

“We Were Surrendered”: Civil War Prisoners and the Trauma of Capture

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“It is impossible to describe the anguish of the troops when it was known that the surrender of the army was inevitable. Of all their trials, this was the greatest and hardest to endure.”¹

—Brigadier General Armistead Lindsay Long, Army of Northern Virginia

During the American Civil War, more than 409,000 Union and Confederate soldiers surrendered to the enemy and spent time in captivity as prisoners of war. Including soldiers who surrendered and were paroled in short order by their captors on the field of battle, the number rises to nearly 675,000. Given the number of soldiers who experienced captivity, scholars have done comparatively little historical analysis on this important aspect of the war. This fact is highlighted by the seminal work of William B. Hesseltine, which formed the basis of analysis of Civil War prisoners until the 1990s.² Hesseltine’s core arguments center on the belligerents’ political motivations regarding the prisoner-of-war issue and the inseparable interrelation between the psychology of warfare and prisoners’ treatment. More recently, Lonnie R. Speer

¹ Quoted in Robert E. Lee, *Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee: By His Son Captain Robert E. Lee* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1905), 152.

² William Best Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology*, 1930 (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1998).

and Charles W. Sanders have published important studies of the prisons and the prison system.³ While these authors draw heavily from prisoners' writings and examples of the hardships prisoners experienced, they are intrinsically more concerned with prisoner-of-war institutions and policies during the war. In addition, other historians have published monographs and articles on individual prisons or discrete categories of prisoners since then, including the treatment of captured black soldiers and women, among others.⁴ My article, by contrast, seeks to bring attention directly on the prisoners themselves and to one of the key factors in "becoming" a prisoner: the loss of identity, self, and agency from the moment of captivity.

My focus on the prisoners and the prisoners' experience brings direct attention to the prisoner condition, to what it meant to Civil War soldiers to surrender to their enemy, and to some of the trials they faced as they endured captivity. With the prisoners' perspectives at the heart of this article, I argue that captured soldiers during the American Civil War endured distinct feelings of shock, loss, and disorientation as they suddenly found themselves

³ Lonnie R. Speer, *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); and Charles W. Sanders, Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

⁴ Some excellent and representative studies of Civil War prisons include William Marvel, *Andersonville: The Last Depot* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994); George Levy, *To Die in Chicago: Confederate Prisoners at Camp Douglas 1862-65* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1994); James M. Gillispie, *Andersonvilles of the North: The Myths and Realities of Northern Treatment of Civil War Confederate Prisoners* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2008); and Roger Pickenpaugh, *Camp Chase and the Evolution of Union Prison Policy* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007). For the treatment of black soldiers captured by the Confederacy see Gregory J. W. Urwin, "'We Cannot Treat Negroes...as Prisoners of War': Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in Civil War Arkansas," *Civil War History* 42, no. 3 (September 1996); Gregory J. Urwin, editor, *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 2004). For a solid discussion on women prisoners, see Mercedes Herrera-Graf, "Stress, Suffering, and Sacrifice: Women POWs in the Civil War," *Minerva: Women & War* 16, no. 3 (July 1998).

transformed from active agents engaged in fighting a battle to effectively passive actors with little agency left them. From free and active soldiers, they became, almost in an instant, prisoners whose entire fate lay in the hands of their enemy. Further, relentless hardships compounded their loss of freedom as they were transported to prison and experienced a keen sense of culture shock as they encountered their enemy, soldiers and civilians alike, away from the battlefield. As hundreds of thousands of soldiers discovered, being a prisoner meant far more than a respite from the rigors of combat. Captivity meant the loss of freedom in a way few had imagined and fewer had considered as a possibility. Death or injury on the battlefield were accepted hazards of combat. For many, however, the prisoners' fate proved as hard to endure as did any other. In the first part of this article, I explore the personal state of prisoners at the moment of captivity, as described by them in the hours and days following their capture. I then shift my focus to examine how captors treated their prisoners and, finally, I explore prisoners' impressions of their enemy, whom many encountered personally only after their surrender.

In some cases, we are left with intriguing glimpses of the feelings and passions that motivated soldiers during the Civil War and hints at motivations of loyalty during the war, captivity, and their post-war lives. Such a case is exemplified by Horace Harmon Lurton who took the oath of office as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States on January 3, 1910, even though President Taft had "been criticized for having appointed a man as

old as Justice Lurton, who is now 66.”⁵ However, the fact that he was then the oldest Supreme Court Justice at the time he took office was not the most unusual aspect of his appointment. Rather, the events of his early adulthood set him apart from his peers in a unique way. As he took the oath of office, vowing to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, Justice Lurton must surely have given some thought to another time in his life, many years before, and to a different cause and country he had sworn to defend. Early in 1861, following the establishment of the Confederate States of America and the firing on the United States garrison at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, Lurton left Douglas University in Chicago and travelled south with his parents. Sending them on to their home in Clarksville, Tennessee, Lurton enlisted in the 5th Tennessee Infantry Regiment, then forming in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and served the Confederacy unwaveringly for the remainder of the Civil War.

Lurton quickly rose to the rank of sergeant major but was given a medical discharge in February 1862 due to “a lung infection, and perhaps a case of battle fatigue as well.”⁶ He recuperated in Clarksville with his parents for less than three weeks before joining the 2nd Kentucky Infantry Regiment after learning of Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant’s advance up the Cumberland River not far away. Now a lieutenant, Lurton arrived with the 2nd Kentucky

⁵ Special to *The New York Times*, “Justice Lurton Sworn In,” *The New York Times* (1857 – 1922), January 4, 1910, Horace H. Lurton Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

⁶ Leon Friedman, and Fred L. Israel, *The Justices of the United States Supreme Court 1789-1969: Their Lives and Major Opinions*. Vol. III (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1969), 1850.

in time to take part in the Battle of Fort Donelson in mid-February 1862. Trapped at Fort Donelson by Grant's army, the Confederates attempted to break out of their untenable position on February 15, launching a massive, early-morning attack on the Union right flank. Held in reserve for most of the morning, the 2nd Kentucky finally entered the battle around noon, just as the Union assault began to weaken. Marching into withering Union musket fire, Lurton's regiment finally halted at point-blank range and fired into the enemy with devastating effect. The "once solid Union firing position melted into the brush," chased down by Confederate infantry and the cavalry brigade commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest.⁷ Already a seasoned soldier, Lurton led his men across that field and risked his life for the cause he believed in.

