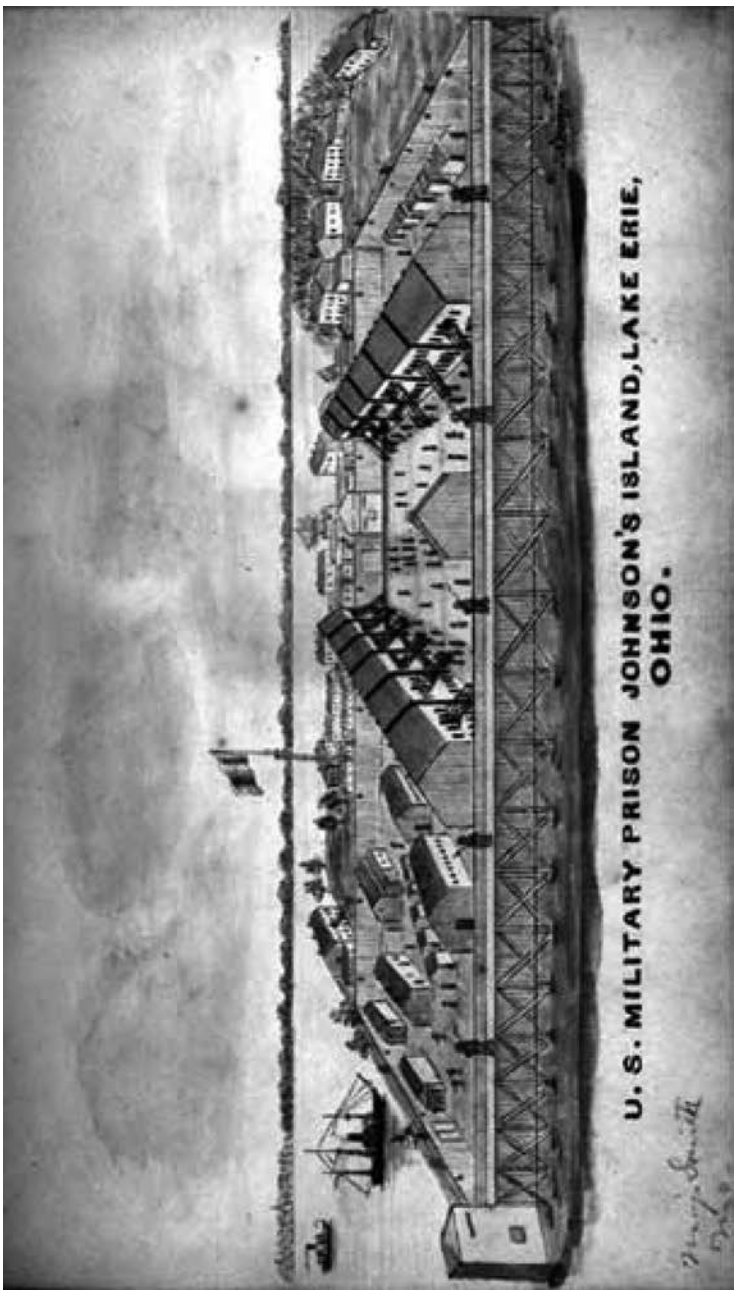
Three months previous to White's and Linsley's travails, another Masonic bond vouchsafed the surrender of a rebel detachment 100 miles away at Fort Fisher near Wilmington, North Carolina. On Christmas Day, 1864, a Confederate Major, identified as Reese of the 4th North Carolina Reserve Regiment, approached elements of the 117th New York Infantry under a flag of truce. He advised their commander, Colonel Rufus Daggett, that he wished to surrender his command. His troops, sent to reinforce the beleaguered garrison of the fort, were not veteran soldiers but teenage cadets, hastily assembled and sent into action,

> On being farther [*sic*] questioned, he said his command was a part of the North Carolina Junior Reserves, and that they were on the river bank, a few hundred yards distant. The Colonel, naturally enough, suspected a trick…. The [Confederate] Major observing this, asked the Colonel if he was a Mason. The Colonel replied, "No, but the Captain is," (referring to captain Stevens). The Major then stepped up to the Captain, and soon made himself known as a brother in the fraternity.[16]
>
> With this assurance, Colonel Daggett detailed a guard of ten men to approach the cadets and receive their surrender, but the Major prevailed on him to not take a guard, explaining that he was afraid that "the boys, on hearing a number advancing on them might fire." [Captain Stevens] then remarked, "Very well, Major, I will go with you alone," which he did. They two had gone about 200 yards beyond our lines, when they were brought to a sudden halt by the sound of the clicking of muskets…. The Major then advanced three or four paces and gave a preconcerted signal…. "Don't fire boys," the answer came, "No Major, we won't." The Major then made the announcement, "Well boys, I've surrendered." "Not by a d---n sight!" said one soldier.
>
> "Yes," added the Captain, who not having spoken, had not been specially observed or noticed. "We have got you Boys, you may as well give it up." Upon this, one of them approached the Captain, and, after peering in his face and scrutinizing him minutely, broke out with, "Be you a Yankee officer?" The Captain answered "yes," when the soldier, after retiring one step, struck a peculiarly expressive attitude and exclaimed, "Well, by G—d." The Captain at once ordered the Major to form his men in marching order, which he did. [17]
>
> Stevens was immediately barraged with questions by the cadets about their fate: would they be killed? Stevens reassured them they "would be better off then in their own army," prompting one young rebel to remark, "We can't be any worse off, any how. We have never received a cent of pay, nor scarcely anything to eat, except what we have picked up."[18]

Given the state of prisons in both North and South, however, the optimism of Daggett's cadets was perhaps misplaced.

