

Story of the Famous Tunnel Escape From Libby Prison

As Told by Major A. G. Hamilton, One of the Projectors. Richmond, Va. 1864

There is probably [sic] no event in the whole history of the Civil War in which the patriotism, energy, courage and ingenuity of the Union soldier is better displayed than in the celebrated tunnel escape from Libby Prison, Richmond, Va., on the night of February 9, 1864. Escapes from southern prisons were frequent occurrences, but in the history of them there is not one that compares with this in the conception of the project, the working of its details, and the number of men that gained their liberty. The entire plan was such a remarkable one, and the results so successful, that the Confederate authorities were speechless with amazement when they learned that 109 Union officers had gained their liberty directly under the eyes of their guards and that the escaping party included many of the most prominent prisoners in Libby. Indeed, the only thing that surprised the Confederates was the fact that every man confined in Libby did not get away in the same manner as the 109 that crawled through the tunnel, and they contented themselves with the thought that the exodus was not as bad as it might have been. At the time of this event there were nearly 1,200 Union officers confined in the building, and had the tunnel project been terminated with the care with which it was started there is no reason why at least half this number should not have made their escape.

There have been many accounts written of this famous escape-some by the participants, others by their friends, and still others by writers imbued with the idea that with the aid of a few meager facts and a literary dressing the story could be told in a satisfactory manner. Col. Thomas E. Rose, late of the United States army, projector of the tunnel, could never be induced to give his story of the affair except in a brief manner, and this was done only after hundreds of requests were made from all over the country. His story appeared in the National Tribune in 1884. Col. Rose is known to be a particularly modest and unassuming gentleman, and to the author of this pamphlet he once said: "I do not want to be distinguished, especially if distinction must come through so much pain and sorrow as did the little I gained from the event in Libby."

Perhaps Col. Rose is right in taking this position. He was the acknowledged leader of the tunnel party, the acknowledged projector of the tunnel, and it was through his good sense, energy and management, aided by the devotion and labor of his fourteen comrades in the secret, that the escape was a success. The story coming from

his pen would savor of ostentation or egotism to many and for this reason it is, perhaps, better that it be told by someone else. There is only one man that can do this from a leader's standpoint, and it could not be better done than by Maj. A.G. Hamilton, with whom Col. Rose discussed the project as a confidential matter before it had been lisped to another soul. The result was that the project was conceived from the ideas of these two men, and they were the organizers of the original party. Colonel Rose became its director and Major Hamilton was his first assistant; consequently, it is safe to say that a story coming from Major Hamilton would naturally be correct so far as his memory would serve him. Major Hamilton was a member of the Twelfth Kentucky Cavalry and was captured at Jonesborough, East Tennessee, with four comrades. He was taken to Lynchburg, thence to Richmond, where he spent one night in Castle Thunder, and was then transferred to Libby Prison and placed in what was called the Lower Chickamauga room-the center room on the second floor. This was on September 29, 1863. At about the same time Col. Thomas E. Rose, Seventy-seventh Pennsylvania Infantry, was captured and placed in the same room. Major Hamilton's words will now better describe the conception of the project and the final results. He says:

"Colonel Rose and I were confined in the same room, but I did not form his acquaintance until we met in the Dock street basement of the prison, where all of the cooking was being done at that time. Then the one thought that was preying upon the minds of the 1,200 men in the building was a means of escape. None, however, were in sight.

"The doors and windows were closely guarded and to make an exit from either of these sources meant instant death. In the great, gloomy rooms nearly 1,200 men, robbed of liberty, watched the inexpressibly slow passage of time, the days going like scarcely moving tears, the nights like black blots dying out of a dream of horror, seemingly eternal in its duration. Here in a single room-the hospital-the angel of death kissed the starved lips of hundreds of men and they ceased forever to whisper of sweetheart and mother, ceased to murmur of food and running water, ceased to pray for a sight of the blue sky and a breath of fresh air blowing over well-remember fields. Hope was all that sustained many-to many it was a hope for liberty in any form. Even death was sought. But among us were some strong-minded men with a courage of steel. Among these I found Colonel Rose to be in the front rank. Our acquaintance ripened into a mutual friendship and we soon had the full confidence of each other. To me he proposed some meager ideas relative to an escape. In the meantime the basement kitchen was closed and the middle room on the main floor was

used for this purpose.

