



Rock Island Prison Barracks at 160 years

FROM THE ARCHIVES



A view of Officers Row at RIPB

The Rock Island Prison Barracks was like any other camp during the war and had its guards. This view is looking north towards the city of Davenport, seen in the distance, close to the present day site of Gillespie St. The guards consisted of a variety of Soldiers from the Veterans Reserve Corps, 37th Iowa Volunteers (Iowa Greybeards) and the 108th United States Colored Troops (USCT).

By the summer of 1863, all expectations that the Civil War would be a short campaign had long since faded. The enduring intensity of the war combined with a breakdown of the Dix-Hill prisoner exchange cartel, that had previously kept the number of prisoners of war housed by both sides low, created a impending crisis. Combined with a series of Federal victories in the late summer of 1863 an immediate need to build additional sites to house prisoners was quickly realized. The job fell to Quartermaster General of the Union Army Montgomery C. Meigs who immediately began looking for a suitable locations to house prisoners of war.

The island known as Rock Island, was an isolated 946 acre rocky outcropping in the middle of the Mississippi River far from the battle areas of the Civil War. Already owned by the Federal Government, with the only commitment of a newly established Arsenal designated in July of 1862, the island proved an ideal location for a new prison. Additionally rail transportation was already established for the quick arrival of prisoners. In August 1863, a team from the Quartermaster Department began construction on the north central shore of the island, where the former golf course stands. The Prison Barracks consisted of eighty-four 22 x 100 ft. buildings arranged in six north to south rows of fourteen buildings each. Construction of the camp quickly fell behind schedule due to equipment, material, and labor shortages. When the first 488 Confederate prisoners arrived in December 1863, they were housed in partially constructed barracks.

Life as a prisoner was extremely difficult in the early days of the prison camp. In addition to surviving the bitter winter cold of the North, Confederate prisoners had to endure exposure to a variety of contagious diseases. During the operation of the prison, 1,964 Confederate prisoners died, with smallpox, pneumonia, and diarrhea accounting for the majority of these deaths. 700 of that total would perish in the first three months of arrival.

In the early days of the prison, prisoners were allowed to receive clothing and food packages from sympathetic local citizens, friends, and relatives. Prisoner rations included fourteen ounces of bread and twelve ounces of "fresh" beef. In addition, the prisoners received a quart of hominy per man each day. The Southerners made hominy soup and boiled other food, serving it in saucepans produced from canteens and burned-out stove pipes. The prisoners had a difficult time swallowing the coarse yellow corn bread provided by the prison and asked for flour to bake white bread, with varying degrees of success. At times, slab bacon was added to the prisoners' diet.

A total of 12,192 prisoners were confined to the prison barracks during its existence with the last two prisoners released from the Barracks Hospital in July 1865, three months after the end of the long and deadly conflict.

The camp would become famous for its depiction in the book *Gone With the Wind* where the fictional Major Ashley Wilkes was held during the war. The book labeled the Rock Island Prison Barracks as the "Andersonville of the North." Andersonville was a notorious prion camp in Georgia that held Federal Soldiers during the war and had a 27% fatality rate of its prisoners. While not great the Rock Island Prison Barracks averaged a 16% fatality rate which was consistent with the other Federally controlled prison camps. For more information please reach out to the ASC History Office.



MONTHLY TRIVIA

- 1 What local RIA newspaper did Secretary of War Edwin Stanton deem a disloyal paper?
- 2 What was the post war named applied to Rock Island Prison Barracks?
- 3 Who technically controlled Rock Island, the Quartermaster Dept or the Ordnance Dept?

ANSWERS FOR OCTOBER 2023 QUESTIONS

- 1 On 19 October 1781, the British surrendered to the Americans in this town?
Yorktown, Virginia
- 2 Operation *URGENT FURY* occurred in which country?
Grenada
- 3 Army Sustainment Command celebrates its ____ birthday this month?
17th

I SENSE A DISTURBANCE



And now for your monthly dose of historians trying to be funny as well as provide meme material for the rest of you to steal. You are welcome!

National American Indian Heritage Month



Every November, the Department of Defense (DoD) joins the Nation in celebrating National American Indian Heritage Month. The event is also known in some circles as American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month. It's an opportunity to recognize the rich and diverse cultures, traditions, stories, and important contributions of Native American and Alaska Native peoples. There are over 9 million American Indian and Alaska Natives living in the United States today.

With over 574 federally recognized tribes, there are hundreds of different cultures that are as unique as the people they represent. For 2023, The Society of American Indian Government Employees (SAIGE) has chosen the theme: "Tribal Nations Soaring to New Heights."



History is being made every day at this command.

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