



U.S. ARMY

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COMMEMORATING ROCK ISLAND ARSENAL'S 160TH ANNIVERSARY



THIS MONTH in MILITARY HISTORY Sentinels of the Rock Island Prison Barracks

- 1804 ~ The Lewis & Clarke expedition departs St. Charles, Missouri.
- 1846 ∞ The Battle of Palo Alto concludes with an American victory.
- 1917 √ Eugene J. Bullard becomes the first combat aviator.
- 1945 √ A Japanese balloon bomb strikes Oregon, killing seven.
- 1951 √ The Chinese Spring Offensive in Korea fails to break the Eighth U.S. Army.
- 1960 - Gary Powers' U-2 spy plane is shot down by Soviet air defenses.
- 1980 ∞ The first female cadets graduate from military academies across the U.S.
- 1987 √ Iraqi aircraft strike the frigate U.S.S. *Stark*, killing 37 Americans.
- 2003 ∞ Aziz Salih Nuhman, one of Saddam's "dirty dozen", is captured in Baghdad.
- 2011 ~ Osama bin Laden is tracked down in Pakistan and subsequently killed.



During the American Civil War, 1861-1865, the United States Army returned to Rock Island. This second period of active Federal occupation of the island began on 11 JUL 1862 when the United States Congress passed an act which established an arsenal on Rock Island. The next year, the Army Ordnance Department started construction a prisoner of war camp on the north central section of the island. The barracks needed to accommodate 10,000 prisoners and construction began in August 1863. This effort was in response to the end of the prisoner exchange program which resulted in the dramatic expansion of Federal housing for Confederate prisoners of war.

The Confederate prisoners were initially guarded by Soldiers of the 37th Iowa Infantry Regiment, 4th Invalid Corps, various "100 day" volunteer regiments; and later the 108th U.S. Colored Infantry Troops (USCT). The 4th Invalid Corps Regiment (later Veteran Reserve Corps, VRC) was a veteran reserve organization comprised of wounded soldiers who were no longer fit for regular military service. These men were the guards when the prison camp opened in December 1863 but would only stay for a little over one month.



Replacing the 4th Regiment was the 37th Iowa Volunteers, commonly known as the "Graybeard" regiment made up of men outside the enlistment age 18-45. The regiment of "graybeards" was exclusively comprised of men forty-five years of age or older; 428 men over the age of fifty, 145 of which were in their sixties, and one man who was eighty. They held the unique distinction of being the oldest regiment to serve in the U.S. Army, earning an almost regiment celebrity status in the north. Among these troops were men who had prior military service dating back to the War of 1812. The "Graybeards" would remain guards until September of 1864.

On 24 SEP 1864, the 108th United States Colored Troops (USCT) arrived by train to assume guard duty at the Rock Island Prison Barracks. The regiment's recruits were primarily made up of freed slaves from northwest Kentucky region. The Soldiers enlisted for a three year term of service with the greatest portion of service being conducted at Rock Island Prison Barracks.

Confederate prisoners first expressed indignation, then anger, over the prospect of armed former slaves in uniform guarding over them. Prisoners accused the guards of firing without provocation into their barracks and shooting prisoners without cause. However, in at least one recorded instance, a committee reviewed all the evidence and the guard was acquitted of any blame. The 108th Colored Infantry Regiment remained at Rock Island until May 1865.

(Pictured top left: Thomas Weatherwax, 37th IA Vol. INF., 1863. Pictured right center: PVT Christopher Anderson, 108th CIR. 1864.

The Confederate Prison Barracks

During the Civil War, the Union operated 21 prison camps, including one on Rock Island Arsenal. The camp was situated in an area on RIA that now includes half of the present "Officer's Row" residences, and the golf course between East Avenue and Gillespie Avenue.

The barracks at the camp were 22 x 100 feet in size, arranged in six rows, housing approximately 120 prisoners each. The total capacity for the camp was around 10,000. A total of 12,215 prisoners called the camp their temporary home between December 1863 and June 1865. Of those prisoners, nearly 2,000 died at the camp. Most of the fatalities were due to dysentery and smallpox. Immediately after the first prisoners arrived at Rock Island, a brutal cold snap reportedly led to temperatures dipping down to -30 degrees, which resulted in some prisoners dying of exposure.

After the end of the war, prisoners were released from Rock Island at the gates of the installation. The remaining barracks were turned over to the War Department and Rock Island Arsenal, and were later demolished. Few remains of deceased prisoners were returned to the South, as few were requested or had the means to be returned. Most of those who died in captivity were buried at the Confederate Cemetery on the arsenal.

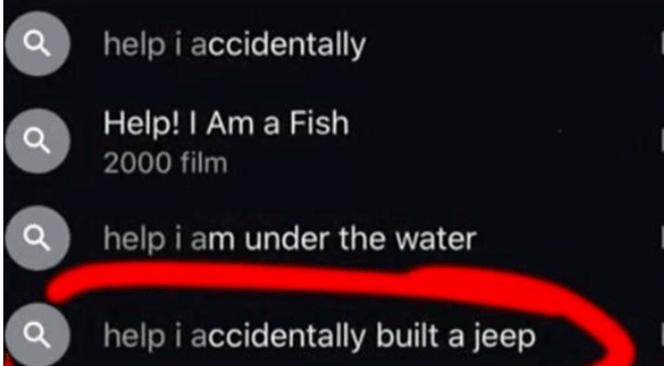
All that remains of the prison camp today is a stone monument located on the riverfront that sits on the far northeast corner of where the camp used to be located.

TRIVIA

- 1 Some Confederate prisoners volunteered to leave the Rock Island Prison Barracks. What was the title they were given?
- 2 What was the post-war nickname given to the camp in a famous novel and late a movie?
- 3 What was the name of the Iowa Soldiers Civil War mobilization camp in Davenport?

ANSWERS FOR APRIL 2022 QUESTIONS

- 1 What famous lawyer assisted in the defense of the railroad companies after the *Effie Afton* crash?
➤ Abraham Lincoln
- 2 Who was the Army Office that surveyed the Rock Island Rapids in 1837?
➤ LT Robert E. Lee
- 3 What was one of the reasons for the train deck to be on top of the 1872 bridge?
➤ To keep the horses calm during train crossings.



Military historians tend to have many hobbies, but some of those hobbies result in strange interests. Aside from the frequent barrage of historical facts that we tend to share at inopportune moments, some of us also build scale models or replica military vehicles. At times the scale is a bit larger than normal... Sometimes 1/1 scale. Evidently according to Google this is not unusual and construction of these models can accidental.



Trivia answers, digital newsletters, and more history is available on the ASC History website:

<https://aschq.army.mil/About-Us/History>

1. History Office, Army Sustainment Command. *An Illustrated History of the Rock Island Arsenal and Arsenal Island*. Rock Island Arsenal, Illinois. 2010.

History is being made every day at this command.

Presented to you by your friendly ASC History Office. Feel free to call or stop by our office for any of your history needs.



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