Up to that time we had formed no definite plans, but had talked the matter over. We had both arrived at the conclusion that there was only one way for us to get out of the prison, and that was to dig out. This conclusion was reached after the basement kitchen had been closed. After considerable deliberation it became a settled fact that the tunnel would have to be dug from the east basement, but how to get into the basement was the next serious question that stared us in the face. All access to it had been closed and the stair and hatchways securely nailed. In the front of the kitchen we were then occupying there was a fire-place with two cook stoves in front of it, with a large pile of kindling wood. A hole through the brick wall at this place would give us the access that we desired. I borrowed a knife from Lieut.-Colonel Miles and one night when nearly all the prisoners were sleeping I carefully moved one of the stoves aside, and with the aid of the knife dug the mortar from the bricks. Thus the bricks were loosened, carefully taken out, and our access to the cellar was made. Then a board was ripped from the top of a bench and with its aid we went down to the black basement, amid the hurrying, scurrying, squealing rats. In the meantime we had organized a secret party, including Capt. J.F. Gallagher, Major Fitzsimmons, Lieut. F.F. Bennett, Capt. John Sterling, Capt. Lucas, Capt. I.N. Johnston, and possibly one or two others that I cannot recall by name. The difficulties under which we labored can be imagined when you think of the fact that we were working in the midst of 1,200 men, all eager for a breath of free air. It took us twelve nights to complete that entrance to the basement, our work being a secret, as everything depended upon the care with which we guarded our operations. The next room was the hospital and a thoughtless move would have betrayed us to the Confederate surgeons and doctors that were in the room day and night. I will never forget the satisfaction and relief that our little party experienced when that entrance was completed. It seemed as though half the battle had been won, although in reality our labors were barely commenced. After gaining access to the cellar, we started a tunnel on the Dock street side, our objective point being a sewer that we believed to be empty enough to allow an exit. To our disappointment we found the sewer to be flooded. Failure was never thought of. Undaunted by ill success, we made another excavation in the east wall, about twenty feet from Dock street, and after digging a short distance our progress was stopped by a number of logs that had been driven into the earth as a foundation. The simple tools that we had could not penetrate those logs, and this tunnel also had to be abandoned.

"It was just thirty-eight days after the tunnel project had been conceived and suggested that we broke through the wall for the third and last attempt. This opening was made by Major B.B. McDonald and Capt. Terrence Clark, with the aid of a chisel that had been stolen from the carpenter shop. The mortar was cut with this chisel and the bricks were pried out with sticks of hard wood that had been furnished the prisoners for kindling. At just about that time we organized by the addition of a few fellow prisoners, making a band of fifteen, sworn to secrecy regarding everything that pertained to the tunnel operations. Colonel Rose remained the leader and director of the party. He divided the party into three reliefs-five in each. One relief would stay on duty a certain length of time, and by hearing the Confederate guards call the hour and post over their heads, they always knew when it was time to quit. Then they would quietly pass to their quarters above, awaken the next relief and go to sleep themselves. Capt. I.N. Johnston had the honor of breaking the first dirt in the tunnel, and among the five that were on that first relief were Captains Fislar and Gallagher and Major Fitzsimmons. When I say that the digging party was sworn to secrecy, I do not mean to infer that there was nobody else in the prison that knew of the operations which we were conducting. While they did not take any active part in the tunnel, we had what we called our "silent partners." These were Lieut.-Colonel Boyd, Gen. H.C. Hobart, Brig.-Gen. Neal Dow, Major Harry White and Capt. John Sterling. The last-named officer had furnished the secret party with candles that were very beneficial in our work, and Lieut-Colonel Boyd was taken into the confidence of Colonel Rose two days after the last tunnel had been started. The first two nights the digging party went into the basement they made their access by means of the plank. It, however, was an unhandy way of getting into the cellar and was of such a nature that it might have aroused the suspicions of the Confederate officers had they seen it. At that time Lieut.-Colonel Boyd had been appointed a member of a committee to distribute several bales of blankets that had been sent from the North for the unsheltered Union soldiers held as prisoners of war on Belle Island, in the James River, just below Richmond. Col. Rose had seen those bales from the windows of Libby. He saw that they were tied with a good, strong rope, just such as he needed to make into a ladder to be used in getting in and out of the cellar from the kitchen fire-place. He sought Boyd and let him into the secret of the tunnel on the condition that he would secure the rope. Colonel Boyd got the rope that day and it was made into a ladder and used by the digging party.