The Pest House

Depending upon the camp in which a prisoner found himself, life could be tolerable or very grim indeed. One of the first Confederate arrivals at the federal military prison of Johnson's Island sounded almost chipper at the prospects of his confinement,



"Sketch of Prisoner of War Stockade made by prisoner for autograph book of Confederate Captain C. W. Fraser." http://www.johnsonsisland.org/imagePgs/index01.htm (accessed June 18, 2008).

Johnson's Island April 15, 1862

Dear Pa,

I was very sorry indeed that I had to leave Camp Chase [military prison, Columbus, Ohio] just at the time when I was most looking for you to visit me. Camp Chase is not to be compared at all with this place neither in health or comfort. Although we had to forsake a great many things in the furniture line (such as chairs tables plates cups dishes &etc. and also a Negro boy that we had hired who was a splendid cook) I think the Comforts of this place will compensate for them all. This must be a very healthy climate. There is always a cool invigorating breeze from the lake such as I never felt before. We are almost three miles from Sandusky, Ohio. Sandusky is a very nice looking place. We, being the first Secesh they had ever seen. I have purchased such clothes as I most needed with the money you sent me. I will copy from my book my expenses since I have been a prisoner and send to you. I would be very glad to see you if you will be permitted to come. We are in very comfortable quarters only four in a room the houses are two storys [*sic*] high large windows and are plenty nice for soldiers. Write to me soon and often give me all the news… Give My love to all the Family

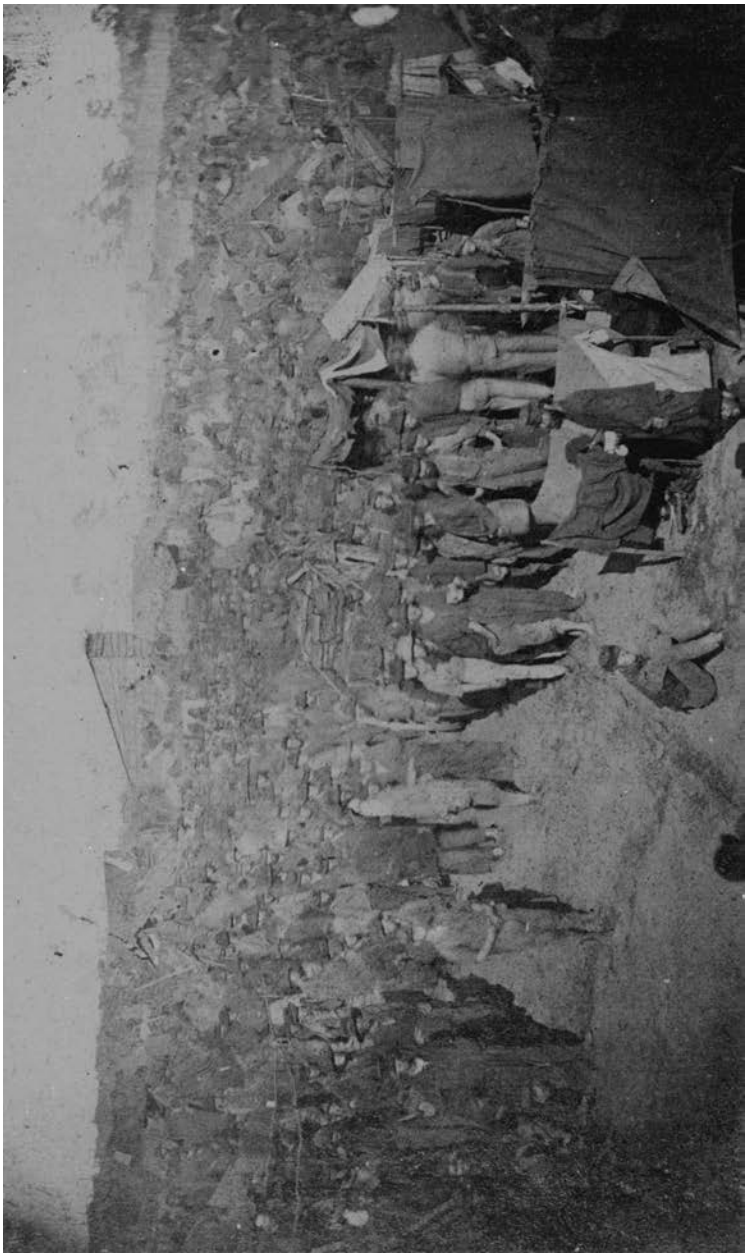
I remain Your Affectionate Son

Thos. C. Skinner.[19]