However bravely Lurton and his fellow Confederates fought, the arrival of Union reinforcements and Grant's personal leadership changed the course of the battle that day, and the Confederates were forced to withdraw behind their defensive earthworks. In a controversial war council held later that night, the Confederate commanders determined to surrender the fort the following day. Cementing a legend and a promotion for himself, Grant had won the battle and earned the sobriquet "Unconditional Surrender" because of his response to the Confederate request for terms: "No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works."⁸ Lurton became a prisoner of war,

⁷ James J. Hamilton, *The Battle of Fort Donelson* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., Inc., 1968), 234.

⁸ Hamilton, *The Battle of Fort Donelson*, 316.

along with an estimated 12,000 fellow Confederates. After days under siege, probing attacks by Grant's army, and a vicious, even hand-to-hand battle, Lurton found himself suddenly cast as a non-combatant.

More specifically, Lurton became a prisoner of war, wholly subservient to the orders and treatment of his captors. This distinction is important. As a soldier, Lurton had always been subject to the orders of his superiors, but those orders aligned with his goal: the defeat of the enemy. Soldiers could also question their orders through proper channels and use of the chain-of-command if time and circumstance permitted. This was not so for prisoners of war. For prisoners, captivity fundamentally removed their essential purpose and their captors often had little or no inclination to heed complaints from their charges. Sergeant Major Robert H. Kellogg of the 16th Connecticut Infantry Regiment felt the loss of will and enforced subservience to the enemy when his garrison surrendered to Confederates at the Battle of Plymouth, North Carolina, in 1864. In the published version of the journal he kept as a prisoner, Kellogg wrote, "Instead of the calls to which we had been wont to listen, and the labor we had been accustomed to perform, we were but passive beings, subject to the will of a conqueror."⁹ For many soldiers, this fundamental change in condition was an important part of their experience as prisoners of war, as was how they learned to internalize and handle their new circumstances. For prisoners of war, the moment of capture, and the realization that they no longer had an active role to play in support of their cause, was fraught with mental anguish,

⁹ Robert H. Kellogg, *Life and Death in Rebel Prisons* (Hartford, CT: L. Stebbins, 1865), 34.

contradictions, internalized categorizations of experience, and denial. In some ways harder to bear than the rigors of combat, surrender to the enemy proved difficult for soldiers precisely because it relegated them to the sidelines and placed them under the direct control of the enemy they had fought and sometimes abhorred.

As General Long noted so poignantly, surrendering to the enemy was a very hard trial for most soldiers to endure. Being captured elicited deeply emotional responses from prisoners, whose initial experiences also confronted them with a complete loss of active will and a separation from the world they had known, replacing it with an utter subordination to their guards and exposing them to their enemy's culture and perspectives in a way many had never previously conceived. The shock of the sudden change in their circumstances also prompted prisoners to deflect, whenever possible, their role or responsibility in their own captivity. For example, the day after his capture, Lurton wrote from Dover, Kentucky: "Dear Mother, After fighting bravely for 48 hours we were surrendered by Gen Pillow. I am well and not wounded except a slight graze on my leg not at all painful. I will write when ever opportunity occurs. We will probably be sent to Illinois."¹⁰ Most significant is the complete abnegation of personal responsibility indicated by the phrase: "we were surrendered."

¹⁰ Horace H. Lurton to Sarah Ann Harmon, February 17, 1862, Lurton Papers. Emphasis added. I have rendered all quotes from primary source material as faithfully to the original as possible and have therefore not added "[sic]" throughout, as that would needlessly encumber this article and the clarity of the respective authors' words.

Similar language appears in other letters as well. Captain L. Mauney, commanding Company F of the 11th Arkansas Infantry Regiment wrote to his wife, “I drop you these lines to let you no that I am a prisoner of ware. We war surrendered at Island No 10 on the 8 ins arrived hear on 13 We ar tollerable well treated.”¹¹ James Sanders, captured in the same battle, also wrote his wife, “I this morning Seat my Self to Write you a few lines to Let you know that I am a prisner of War. We was Surrendered on the 8th Inst. at Island 10 and Brought to this place on 15th.”¹² After his capture, Lurton travelled north to Cairo, Illinois under guard, and from there to the prison at Camp Chase, Ohio. While he also complained of a lack of money and clothes, Lurton described his greatest problem, that he “can not be happy when the mind is not free.”¹³ As evidence that Lurton did not consider himself permanently out of the fight, he escaped from Camp Chase within a few weeks and joined a Confederate cavalry regiment commanded by General John Hunt Morgan. After raiding throughout Kentucky, Lurton and Morgan’s Cavalry engaged in the deepest Confederate incursion into Union territory during the summer of 1863, where Union forces captured Lurton again during operations along the upper Ohio River. Ironically, had Lurton not escaped from Camp Chase the first time, he would have been exchanged with the rest of his regiment, which was soon reconstituted and took part in the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862.

¹¹ L.F. Mauney to N.A.E. Mauney, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

¹² James M. Sanders to his wife, April 20, 1862, Camp Chase Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

¹³ Horace H. Lurton to A. W. B. Allen, March 7, 1862, Lurton Papers.

