

Sharing Their Stories (Salisbury Prisoner Of War Camp)

By Tom Steadman - Staff Writer - News-Record.com

SALISBURY -- The first prisoners arrived in 1861, just after the Civil War's first major battle at Manassas, Va.

From then until 1865, when prisoners were evacuated and marched to Greensboro just before Union Gen. George Stoneman burned it to the ground, Salisbury Prison Camp served as North Carolina's only authorized Civil War POW camp, housing a succession of about 15,000 captured U.S. soldiers, Southern deserters or criminals in conditions that grew increasingly harsh.

A few hundred yards from the vacant lot marking the site of the former cotton factory turned prison camp, the National Cemetery at Salisbury denotes the final resting place of thousands of unknown Union prisoners who died there.

"You're talking about a piece of land ... that's been almost forgotten, covered over and built over," says Sue Curtis, head of the nonprofit Salisbury Prison Association and chairwoman of the seventh annual Salisbury Prison Symposium, which begins Friday in Salisbury.

There, descendants of prisoners, guards, history buffs and historians will gather for three days of discussions, lectures and services honoring those who served and died there.

"Many people want to walk in the footsteps of their ancestors," says Curtis, whose forebear, John Payne, served as a guard at Salisbury Prison Camp.

For prisoners or their guards, the days at Salisbury were hardly a lark, though prisoners certainly had it easier during the war's early years.

The converted textile mill got its first prisoners in December 1861, and at first, life in the uncrowded prison was relatively comfortable, with adequate room and food. Prisoners even staged dramas and played baseball on the grounds.

Later in the war, when Union officials put a stop to prisoner exchanges, about 10,000 men at a time were squeezed into quarters adequate for 200, leading to deadly diseases and unsanitary conditions, not necessarily in that order.

Inadequate food supplies made for starving prisoners and guards alike, historians and descendants say.

"The guard's life was pretty much the same as the prisoners'," says Joanne Sharpe, a Guilford County resident whose grandfather, Robert Sanders Phipps, served as a Confederate guard at Salisbury at age 17. Phipps survived the food, the living conditions and the war, coming home to eastern Guilford County to father two children in his 70s, including Sharpe's mother, Effie Phipps Whittle.

These days, Sharpe is a regular at the Salisbury Prison Symposiums, as is Larry Brown, another Greensboro resident whose ancestor, James Henry Stewart Sloan of Iredell County, also served as a guard at the prison camp. Sloan's tenure was brief at Salisbury, however; he served as captain of a Confederate regiment raised by Archibald Godwin, an early commandant of Salisbury Prison Camp. Godwin raised the regiment because he was unsatisfied with running a prison; he wanted to serve at the front.

But while awaiting a new commandant and new orders, Godwin and his men were stationed at the prison, where Brown's ancestor pulled guard duty, Brown says.

When new orders did come, glory was brief for his ancestor, Brown says. Sloan and his outfit saw their first action at Fredericksburg, Va., where they distinguished themselves in battle. Afterward, a snowstorm resulted in a memorable snowball fight among Confederate troops and a fatal bout of pneumonia for Sloan. He died at 21 and was buried at Prospect Presbyterian Church at Mooresville.

"It's ironic that he survived the battle without a scratch, then got sick and died from a snowball fight," Brown says.

Salisbury Prison saw a succession of nine commandants, most notable of which was Maj. John Henry Gee of Florida. In 1866, Gee was tried for war crimes in Raleigh and was acquitted. That stood in contrast to Capt. Henry Wirz of Anderson, the only other prison camp commander tried for war crimes. Wirz was convicted and hanged.

By early 1865, the war was all but over and remaining prisoners at Salisbury were readied for exchange or liberation. A group of about 3,700 prisoners were marched to Greensboro, where they were transported by train to Wilmington for the journey north. Other, sicker prisoners were sent to Richmond. None was left at the prison camp April 12 when Stoneman arrived to free the prisoners. He ordered the prison burned; today only a few bricks remain in private collections.

It was a continual flow of interest from descendants of both prisoners and guards that prompted Curtis to form the Salisbury Prison Camp Association and launch the yearly symposiums.

"I was a volunteer at the public library, and I was constantly getting calls from descendants, wanting to know something about the lives their ancestors were living at Salisbury Prison," says Curtis, who is past president of Robert F. Hoke United Daughters of the Confederacy Chapter No. 78 in Salisbury.

She began taking them on walking tours of the site. Soon, she realized that there was much more demand than she could address individually. Since then, symposiums have attracted visitors and lecturers from across the United States and even Scotland. A Scottish researcher, interested in prisoner Robert Livingstone, son of famed explorer David Livingstone, attended the symposium two years ago.

Robert Livingstone, a teenager who dropped out of school in Scotland and joined the Union Army under an alias, didn't survive his stay at Salisbury. He was one of scores of prisoners killed during a breakout attempt in November 1864.

This year's symposium will include participants from a dozen states, including Ohio and New York, many of whose soldiers were captured and imprisoned at Salisbury during the Civil War.

For the families of both guards and prisoners, the attractions seem much the same, Curtis says.

"The result of the symposiums has been a camaraderie built between descendants of both sides," says Curtis, who along with her husband, Ed, has been involved in researching and preserving history of the prison camp for more than a decade.

The symposium begins at 5 p.m. Friday with a reunion of descendants, followed by a 7 p.m. dinner, and concludes Sunday with a walking tour of the old prison grounds.

This year, the headliners include noted North Carolina Civil War author William Trotter, and Lonnie Speer, the state's best known authority on Civil War Prisons. At least 100 participants are expected.

Past symposiums have featured a thermal-imaging expert, who used equipment to scan the old prison grounds, and an archeologist, who hopes to work with the prison association in a future dig.

Many participants stay in touch, sharing information and staging mini-reunions, Ed Curtis says.

Sue Curtis says: "They come away with history that hasn't been printed yet, and with friends."