By contrast, new arrivals at Andersonville reportedly vomited at the odor of the compound and the sight of the inmates, and approximately 13,000 of the 45,000 Federal prisoners housed there died.[20] Likewise, Southerners were outraged by conditions in Northern prisons—Johnson's Island, Alton Penitentiary, Camp Douglas, Camp Chase, Rock Island, and Elmira were pointed to as examples of Federal barbarity and criminal mismanagement. On both sides, inmates described wretched prison conditions, rife with disease and reeking of filth and death.[21] "It is impossible to have any idea of the state of the skin covering bodies," wrote Surgeon William S. Ely, executive officer of the Union General Hospital at Annapolis. "In many cases I have observed, the dirt encrustation has been so thick as to require constant ablution to recover the normal condition and function.… Patients repeatedly stated that they had been unable to wash their bodies once in six months."[22]

The want of proper clothing and shelter was a constant concern of prisoners. A Confederate soldier imprisoned at Champ Chase echoed the concerns of many,

"I suffered all night nearly with cold, and yet I could not tell why for I had my usual Am[oun]t of blankets and the night was not as Cold as Some others have been when I was quite comfortable. Today I am nearly



Issuing rations. Andersonville Prison, Ga., August 17, 1864. Photographed by A. J. Riddle. U.S. National Archives, Pictures of the Civil war, #165-A-445, http://www.archives.gov/research/civil-war/photos/images/civil-war-072.jpg (accessed June 18, 2008).

> sick. [I have] a severe pain in My Stomach and a bad head ache. How gloomy such feelings Makes us. We begin to think about being sick and having to go to the Hospital, and what is worse we Never Know at what time the Small Pox is [likely] to lay hold of us and Carry us to our long home by way of the pest house. But I have been so Much exposed to it in the last 10 mo[nths] that I have learned to think I am not subject to it. Let come what May I will try to be ready to meet it."[23]

The gravest danger facing prisoners everywhere was disease. At Camp Chase in the fall of 1864, smallpox broke out. By October, "the smallpox [was] prevailing in the prisons averaging ten cases per day." A small building called the "pest house" was constructed outside of the prison walls to quarantine those with the disease.[24]

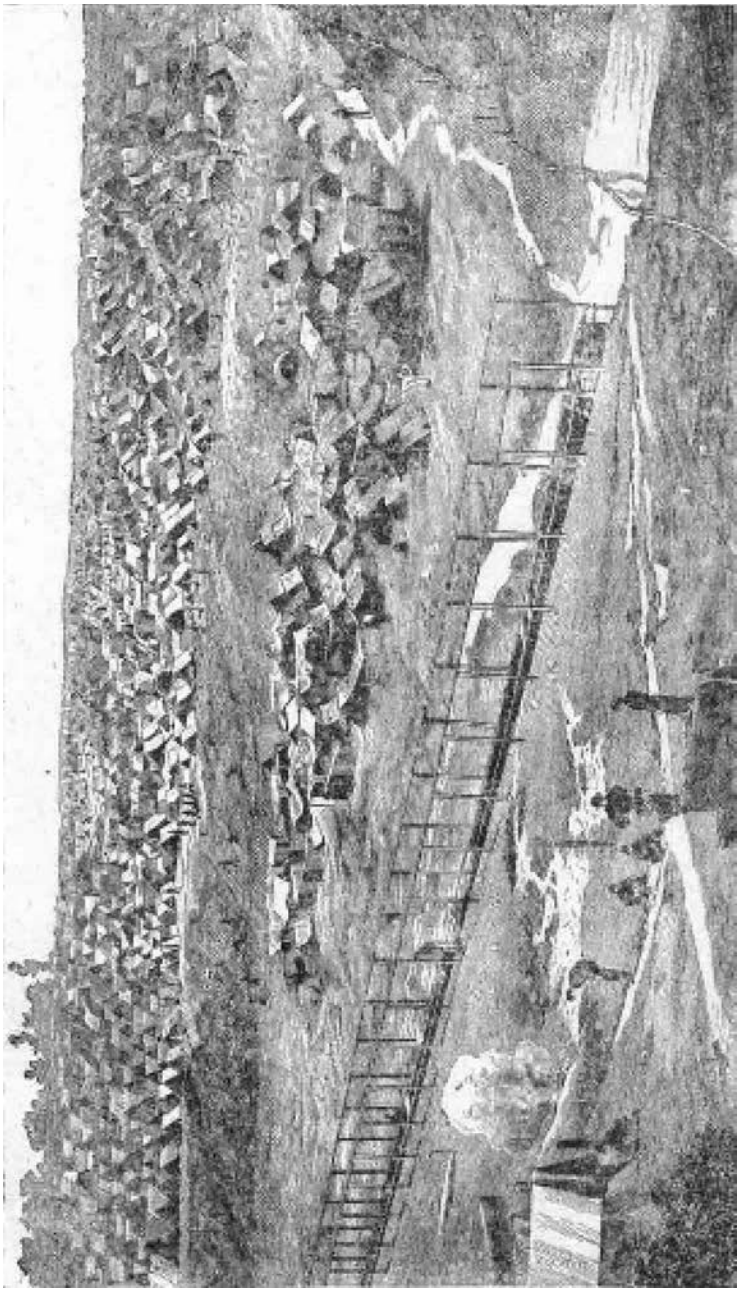
In response to these hardships, Freemasons in prisons on both sides relied upon one another, irrespective of rank or allegiance. Masonic prisoners shared rations, lived together and held meetings, although without a charter or a dispensation from a Grand Lodge, Freemasons in prison could not operate a lodge *per se*. Considerable evidence exists that Masonic prisoners associated freely and openly while incarcerated. At Andersonville, prisoners erected quarters known as the 'Masonic Tent' which consisted of a shanty situated on the south side of the camp "but a little way from the Dead Line."[25]