Prisoners struggled to cope with their new captivity, often in a state of shock, depression, and anger resembling the five stages of grief and loss defined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.¹⁴ While it is not possible at this remove in time to determine how closely prisoners' experiences matched her model, the surviving evidence from their letters, diaries and memoirs, both published and unpublished, reveals very similar emotional states and strongly implies that sudden captivity affected prisoners as deeply and personally as the death of family, friends, or comrades. While the particular experiences of any soldier, officer or enlisted, Union or Confederate, who became a prisoner of war varied, they all shared feelings of depression and shock over the event itself, and a strong sense of loss for their previous freedom, which often manifested in expressions of regret at the loss of personal possessions. They frequently revealed a strong need to defend their actions or the circumstances that led to their captivity and attested to the deep-felt humiliation associated with capture. Like Lurton's account, Civil War diaries and letters frequently only allude to personal feelings and emotional states, but they nonetheless reveal how deeply their new status affected them.

Depression and shock were natural reactions for most prisoners, particularly at the moment of their capture and for the first days or weeks of captivity as they internalized and assimilated their new situation. At times, soldiers expressed their feelings of depression to family

¹⁴ For more detailed information on the Kübler-Ross Model, see Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: MacMillan, 1969).

and friends. Following his capture at the Battle of Shiloh, Private Seth J. Crowhurst of the 12th Iowa Infantry Regiment wrote his father, “The white flag was finally raised and we were prisoners, we were forced to ‘lay down’ the arms we had ‘taken up in the defense of our country. And suffer ourselves to be marched to a southern prison.”¹⁵ Of his personal reflections and feelings about the surrender, he wrote, “As we started away I saw officers high in rank shedding tears.” Of himself, he added: “I shed no tears but that nights walk was a lonely and sad one to me, I was thinking of home wondering if I would ever get back thinking it was disgraceful to be a prisoner of war and wondering how we would be treated.”¹⁶ Crowhurst later described how “officers wept as they waved their handkerchiefs in token of surrender.”¹⁷^[17] Perhaps ironically in the vicissitudes of war, Lurton and Crowhurst may even have encountered each other, as the 12th Iowa formed part of the left flank of the Union counterattack on Fort Donelson in the Union Fourth Brigade, Second Division under Brigadier General Charles F. Smith. Crowhurst’s regiment therefore directly assaulted the positions of the Confederate Second Brigade under the command of Brigadier General Simon B. Buckner, Sr. in which Lurton served.

Prisoners’ feelings of shock rendered them almost incapable of accepting what was happening to them and resulted in expressions of stupefaction and numbness. Union cavalry captured Captain Robert Bingham, commanding Company G of the 44th North Carolina

¹⁵ Seth J. Crowhurst to his father, October 24, 1862, Crowhurst Family Papers, Civil War Document Collection, U.S. Army Military History Institute. Crowhurst received several promotions during his military service and mustered out of the military as Fourth Sergeant on January 20, 1866.

¹⁶ Seth J. Crowhurst to his father, November 5, 1862, Crowhurst Family Papers.

¹⁷ Seth J. Crowhurst, “Reminiscences of a Union Soldier” (unpublished memoir), Crowhurst Family Papers.

Infantry Regiment, on June 26, 1863 at Hanover Junction, Virginia during the Gettysburg campaign. Of his surrender, Bingham wrote, "I was stupefied at the time we were captured – not stunned, for I had my wits about me – but I cared for nothing – felt nothing."¹⁸ Private Henry Harrison Eby of the 7th Illinois Cavalry Regiment, a mounted orderly on the staff of Major General John M. Palmer was captured in the early evening of the second day of the Battle of Chickamauga. Of his emotions on finding himself a prisoner, he later wrote, "I cannot describe the state of my mind just then, but guess I felt some like the boy, after getting a good whipping which he did not deserve, very despondent."¹⁹ Later, as he tried to get some rest and contemplated his condition, he recalled thinking that he "felt like a criminal under death sentence on the night previous to execution, as considered confinement in southern military prisons equivalent to a death sentence."²⁰ Eby's feelings of hopelessness matched Bingham's explicit references to emotional numbness. Eby also evinced depression when he wrote, "I feared that I could send no letters to the folks at home, and if ever a person had the blues I had them that night of Sept. 20, 1863."²¹ Like most soldiers, Eby was mentally ready and prepared to be wounded or even killed in service, but never expected to become a prisoner of war. On this point, Eby admitted, "being made a prisoner of war was something that I had never thought to experience."²²

¹⁸ Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers, The Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁹ Henry Harrison Eby, *Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons-1861 to 1865* (Mendota, IL: Henry Harrison Eby, 1910), 126.

²⁰ Eby, *Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons*, 128.

²¹ Eby, *Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons*, 128.

²² Eby, *Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons*, 128.

The sense of numbness continued long after the initial shock of being captured. As he traveled by steamer to Norfolk, Virginia, Bingham remembered, “during the sail down the Pamunky & York I was in a sort of comatose state, nummed. I did not admire the beauties of the river scenery. I cared nothing for it. I never felt so before.”²³ His diary recorded a complete state of shock, denial, and disbelief. On reaching the Union Prison at Norfolk on June 29, 1863, Bingham wrote, “I felt stolid – and even the sight of the prison, the iron grating & heavy iron door made no impression – caused no shudder. I wondered that it did not.”²⁴ Captain W. A. Wash of Company I, 60th Tennessee Infantry Regiment was captured by the Union at the Battle of Big Black River Bridge in Mississippi on May 17, 1863 and transported to the prison at Johnson’s Island, Ohio. In his memoir, he encapsulated similar feelings of shock, lack of will, and submission: “I and many others shed tears for a few moments. . . . powerless now. We are prisoners of war, subject to the will and mandates of those into whose hands we have fallen.”²⁵

The clear demarcation from being a free soldier to becoming a captive was echoed by other soldiers as well, who drew clear distinctions of how they felt before and after their surrender. About a week after his capture, Kellogg wrote: “The 24th, was the Sabbath, and, what strange vicissitudes one short, week had wrought for us. In not many things could, we say it was a blessed contrast. Then, we were free, now we were prisoners; then we had plenty of food and

²³ Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

²⁴ Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

²⁵ W. A. Wash, *Camp, Field and Prison Life: Containing Sketches of Service in the South, and the Experience, Incidents and Observations Connected with Almost Two Years Imprisonment at Johnson’s Island, Ohio, Where 3,000 Confederate Officers were Confined* (Saint Louis, MO: Southwestern Book and Publishing Co., 1870), 48-50.

comfortable shelter, now we had neither, or at least but little to satisfy our hunger.”²⁶ This reflects not merely a sense of defeat, but an awareness of their fundamental change in condition and the associated personal feelings of loss that were inherent in their new status as prisoners.