"The completion of this tunnel was carried out almost identically as originally planned by Colonel Rose. I did but little of the digging,

as I had charge of the kitchen fire-place entrance the greater part of the time, yet I made frequent trips into the cellar and knew just exactly how matters were progressing. The only difficulties experienced in making this excavation resulted from a lack of tools and the unpleasant feature of having to hear hundreds of rats squeal all the time, while they ran over the diggers almost without a sign of fear. The earth was soft and easily removed. For this purpose the chisel was a fortunate possession, but hands and fingers were constantly in use in loosening and removing the dirt. As a receptacle for removing the earth, the digging party used some wooden cuspidors that had been taken from the rooms above. A rope was attached to each end of these and the man in the hole filled the box, after which his companions at the entrance pulled it out with one rope, the digger drawing it back with the other. In the manner three boxes were completely worn out. The dirt thus removed was carefully hidden under a pile of straw that had been stored in the basement. It will be remembered that our plan in the break for liberty was to tunnel about fifty feet and come up behind a board fence that would protect us from Libby and the guards, and then pass to the street through an unoccupied building that faced on Dock street. On the ninth night after this tunnel had been commenced, after having dug a hole just large enough for an ordinary sized man to squirm through, we supposed that we had gone far enough on the level. Then an upward shoot was made, with the belief that the digger would find himself behind the protecting fence. Yet we were not sure of the location, so rather than to make a misstep, the digger removed one of his shoes, shoved it through the little opening through which the stars were peering, and left it there. The next morning at daylight we looked out the window and to our disappointment found that the shoe was on the wrong side of the fence. Two nights more the men dug for liberty, and on the thirteenth night the tunnel was finished. On that night we could have gone out had we so desired, but we believed a fresh and early start would be to our advantage, so we closed up the hole and went up stairs for orders from Colonel Rose. It was decided that each of the fifteen in the digging party should choose a friend to go out with him, and when the thirty had passed through the hole its entrance was to be closed by Gen. Hobart, who had been let into the secret and given charge of the tunnel after we should have left, on condition that he would hold the secret one hour, thus giving us a chance to make good our escape. On the fourteenth night after starting the third tunnel and the fifty-second night after the entrance was commenced in the kitchen fire-place, our hopes and prayers were realized. Freedom was within our grasp and thoughts of home and loved ones came thick and fast.

"At eight o'clock that night the kitchen fire-place was opened for the last time.

"All of our arrangements had been made and Colonel Rose, after bidding farewell to his comrades, dropped into the basement and made his way through the tunnel. He was the first man out. I was at his heels, and we were followed by Capt. J.F. Gallagher, Major Fitzsimmons, Capt. Johnston and Lieut. Fislar in the order named. This is as far as I can remember the names in order. Major McDonald waited in the basement for Col. A.D. Streight, whom he had chosen as his picked friend, and, without malice or prejudice, I would like to say right here that this is the only connection with the Libby Prison tunnel that Streight had, so far as my knowledge extends. I never knew of an idea that he contributed and never heard his name connected with it as far as the digging party was concerned. In emerging from the tunnel, thence through the unoccupied building to Dock street, we went in parties of two or three, so that we would not particularly attract attention. As to the escape of others than Col. Rose and myself I have no definite knowledge. Col. Rose waited for me to come out of the tunnel and we passed to Dock street unnoticed. We walked two squares and then turned. Here we passed a hospital guard, who insisted upon knowing where Rose was from. Not receiving satisfactory replies the Col. was taken to the chief officer of the guard, where he must have made some clever explanations, for he was away again in half an hour. In the meantime I came to the conclusion that the quarters were too close for me in that vicinity, and I trudged on alone. The first night I made eight miles in the half-frozen swamps, and traveled seven nights before reaching the Union lines at Williamsburg. While traveling I was in ice and water to my knees the greater part of the time, and often it was up to my waist. I was about the fifth man to reach our lines-two had come in the day before and two the night previous to that. It was a happy day for me and I had the pleasure of meeting many more of my comrades within the next few days that had gone through that little hole.

"These are facts regarding the history of the tunnel from my recollections. I have been told that 109 officers got out that night before the secret became an open one in the building, causing a wild stampede for liberty, which attracted the attention of the Confederate guards and put a stop to operations. I know that General Hobart kept the tunnel a secret an hour by the watch, closing the kitchen fire-place after the first thirty had departed. Had the prisoners kept cool and collected, I believe that the prison would have been almost emptied before daylight next morning. At roll call on that day the escape was discovered, and before three days had

passed forty-eight of the escaping party were recaptured, including Col. Rose."

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The above narrative is practically the same as that told by Capt. J. Diehl, Co. C. Seventy-first Pa. Volunteers (at the entrance of the tunnel in Libby Prison War Museum). He was a prisoner at Libby at the time of the escape, and was personally acquainted with many of his comrades that participated in it. He had read many accounts of the tunnel, and says that the above is the most accurate narrative of the event ever placed in print.