Union Masons in Libby Prison in Richmond at least once sent a formal declaration of sympathy to the family of a deceased Masonic comrade who died in prison.[26] Through this association, which offered both physical and psychological support, individual Masons increased their chances of surviving the war.

Gentlemen of the "White Apron"

A great number of non-Masons observed acts of Masonic charity while in prison and wrote about them after the war. In many of their accounts, they describe how Masons stuck together after capture and how Masonic prisoners on both sides received support from "enemy" Masons. John McElroy, of Co. L. 16th Illinois Cavalry, was an inmate at Andersonville. He remarked that the Fraternity was one of the few humanitarian agencies inside, or outside, the prison,

> The churches of all denominations—except the solitary Catholic Priest, Father Hamilton—ignored us as wholly as if we were dumb beasts. Lay humanitarians were equally indifferent, and the only interest manifested by any Rebel in the welfare of any prisoner was by the Masonic brotherhood. The Rebel Masons interested themselves in securing details outside



"Interior of the Stockade—Viewed from the Southwest. (From a Rebel photograph in the possession of the Author.)" Andersonville Prison, Ga. Original source unknown. http://www.jewish-history.com/clipartgallery/images/stockade.jpg (accessed June 18, 2008).

> the Stockade in the cook-house, the commissary, and elsewhere, for the brethren among the prisoners who would accept such favors. Such as did not feel inclined to go outside on parole received frequent presents in the way of food, and especially of vegetables, which were literally beyond price. Materials were sent inside to build tents for the Masons, and I think such as made themselves known before death, received burial according to the rites of the Order.

Doctor White and perhaps other Surgeons, belonged to the Fraternity, and the wearing of a Masonic emblem was pretty sure to catch their eyes and be a means of securing for the wearer the tender of their good offices, such as detail into the Hospital as nurse, ward-master, etc.[27]

McElroy's account is corroborated by Sergeant Samuel S. Boggs, of the 21st Illinois Infantry, also incarcerated at Andersonville. Boggs agreed that Father Hamilton was the only religious minister he ever saw inside Andersonville; he also echoed McElroy's comments about Freemasonry,

> Rebel Masons interested themselves in assisting their brother Masons in presents of medicine, food, tent material, reading and writing material, vegetables and in many ways not known to those not familiar with Masonry. I was neither a Catholic nor a Mason, but I do want to give credit to every merciful act shown in that hell; there were so few that it takes but little space to give them.[28]

"I was a prisoner of war for four months, in the prison at Danville, Virginia," wrote J. L. Hinley, of Co. L, 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry, in a letter dated 11 September 1914,

> I was not a mason during the war, but what I saw there of masonry, induced me to join the beneficent order, and I was made a mason in 1866. I saw [at Danville] what the order did for a brother, as several of those who were masons were treated much better than others; they were taken out of prison on their word as a mason, that they would not attempt to escape—most of the Confederate officers being masons, and they faithfully observed their vows. It may be as well that I was not a mason at that time, as I escaped from the prison and safely made my way to our lines at Newbourne, [*sic*] N.C.[29]

John M. Copley's experiences in prison were similar. A Confederate soldier in Co. B, 49th Tennessee Infantry, Copley was captured by Union troops at the Battle of Franklin (30 November 1864) and sent to the military prison at Camp Douglas, Illinois,

> Within a few weeks after being domiciled, and were becoming accustomed to our new mode of living, we were notified that this barrack must be vacated, and that we must be transferred to other barracks, to make room for those who had somewhat grown in favor with the Federal authorities, and were known to the rest of us as two classes,—one class was known as gentlemen of the "White Apron," more familiarly, as Free Masons; the other as "Loyal Men"; that is, those who petitioned for the oath of allegiance and to join the Federal army, to fight against their own blood kin and their already desolated homes. These favored loyal gentlemen were removed to and located in the barracks which the authorities had us to vacate. All the Free Masons were stored away in barracks to themselves. They were as good Confederates as any of us, but were more highly favored on account of the order to which they belonged, and we were informed that they received much better treatment at the hands of the officials, in every particular, than the remainder of us. I did not belong to that order then; hence, I had to take the storm as it came, let it be heavy or light.[30]