Anger and grief intertwined in prisoners’ reactions to the necessity of their surrender. Thomas Dabney Wier, a corporal in company B, 14th Mississippi Infantry Regiment, poignantly described the anger fueled by shock that he and other Confederates felt when they learned their commanders surrendered Fort Donelson to General Grant and they were now prisoners of war: “Morning at last came – The feelings of the Soldiers Cannot be described. When they beheld the flag floating from our works as a Sign we had been Surrendered²⁷ – Some broke their guns others threw them in the river & many raved & cursed. I gave vent to a Small oath for which ‘I hope’ the recording angel droped a tear upon it as he wrote it down & blotted it out forever against me’ twas the prompting of a heart which beat only for the South.”²⁸ After venting his anger and describing that of his fellow soldiers, Wier wrote of the sense of grief and resignation felt by the garrison: “All regret having to Surrender.”²⁹ He ended this entry almost plaintively, describing the exhaustion of the Confederate prisoners, as much mental as physical: “Night

²⁶ Robert H. Kellogg, *Life and Death in Rebel Prisons* (Hartford, CT: L. Stebbins, 1865), 39.

²⁷ Note the verb construction and disassociation implicit in this phrasing, which is similar to many other references prisoners make to their capture by the enemy, both distancing themselves from the act of surrender and simultaneously repudiating any personal responsibility for it.

²⁸ Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 16, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia. Protestations of loyalty to the South or the North by prisoners, as noted here and in many other letters and diaries of prisoners throughout the war, are common. While a full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article, excellent treatments of these themes can be found in James M. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, NY: 1997); and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *Why Confederates Fought: Family & Nation in Civil War Virginia* (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC: 2007) among others.

²⁹ Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 16, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

comes on we lie down to sleeps. it rains in the boys faces but they Sleep too Sound to know it until morning when they wake to find themselves & Blankets perfectly wet.”³⁰ Wier’s experiences and descriptions encapsulated the situation experienced by Lurton as well, as they served in the same brigade on the same part of the battlefield.

Not all prisoners were satisfied with venting their anger after their capture. Some simply refused to accept surrender at the time and did not give up easily, as much in anger at their circumstance as to continue the battle. John R. King of the 25th Virginia Infantry Regiment was captured during the vicious fighting at the Bloody Angle at the Battle of Spotsylvania. Although he had thrown down his gun, King also described his refusal to accept his new circumstances as he “and others of our Company enraged because we were taken did rash things. With a big sharp knife in hand I cut and slashed around in a disorderly way, until a very young Yankee boy appeared who looked up into my face so kindly and lovingly and spoke so gentle to me that my foolish anger vanished.”³¹ As with his companions, King had also no doubt realized the futility of further resistance.

Prisoners frequently expressed a resignation to their fate as they tried to accept their new status. Bingham’s captors first took him to Norfolk, Virginia, where he began a private diary meant for his wife, Della Worth Bingham. Of his capture, he wrote, “well, we did our duty,

³⁰ Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 16, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

³¹ John R. King, *My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons Written from Memory* (Clarksburg, WV: Stonewall Jackson Chapter No. 1333 United Daughters of the Confederacy), 25-26.

and no action of our own could have altered the result. It was simply inevitable and as the will of God we submit, tho' humanly it is painful – humiliating.”³² Bingham revealed in these few words how hard it was to accept his new situation; he could only fathom it as the will of God, to which there was no appeal. Some prisoners used diaristic therapy to cope with their captivity. One such was Captain William D. Wilkins of the 46th Pennsylvania Infantry, captured during the Battle of Cedar Mountain, admitted when he wrote, “I may as well to divert my mind from constantly dwelling on my sad fate and on the hardships which surround me, commence a record of my life of captivity.” Wilkins’ despair is evident, as is his hope that the experience may cause future trials to pale in comparison: “If I live to be released its journal may enable me to bear future trials with patience.”³³ It is worthwhile to note here that this entry was written on August 12, 1862, just three days after his capture and at a time in the war when many soldiers expected a relatively speedy exchange and return to duty.

Prisoners’ loss of freedom was painfully clear to them from the moment of their capture. Not only were they suddenly under guard, their status changed from soldiers to prisoners, but their captors also immediately stripped them of their weapons, as well as other items of personal property in many cases. Prisoners often expressed personal connections to their weapons and other items of uniform issue or steeds taken from them, some of which became personified in the minds of the soldier, whether animate or inanimate. Immediately after his capture, Bingham

³² Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

³³ William D. Wilkins, diary, August 12, 1862, William D. Wilkins Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

recalled his captors disarming him as they took him prisoner. "I hated to give up my sword," he wrote, "but it was a common one, & being my associate only since the war & not connected with my life before the war, I let it go with comparative composure – tho' I did want to hang it up in my study after the war & show it to my children." The sidearm he surrendered, however, evoked far deeper feelings because of its connection with his antebellum life. Of its loss, he wrote, "but my pistol. I had had it so long. It had afforded me so much amusement. I had practiced with it with so many friends – girls . . . but the loss of my pistol . . . I felt it most keenly. But I had to submit not only to the loss but to a sort of a cursing from Col. Spears for my tardiness about giving up my arms."³⁴

Prisoners often expressed sentimental attachments to the loss of possessions when they were captured. For example, when his mount was taken from him, Eby wrote that he "bade good-bye to my faithful horse, rubbing my hand down over her honest face as we parted. But now at our final separation came over me a more piercing sense of the loss of my honest four-footed friend, that was always so willing and ready to do her duty."³⁵ At the risk of being caught as a spy, and in a bold attempt to escape capture, B. T. Holliday of Chew's Battery in Stuart's Horse Artillery obtained civilian clothes from a slave at a nearby farm. He later wrote, "took off my grey uniform, which with my cadet cap, I left in a pile in the patch of corn. On the discarded jacket was a half dozen Virginia Staff buttons that I had recently paid forty dollars for in

³⁴ Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

³⁵ Eby, *Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp and Prisons*, 128.

Staunton. I was loath to leave them behind, but I could not risk having them found on my person.”³⁶

As part of their efforts to accept captivity, prisoners did more than deflect responsibility for their surrender onto their commanders. They also strove to defend the actions of their unit prior to its surrender and place it within the context of an unavoidable result after they had expended every shred of possible resistance to the enemy. Their efforts to explain and defend themselves to family and friends frequently revealed this need. For instance, Henry Brown, a private in Company F, 27th Virginia Infantry Regiment, wrote a friend, Ann Bolton of Roseland, Virginia, to explain that his capture by the Union was only occasioned because of his wounds: “Fell in the hands of the yankees on the 5th day of last July being severely wounded.”³⁷ The night before his surrender, Wier recorded the resolution felt by the Confederates, “Night Comes on We Stand on our Arms. Evry one expects bloody work with comeing morn – Stearn determination to do or die Sits ion evry brow – the Boys have worked & fought hard with out Sleep & but little food for 5 days. But not a murmer escapes their lips.” However, the next day Wier defended his garrison’s capitulation: “it was folly to have held out longer. for our forces were out numbered 5 to one & then were worn out with hard work, Exposure, cold & want of Sleep. And the enemy was reinforced during the night by 20,000 fresh troops.”³⁸ Regardless of the military merits of the surrender of the Confederate garrison, the

³⁶ B. T. Holliday, “Account of My Capture,” 7 (unpublished memoir), B. T. Holliday Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

³⁷ Henry Brown to Ann Bolton, April 24, 1864, Bolton Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

³⁸ Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 15-16, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

juxtaposition of these two diary entries, one written before the surrender and one immediately afterwards, shows Wier's altered perception of his circumstances and the situation, as well as his need to clarify that the garrison had only surrendered because further resistance was futile.

Often, soldiers focused not merely on the futility of resistance, but on the fierceness of the fighting and the certainty of death had the battle continued. Assigned to guard railroad bridges that secured the Army of Northern Virginia's communication lines, Bingham and his small Confederate force of about eighty men were assaulted by the Union 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry, two companies of cavalry from California, and artillery numbering nearly 1,500 men. Forced to surrender "after a most desperate and hand-to-hand conflict with pistol, sabre and bayonet."³⁹ Bingham described in detail his men's desperate fighting, while at the same time partly ascribing their surrender to fatigue: "My men fired badly. They were very unsteady from their rapid march from Taylorsville; but with this disadvantage we repulsed them handsomely. . . . Then [they] bro[ugh]t a much larger force across the river at a ford. . . . I watched . . . being certain that we would all be captured or slain unless our cavalry came to our relief, & this I did not at [all] expect. . . . It was useless."⁴⁰ Of his surrender, Seth Crowhurst wrote, "we were entirely surrounded. There was no way of escape. To attempt it would be death."⁴¹

³⁹ Charles M. Stedman, "Forty-Fourth Regiment" in *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-'65*, Vol. III edited by Walter Clark (Goldsboro, NC: Nash Brothers, Book and Job Printers, 1901), 25.

⁴⁰ Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

⁴¹ Seth J. Crowhurst, "Reminiscences of a Union Soldier" (unpublished memoir), Crowhurst Family Papers.

Even in the midst of battle and during some of the fiercest fighting of the war, soldiers' basic humanity and consideration towards the less fortunate often remained. Virginian John R. King described acts of mercy in the midst of the carnage he witnessed when captured during the vicious fighting at the Bloody Angle at the Battle of Spotsylvania, even as he proffered his explanation for how he became a prisoner through no fault of his own. King described how, while defending a line of breastworks against a strong Union attack, his regiment was suddenly attacked from the rear. In surprise, he looked and saw "a long line of Yankee soldiers with bayonets pointing at us, saying: 'Boys, Surrender!' They never fired again, but stood looking at us good naturedly. Of course we had to throw down our guns." Although they could have easily killed most or all of the Confederates, the Union soldiers chose to take them prisoner, an act of mercy for which at least one Union soldier paid with his life. Regarding this incident, King reported a Confederate killing a Yankee before throwing down his gun and another Confederate shot in the chest as he raised his gun to fire.⁴²

More than a means of learning to accept how and why they became prisoners, defending the circumstances that resulted in their captivity served a practical purpose as well: it helped prisoners fend off criticisms from other soldiers who had never experienced the humiliation of defeat and who often sharply criticized those who surrendered. Many of these soldiers felt that those who became prisoners had not fought hard and long enough. For instance, Colonel

⁴² John R. King, *My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons*, 24-25. This soldier, named John Keener, survived the shot because a case over his heart, in which he had kept a picture of his daughter, stopped the bullet.

Launcelot Maury of the 24th Virginia Infantry wrote in his diary on February 5, 1864 that even though he had been “most terribly wounded in action at the head of my Regiment was forced to go on duty,” and continued “yet I do this and will do anything else for the welfare of my country most cheerfully. I cannot be conquered. No! Not by the whole Yankee nation.” Of those who surrendered, he wrote a few weeks later, “as a general rule men who are taken prisoner are good for nothing – else finding themselves in a tight place they would fight their way out instead of surrendering to the enemy.”⁴³ After the fall of Petersburg on April 2, 1865, Maury was captured at the Battle of Sailor’s Creek on April 6, 1865 along with most of the survivors of his regiment. The remnants of the 24th Virginia, numbering 22 men and no officers, surrendered to the Union with Lee at Appomattox Courthouse.