"Just before we went into camp one night a citizen walked beside us for a short distance and I saw him exchange glances with Captain Hume," wrote Captain John G. B. Adams, of the 19th Massachusetts, another non-Mason,

> After he passed on Captain Hume said, "We will have something to eat to-night. That man is a mason; he says we are going into camp soon and he will come down and bring me some food." We soon after filed out of the road and into a field. The captain's brother-mason came and walked around until he saw Hume, then passed near and dropped a package containing bread and meat. Although not a mason at that time I shared the refreshments furnished by the craftsman.[31]

Captain William A. Wash of Co. I, 60th Tennessee, was captured at Big Black, Mississippi on 17 May 1863. He was imprisoned at Johnson's Island, on Lake Erie, near Sandusky, Ohio, an officer's camp, holding three thousand Confederate prisoners. In 1870, he published a book based on his experiences in which, among other things, he explains how his stint in prison changed his mind about Freemasonry,

> From early childhood, I had imbibed a dislike to anything hidden or secret, for I imagined whatever was meritorious would not suffer by being brought out into the light. But now I take it all back, and give my testimony in behalf of Freemasonry as a good and valuable institution. During my stay in prison I had ample chance to watch its workings.
>
> A little flock of perhaps three hundred of the Order had been gathered up from every quarter and sent to stay with us. They were regularly organized for such charitable ministering as was in their power among

> the fraternity. If one was sick the brotherhood were detailed to wait upon him, by day and by night, till he got well: and if he had no means, a collection was taken up from the scanty purses of his comrades to procure whatever dainties or comforts were to be had; if he died, they gave him the most decent burial possible.[32]

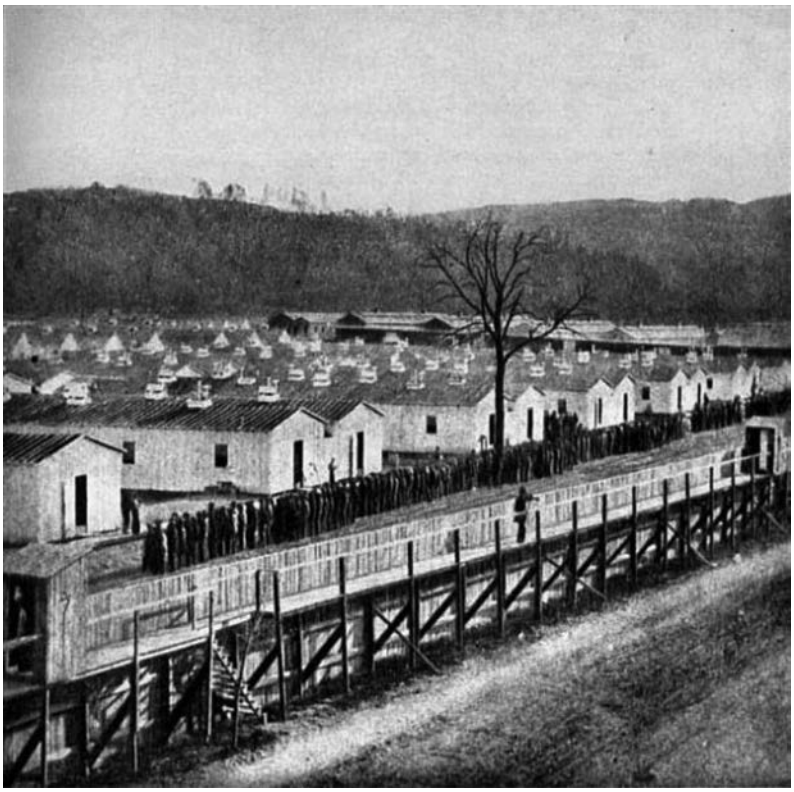
One Mason was too proud to make a Masonic appeal, at least initially. George W. Sandusky, of Co. K, 1st Kentucky Cavalry, was captured and became seriously ill in a rebel prison. A young man in 1861, his hatred towards the rebels was so intense that he resolved to suffer the consequences rather than reveal himself to be a member of the Craft and accept aid from the enemy. As his condition worsened, however, he finally revealed to a Confederate surgeon his Masonic membership. The rebel doctor, also a Mason, evacuated him from the prison compound and lodged him in a private home. He recovered, and credited Freemasonry for his restoration to health.[33]

H. H. Rockwell, of the 23rd New York Volunteers, observed prison life from the outside following his discharge from the Army of the Potomac in May of 1863. A resident of Elmira, New York, he reported in 1912 that the Masonic Fraternity in the town, during the war, had established a benefit committee to care for rebel Masons interned at the local prison camp,