Despair and a tremendous sense of loss accompanied surrender, whether in the face of insurmountable odds or due to error amidst the fog of battle. Soldiers experienced surrender under a wide variety of circumstances but, seemingly regardless of how they fell into the hands of the enemy, prisoners expressed the need to defend themselves, their actions, and their unit, as well as ascribe blame for their surrender to fatigue, lack of supplies, or the numerical superiority of the enemy. Prisoners’ descriptions of their capture, as related through letters and memoirs, share common traits of anger, disbelief, sorrow, helplessness, and acceptance: all traits associated with emotional states following a great loss. In this case, the loss was nothing less than their freedom. From predominantly volunteer soldiers, prisoners came suddenly and completely

⁴³ Richard Launcelot Maury, diary, February 5, 1864, Richard Lancelot Maury Diary, Virginia Historical Society.

under the absolute control of another, who could treat them with kindness, cruelty, or indifference depending on circumstance, mood, and personal proclivities.

The journey to prison was often rough. It consisted of long, hard marches, little or no rations provided by the enemy, cramped conditions in railroad cattle cars, and the ever-present danger of the prisoners' guards shooting them as they made their way inexorably to the prison that would serve as their home until they were paroled, exchanged, or the end of the war came. The guards treated prisoners kindly at times, but quite harshly at other times. Regardless, at all times prisoners were under the complete control of their enemy and subject to their enemy's need to secure them and transport them to prison quickly. Whether surrendered *en masse* or taken on the battlefield, the process was much the same, chiefly differing in the speed with which the enemy handled them. Immediate disarming, as noted previously, was a normal procedure that prisoners often recorded: "After being searched for pocket Knives, Bowies, Pistols, & etc We were crowed on the upper & lower deck of the Stemr Stephen Decatur."⁴⁴ Guards removed their prisoners from the battlefield as quickly as possible, usually taking them to a holding area nearby before starting them on their journey to prison. After their capture, King and his comrades "were . . . taken through the Yankee lines . . . through at least two more lines of battle. . . . Those near were disorderly. It seemed as if every fellow thought he should assist in taking the prisoners, 3000 of us to the rear." Afterwards, they "were conducted

⁴⁴ Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 17, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

into an old field where we remained during the night. Here we found the greater number of our Regiment who had been made prisoners on the 5th of May in the wilderness.”⁴⁵

Prisoners captured in the midst of battle experienced rapidly changing circumstances that placed them in the hands of the enemy, often under dangerous and confusing circumstances. Their enemy conducted a rapid process of securing them, stripping them of their weapons, and sending them to the rear as quickly as possible. After Confederates captured Captain Wilkins at the Battle of Cedar Mountain, he wrote: “Fell into the hands of the 14th Tenn. I was immediately seized dismounted, stripped of all except my . . . pocket book & hurried to the rear. Passing over the battle ground strewn with dead & wounded.”⁴⁶ Wounded soldiers frequently became prisoners as the vicissitudes of battle brought the area where they fell or sought refuge under enemy control. Corporal W. H. Merrell of the 27th New York State Volunteers, who was wounded in the chest at the Battle of First Manassas, related just such an instance. After being shot, Merrell sought refuge in a stone house along with other wounded Union soldiers when “a body of troops halted at the stone building, entered with bayonets, and demanded a surrender! They were to all appearances as much intimidated as though they had

⁴⁵ John R. King, *My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons*, 25-26.

⁴⁶ William D. Wilkins, diary, August 12, 1862, William D. Wilkins Papers.

anticipated a successful resistance. None was made, however.”⁴⁷ Although the situation readily lent itself to a tragic end for the wounded Union soldiers, Merrell reported, “no violence was offered to the prisoners, and in this connection, I may state that I saw no ‘bayoneting’ whatever committed by the enemy at Bull Run. Our arms were delivered up, and a few moments afterward I was led and half-carried away to the quarters of Gen. Beauregard, situate at a distance of perhaps half a mile.”⁴⁸

A sense of reciprocity on the part of captors sometimes underlay acts of kindness. As Captain Sumner Upham Shearman of the 4th Rhode Island Volunteers related after his capture at the Battle of the Crater in July 1864, one of his captors, in a successful attempt to cause him distress, told him about the harrowing reality of life at Andersonville prison to which he was headed. Immediately afterwards, however, another Confederate guard told Shearman that “he did not believe in insulting a prisoner.” This captor continued “that he had made up his mind never to insult a prisoner, because he had the feeling that he might some time be in the same position,” clearly evincing a regard for his charges in hopes of receiving like treatment if he

⁴⁷ W. H. Merrell, *Five Months in Rebelldom, or Notes from the Diary of a Bull Run Prisoner, at Richmond* (Rochester, NY: Abner & Dabney, 1862), 12. Merrell originally published this account in the Rochester Evening Express, to which he had sent regular “diary” entries of his war experiences from the time of his enlistment to the time of his release from captivity, a period covering roughly nine months. Merrell’s reference to “bayoneting” is a specific refutation of accounts printed in Northern newspapers and magazines such *Harper’s Weekly*. His refutation is particularly telling in the context of its original and subsequent publication, both of which occurred during the early years of the war. While his later account of captivity is not lacking in instances of neglect or ill treatment on the part of his captors, Merrell’s account appears to be an attempt to describe objectively his experiences on the battlefield and as a prisoner.

⁴⁸ Merrell, *Five Months in Rebelldom*, 12.

became a prisoner.⁴⁹ Likewise, following his capture, Corporal Wier wrote, “they Said they would treat us well for they did not know when they would be in a like fix, and they said they never wanted to meet us in battle again.”⁵⁰ While directly speaking to the combat toughness of the Confederates, the Union treatment of their enemies and their remarks also implied a strong desire to receive similar treatment should the situation be reversed in the future. In a similar vein, Roger Pickenpaugh wrote that, “the majority [of prisoners] recorded generally kind treatment from their original captors in the field. As they traveled farther from the front lines, the prisoners encountered guards who were much less compassionate. The captives attributed the change to the fact that the men at the front respected their enemies and could sympathize with their situation.”⁵¹ Pickenpaugh also discusses prisoners’ transport from the battlefield to the prison, but focuses more on the system and technicalities of the process, founding his evidence as much on official records as guards and prisoners’ letters. However, his larger purpose is to explicate the functioning of the northern prison system and its treatment of prisoners rather than prisoners’ perceptions of their capture and captivity.

In this vein, another item that Pickenpaugh does not mention specifically is that practical considerations of reciprocal treatment accounted for as much compassion on the field as respect, especially as many Union and Confederate armies consistently faced the same

⁴⁹ Sumner Upham Shearman, *Battle of the Crater and Experiences of Prison Life* (Providence, RI: Rhode Island Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society, 1898), 17-18. For more on Andersonville, see William Marvel, *Andersonville: The Last Depot* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁵⁰ Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 17, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

⁵¹ Roger Pickenpaugh *Captives in Gray: The Civil War Prisons of the Union* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 80-81.

opponents in both the Eastern and Western theaters of the war. Even so, there is considerable evidence to show that captors exhibited as much hatred and animosity as respect toward their prisoners resulting from hatred of the enemy and the passions of the battlefield. There is no simple answer to why prisoners received kind treatment at times on the battlefield. After his capture at the Battle of First Bull Run, Merrell noted that, while he received kind treatment and care for his wounds on the battlefield after his capture, this “may have been exceptional, for I was afterwards subjected to frequent insults from private soldiers, though kindly treated, in general, by the ‘Confederate’ officers.”⁵² That some captors were considerate of their charges is certain, however, as William Tillson of the 84th Illinois, captured at the Battle of Chickamauga, confirmed when he wrote, “Some of the rebels are very kind give part of their rations to some of our hungry boys.”⁵³ In a similar vein, Bingham wrote, “all the fighting men treated us well, as well as could be.”⁵⁴

Hunger and lack of food in the immediate aftermath of their capture, which Union and Confederate soldiers alike frequently reported, had two basic causes. First, the rapid movement and orderly chaos of Civil War armies as they maneuvered before, during, and after a battle largely precluded their ability to provide food for prisoners from their commissary stores. In fact, it was common practice in both armies to provide their soldiers with only three days’ worth of rations before any major movement or engagement to keep the commissary and the bulk of

⁵² Merrell, *Five Months in Rebelldom*, 12.

⁵³ William H. Tillson, diary, September 21, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary, The Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵⁴ Robert Bingham, diary, June 30, 1863, Robert Bingham Papers.

the supply wagons out of the army's way. Second, the captors' principal concern when taking prisoners was to provide for their security and transport to the rear as quickly as possible; supplying the prisoners with provisions fell much lower among the army's priorities. Virginian John R. King wrote that others of his regiment whom he rejoined after his capture "were very hungry having had little to eat for four or five days and here is where Mr. Flat Cake came in advantageously. I divided it among old comrades and it appeased their hunger to some extent."⁵⁵

Representative of many prisoners' experiences, Captain Wilkins recounted scant food and treatment bordering on neglect as well following his capture: "Marched through the night until 8 am – a repetition of insults from citizens and troops . . . then recd the first meal since our captivity 24 hours before, being raw rancid bacon & hard crackers. Then we were loaded together into a cattle car, covered with manure, & kept herein until the train arrived to take us to Richmond."⁵⁶ Colonel Carlton of the 89th Ohio Infantry, captured on September 20, 1863, at the Battle of Chickamauga wrote his wife, "We arrived here last night, pretty well used up. I received a couple of pretty smart raps from . . . bullets, which in addition to I was of sleep, poor food and general disgust renders me sore cross and very much dissatisfied with my situation."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ John R. King, *My Experiences in the Confederate Army and in Northern Prisons*, 26. King was captured on May 12, a week after his comrades from the 25th Virginia were captured during the Battle of the Wilderness. From his statement, these soldiers received some food during the first couple of days of captivity, but none during the intervening time, which was when the Union army maneuvered from the Wilderness to Spotsylvania.

⁵⁶ William D. Wilkins, diary, August 12, 1862, William D. Wilkins Papers.

⁵⁷ Caleb Henry Carlton to Sadie Carlton, October 1, 1863, Caleb Henry Carlton Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

In addition to suffering from hunger and hardship as they travelled to prison, prisoners were also at risk of the guards shooting them. Private Tillson reported that “our boys are too independant set of fellows for prisoners. One was shot because he would not get off the beat of the guard when ordered to do three times.”⁵⁸ Captured at the Battle of Allatoona Pass in Georgia on October 4, 1864, Lieutenant Edward E. Dickerson of the 44th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment described a personal incident: “I got one of the guards to go to a house near by with me to see what we could find to eat. I bought a few potatoes. They had nothing else to eat themselves. The Reb Officer came after me and ordered me back to camp. Said he would have me shot. I told him ‘Alright’, but just wait until I get these potatoes, there is no use shooting a man on an empty stomach, and I am so thin your men could not hit me now, anyway.’ He made awful threats but I got the potatoes.”⁵⁹ Instances such as these were common as small contingents of guards tried to move larger bodies of prisoners from the battlefield to the rear and, ultimately, whatever prison or holding area awaited them. The balance between compassion and control of their charges was often a fine line and prisoners never knew when their guards would use deadly force to control them.

Soldiers’ first real encounters with the civilian population of the enemy often occurred soon after their capture. This was particularly true of Southern soldiers, many of whom had

⁵⁸ William H. Tillson, diary, September 27, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.