> Immediately after the establishment of the camp [in July of 1864], both of the Masonic Lodges in Elmira [Union Lodge No. 95 and Ivy Lodge No. 397] passed resolutions appointing a joint committee to raise funds and ask for contributions of money and clothing, which were freely given under the direction of this committee [and] were distributed to such of the prisoners as were Masons. The committee was directed to investigate and find all such cases and relieve them according to their necessities, and this continued during the entire existence of the camp at this city. Although I never attended personally, I know of the fact that Masonic funerals for deceased prisoners were held by the Lodges and such prisoners as were Masons were given Masonic burial, but I have no recollection as to how many instances of this kind there were… These prisoners were very largely from South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi.[34]

On at least two occasions the charitable work done by Union Lodge No. 95 was remarked upon in the Lodge minutes,

> July 18, 1864. Resolved, that the relief committee be directed to take measures for relief in the matter of clothing, delicacies, etc., for the prisoners of war now in camp in this place who are Masons....



"New York's Elmira Prison. Close to one-quarter of the more than twelve thousand Confederate soldiers imprisoned at Elmira died there; seventeen escaped." Pennsylvania State Archive. http://www.explorepahistory.com/displayimage.php?imgId=1704 (accessed June 18, 2008).

> September 20, 1864. Moved and carried that Fifty Dollars be appropriated from the funds of this Lodge for the benefit of our Southern brethren, prisoners of war in Barracks No. 3.[35]

At the September 20th meeting, the Lodge also appointed a committee to erect a marker for the grave of a Confederate Mason, W. B. Egerton of Co. B, 12th Virginia Infantry, who died in the Elmira prison camp on August 22, 1864.[36]

In prison, most of the benefits of the Fraternity naturally flowed to fellow members. Masons cared for Masons out of a sense of common fraternal regard and because of the obligations that each member took at his initiation to "help, aid and assist a worthy brother" in distress. However, at least some acknowledgment of the needs of non-Masonic prisoners and an attempt to care for them are recorded. Confederate Freemasons formed a Masonic Prison Association at the Federal prison on Johnson's Island to ameliorate some of the privations of prison life. In an official appeal, Captain Joseph J. Davis of North Carolina corresponded directly with the Union Commandant,

> U. S. DEPOT PRISONERS OF WAR
> Johnson's Island, Ohio, November 28, 1864.
>
> Col. CHARLES W. HILL,
> Comdg. U.S. Forces at Johnson's Island and Sandusky, Ohio:
>
> COLONEL: As president of the Masonic Prison Association I desire to make an appeal to you in behalf of the sick confined here. I am sure your nature must be too generous to refuse to do anything in the real interest of humanity that may be in your power, and that you will indulge me a moment. It is cheerless, indeed, to be sick away from home under the depressing influences of the prison and recovery is often retarded—sometimes prevented—by mental anxieties. Under present orders, however, much we ourselves may be inclined to aid our fellow prisoners, we cannot go beyond the simple offices of the nurse, and mere sympathy, which, though valuable, can never restore the deranged stomach or stay wasting disease. We do not wish to invade the department of medicine, but if allowed we can supply the sick with many things that will cost the Government nothing and will be of vast service in restoring their health and in relieving their sufferings. Diarrhea is a common and often fatal disease in this prison, and apples and other fruits, jellies, cordials and what are termed generally hospital delicacies (real necessaries), are much needed for this class of sick.… If permitted to do so, many of these wants can be supplied through our association, and we will not confine ourselves to the sick of our own fraternity, for (under the circumstances, I may be pardoned for saying) the diffusive charity inculcated by our order extends to

> all mankind and should embrace even an enemy in distress and relieve him with a hearty good will…. If the orders shall be so relaxed (which we respectfully ask) as to permit us to procure the class of articles alluded to, I give you the most solemn assurance that they shall be appropriated solely for the benefit of the sick, and I will myself, if required, become responsible as a hostage under such penalties as you may prescribe for their faithful disposal.… Pardon me, colonel, for thus trespassing upon you time, which, I trust, will be justified by the subject-matter.
>
> Respectfully, JOSEPH J. DAVIS,
> Captain, &c., President of Masonic Prison Association
> Block 1, Ward 1, Room 16[37]

The request was approved by the prison Commandant, and contributions began to accumulate. By 1865 these included $165 "from the Masons of St. Louis … of Nashville $165., of New York $20., and in Boston they have on hand, subject to our order, several hundred dollars. The Masons of the city of Louisville have supplied us with at least $300 worth of hospital stores and medicines, and those in St. Louis have supplied us with four boxes of hospital stores."[38]

Sometimes, however, the Masonic connection was used in prison to ward off not sickness and distress, but the ministrations of well-meaning surgeons. Captain J. H. Larew, of Company E, 60th Virginia Infantry, was seriously wounded on 9 May 1864 at the Battle of Cloyd's Mountain in Western Virginia. A shell struck him on the right shoulder, tearing away the shoulder blade, and Larew was captured. Initially, the doctors pronounced his wound fatal, but as he survived longer than expected—several days, a Georgia surgeon who was at the hospital decided that the arm should be amputated. Larew found this out and, as he was a Mason, he recruited among the Federal guards several brother Masons, whom he persuaded to pledge that they would not permit the amputation. Larew survived the war and became an attorney in Pulaski City, Virginia, with his right arm intact.[39] It is interesting to note that Freemasonry traditionally required a man to be "a perfect Youth having no Maim or Defects in his Body that may render him uncapable of learning the Art of serving his Master's Lord, and of being made a Brother, and then a Fellow-Craft in due Time."[40]

In another such incident, Samuel H. Hargis, of Co. D, 2nd Arkansas Mounted Riflemen, was assigned as hospital orderly following the Battle of Peachtree Creek in July 1864. A Federal officer spotted the Masonic pin Hargis wore, made himself known as a Mason, and appealed to Hargis to stop the amputation of his leg, which was imminent. When arguing with the surgeon failed, Hargis threatened him; the Union officer kept his leg, and Hargis, apparently,

kept his job.[41] Apart from the natural abhorrence to the prospect of amputation, it is quite possible that both men's reactions arose from the Masonic stigma of such multilations.

These and similar claims of Masonic benificence in prison may seem remarkable, but they are verifiable and many are corroborated by more than one contemporary source. Those not independently verifiable usually occasion little suspicion, being typical of those that are. For example, in December 1864 an anonymous Captain J. W. C. of the 123rd Ohio Volunteers wrote of his nine months of captivity in Libby Prison in a letter to Cornelius Moore, editor of the *Masonic Review*. His account typifies the experiences of a Freemason in a Civil War prison and seems eminently credible, though no supporting evidence exists,

> I was captured at Winchester, Va., June 15, 1863…. I was taken to Richmond a few days thereafter and lodged in the famous Libby Prison, of which loathsome place I was an inmate until March 21, 1864…. About the 1st December, our government sent some 15,000 outfits for the relief of our suffering men. The Confederate authorities appointed a committee of our officers.… I was the only one of the number who was a Mason. Capt. D. D. Munro, 3d N.C. Regt., C.S.A., performed the same duties on the part of the rebels. He was a Scotchman, made a Mason in a Lodge in Scotland, "had passed the chair," and held a Diploma from a Lodge in Philadelphia.… I never asked any favors on the grounds of my being a Mason, because I do not believe it is according to the teachings of Masonry—unless I was in very destitute circumstances. This same Captain had charge of the distribution of private boxes sent to us from the North. Although they were always critically examined, mine did not have to pass such an examination, and they were always delivered to me very promptly, as well as those of a few particular friends for whom I requested the same favor.…This Captain used his influence with the Commandant of the prison, and had my name placed on the list [of those prisoners selected to be exchanged]. He then came up in the prison and informed me that I was to go the next day which I did. He also informed me that his life was saved at the battle of Gettysburg, by the use of a certain ——, well known to the Craft." There is one fact I wish to state: during 27 months service in Virginia, I have visited some twenty Lodge rooms, filled the east in two or three, and in not a single place have I found one disturbed, although some of them had been alternately in possession of the opposing armies five or six times in a single campaign.[42]

However, other tales, of which the account of Isaac "Ike" Hermann is typical, are simply fantastic. Hermann was a member of Howell's Company, Georgia Light Artillery. In Davisboro, Georgia in late 1864, he allegedly had an encounter with a Mason on a prison train bound for Andersonville,

> Curiosity led me to approach the train, which was heavily guarded by sentinels stationed in the open doors and on top of the cars, with loaded muskets, to prevent escapes, when I heard the grand hailing words of distress from an inmate of the car. Being a Mason, I demanded what was wanted, when some one appealed to me, "For God's sake give me something to eat, I am starving to death; somebody stole my rations and I have not eaten anything for three days." Being meal time I at once run into the dining room of the Hardwick House, picked up a plate with ham and one with biscuits, and ran to the train, called on the man in Masonic terms, and handed him the provisions that I had wrapped up in a home made napkin, bordered with indigo blue. It was seven o'clock P.M. and one could not distinguish the features of an individual; it was a starless, foggy night. After the train left I entered the house and excused myself for the rudeness of taking the provisions as I did. Mrs. Hardwick not having been in the dining room at the time I explained to her that my obligations were such that I had to render assistance to any distressed Brother Mason; he applying to me as such. "I am now ready to pay you for all the damages I did," and this was her reply: "I don't charge you anything honey, I am glad you did it."[43]

Incredibly, Hermann claimed that he later chanced upon this anonymous prisoner, whom he identified as one "Mr. McClucklan," a salesmen, in New York City in 1868. Recognizing each other as Masons, the two men struck up a conversation which turned to Georgia, then Andersonville, and finally to the salesman's reputed appeal complete with details about the home-made napkin.[44] Clearly, the odds against such a post-war encounter strain credulity, but the story is nonetheless plausible.

Geegaws

A discussion of Masonry in prison would not be complete without some mention of handmade Masonic jewelry. Period sources that mention Masons as prisoners of war inevitably describe the trinkets and charms made by soldier-inmates; these frequently featured Masonic emblems. Some prisoners made them to sell or barter to guards or outsiders for food or other provisions, while those with Masonic emblems served to identify members of the Fraternity to one another, a common device among Freemasons during the war and even today.

Captain James N. Bosang of Co. C, 4th Virginia Infantry made jewelry from soup bones to earn money for food in prison. After being wounded and captured at Spotsylvania, "[h]e found some Masonic friends among his captors who started him on his way to a Northern Prison with a five dollar bill, which

he accepted as a Masonic favor." When the five dollars ran out, Bosang, imprisoned in Fort Delaware, developed a thriving trade in making jewelry from gutta-percha buttons and re-soling shoes. [45]

Colonel Thomas E. Barker of the 12th New Hampshire also earned money by making and selling trinkets in prison in Louisiana,

> [I]n Old Parish Prison, New Orleans, La., in December, 1862, like many of my associates, I became quite skilled in the manufacture, from the bones in our rations, of rings, charms, Masonic emblems, etc., which were eagerly sought for and purchased by the many visitors who were allowed, on certain days of each week, to see us.[46]

The Confederate prisoners in Elmira, New York were similarly employed,

> Considerable mention has been made concerning the various souvenirs made by the prisoners … two [of] which are worthy of special mention. Both are Masonic watch charms. One is one and one fourth inches long, made square, half an inch at the base, tapering to one quarter inch at top, surmounted with an eyelet, gracefully carved, with a square and compass, cut on two opposite sides…. The other [is] a two pronged scroll, with a book between the two arms, which swings on a pivot; on the face and back of the book, the Masonic square and compass are neatly cut.… Both evidently made from a soup bone, but the artistic work shown would grace a piece of ivory. How the prisoners could do such work with a jack-knife is beyond … comprehension.[47]

In at least one incident, an inmate's display of a Masonic-themed trinket brought an immediate response from his captors at the prison camp in Macon, Georgia,

> Lieut. Hyde of my company [Co. B., 1st Vermont Cavalry][48]… captured at Brandy Station, Oct. 11, 1863, and about eight months a prisoner, was suffering from that usually fatal disease—in this place—diarrhoea [*sic*]. He was a Free Mason, and from a piece of bone I had made him a small scarf pin representing the order—the square and compass; as the poor fellow was so very destitute of anything pertaining to the comforts of life, I borrowed from him the scarf pin, and going to the gate, I handed it out to a rebel sergeant whom I had seen wearing the same symbol, I said: "The man who wears this is lying in a critical condition, and I wish you would kindly call upon him." He bowed assent, and during the day came in. Being on the watch for him, I at once guided him to where the sick man lay. He talked with him an hour or so and went out, saying he would call again. The next morning he walked hurriedly into the Lieutenant's tent, threw down a parcel, and walked out. It contained one pair of drawers, one shirt, a pair of feeting, some medicine and food.[49]

Beyond mere vanity or personally meaningful symbolism, Masonic emblems were important because they identified the wearer as a member of the Craft and unlocked what compassion there was to be had—if the circumstances permitted. For Lieutenant Hyde, however, the assistance was too little and too late, and he died a few days after this incident.[50]

Although some accounts suggest that Masonry responded to the needs of non-Masons in prison (as in Captain Davis' letter, above), documentary evidence shows that, in most instances, its benefits were restricted to members only. One Confederate prisoner at Elmira wrote bitterly that, "I found that the worst and most worthless men could outstrip the best in a contest for the 'good places' about camp, if they were only Masons."[51] Complaints that favorable treatment was, in many cases, reserved for fellow Freemasons are almost certainly true, and the Masonic Fraternity, like any other, clearly devoted its primary attention to fellow members before considering the needs of the public at large. The Masonic emblems worn by prisoner and guard alike reflect this fraternal bond.

Conclusion

Freemasonry was not practiced in the military prisons of the American Civil War. Lodges did not meet nor were men initiated into the Brotherhood, but its tenets were applied there. This practical application, ignored by scholars despite abundant documentary evidence, provided Masons and non-Masons alike with an inoculation of civility in an otherwise barbaric setting. The record indicates that Freemasonry was a lifeline for many prisoners of war, transcending national and political boundaries, and in some instances even affiliation with the Fraternity itself. Deprived of proper medical care, basic sanitation, suitable clothing, and even basic foodstuffs, prisoners of war in 1861–1865 were forced to fend for themselves. Although soldiers made use of their Masonic credentials to gain respite, reprieve and succor from the enemy on the battlefield, Masonry's influence in the prisons is perhaps its greatest contribution to ameliorating the suffering of the war. It is for this reason that Masonic emblems, trifling objects in ordinary times, assumed an importance far larger than mere decoration or vanity. These emblems were passports to a physical and spiritual support structure that was sorely needed in these direst of conditions. Quiet simply, affiliation with the Masonic Fraternity in a prison compound could literally become a matter of life and death.

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