⁵⁹ Edward E. Dickerson, diary, October 11, 1864, Edward E. Dickerson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. As a note of interest, the 44th Wisconsin Infantry was not part of the battle. Dickerson had been assigned to the 18th Wisconsin Infantry, but had just received his promotion and orders to report to the 44th Wisconsin. He was captured during the Battle of Allatoona Pass, however, while he was still waiting for transportation to his new regiment.

never been North before or during the war, with certain notable exceptions such as those serving in the Army of Northern Virginia during the Maryland and Pennsylvania Campaigns of 1862 and 1863, and Morgan's Raid into Indiana and Ohio concurrent with Lee's Pennsylvania Campaign. By contrast, tens of thousands of Union soldiers gained at least some experience with Southern society and culture because Northern armies operated in the South throughout the war. Many Southern and Northern civilians encountered the enemy close up for the first time as prisoners of war were transported far from the front lines. Prisoners' diaries often describe these encounters and record their impressions of enemy civilians and, in many cases, the reactions of the civilian population to their first sight of the enemy, at close range and in no position to cause harm. Thomas Wier boarded the steamer *Stephen Decatur* for his journey to prison following his capture at Fort Donelson. Near St. Louis, Missouri, the steamer stopped to refuel with coal and he described the positive reactions of local Northerners in this border state at their first sight of Southern soldiers: "The citizens Show a decided preference for the South. . . . the Ladies who were more oppen in their Simpathies – bought fruit & Tobacco and threw on board the boat."⁶⁰

The prisoners discovered that many civilians had a keen interest in obtaining souvenirs from them whenever opportunity presented and in seeing what the enemy looked like. Wier wrote that when they stopped at St. Louis, they were approached by large numbers of civilians who "were all very anxious to get any thing of remeberances from 'Seceshee' or Dixie –

⁶⁰ Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 21, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

Mississippi buttons Seemed to set them all on fire – and in their eagerness to get to get them would run the risk of falling into the river.”⁶¹ Corporal Merrell also mentioned the curiosity of collecting souvenirs, especially buttons, and described the exchange of a small secession flag for buttons from his coat sleeve.⁶² Practically mirroring Merrell’s remarks, William Tillson remarked wryly on some civilians’ preconceptions of their enemy: “One woman in Georgia it is said came fifteen miles to see us. Said she had herd that Yankees had horns finally acknowledged us to be fine fellows and fed it is said several of the boys.”⁶³ Humorously, Wier described another encounter with Northerners as the Confederate prisoners were taken from the cattle cars that carried them the last major leg of the journey and marched through Chicago, Illinois. As they “marched through the Streets to the Barracks at Camp Douglas – Crowds pressed round to ‘See the Secesh’ and looked Surprised at not finding them with claws & a tail – We Whistled Dixie as we passed through the Streets to Camp Douglas.”⁶⁴

Civilians frequently turned out to watch prisoners march past. Of his experience, Kellogg wrote, “crowds of women and children lined the roadside, apparently eager to get even a glimpse of the ‘yankees,’ of whom they had heard such fearful things, but we marked what seemed to us a look of surprise, as they surveyed what was unquestionably a set of decent, respectable looking fellows.”⁶⁵ In his excellent treatment of Camp Douglas, George Levy

⁶¹ Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 21, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

⁶² Merrell, *Five Months in Rebelldom*, 15-16.

⁶³ William H. Tillson, diary, September 27, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.

⁶⁴ Thomas D. Wier, diary, February 23, 1862, Thomas D. Wier Papers.

⁶⁵ Kellogg, *Life and Death in Rebel Prisons*, 36.

describes the prisoners' journey to the prison, and being paraded "through the frigid streets of Chicago." This is not Levy's principal concern, however, and the bulk of his work deals with the horrendous conditions Confederates endured there as prisoners. In addition, a recurring theme throughout is that "contrary to Civil War romanticism, the blue and the gray did not feel as though they were brothers or even fellow citizens," and he details the grim realities of prisoners and their high mortality due to the course and callous treatment by the guards.⁶⁶

Not all interactions between civilians and prisoners were as harmonious, and prisoners often endured taunts and other verbal abuses. After his capture at the Battle of the Crater, Captain Shearman of the 4th Rhode Island Volunteers was marched through the streets of Petersburg as Confederate soldiers took the prisoners to the rear. Of this experience, Shearman later wrote, "In the morning the Confederates took the officers and the negroes who had been captured in battle and arranged us in an order like this: four officers, four negroes, four officers, four negroes, and so on, until all the officers and negroes were formed into a line of that character. Then they marched us all over the town of Petersburg, through the streets, to show us up to the inhabitants. The idea they had in view, I suppose, was to humiliate the officers," by intermingling them with black soldiers. As the Confederates paraded the captives through the streets, many of the local civilians taunted them. Shearman later recalled: "We passed one house, in the doorway of which stood a white woman, with a colored woman on either side of her, and

⁶⁶ George Levy, *To Die in Chicago: Confederate Prisoners at Camp Douglas 1862-65* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1999), 41 & 51.

as We passed I heard her say, "That is the way to treat the Yankees; mix them up with the niggers, they are so fond of them, mix them up."⁶⁷

The purposeful arrangement of the prisoners, intermingling white Union officers with black soldiers likewise captured in the battle, seems clearly intended to have been a means of humiliating the Northern officers and the Southern lady's comment plainly resonates with tones of racism and disgust at Northern white soldiers for serving alongside black soldiers. Her jibe may not have quite succeeded, however, at least for Shearman who "thought to myself that she was very much in the same position that we were," as she was surrounded by blacks herself. More heatedly, "Another woman whom we passed, called out, saying that if she had her way she would put all those Yanks in front of a battery and mow them all down."⁶⁸ Tillson reported, "one woman in South Carolina threw rocks at us while passing. Also did a little boy in Georgia while passing a plantation."⁶⁹ While soldiers on the battlefield may have developed a respect for their enemy, the sectional divide and hatred of the enemy had certainly grown among segments of the civilian population after years of war, and they vented their anger on prisoners when they could.

Southern soldiers and civilians alike relished taunting Union prisoners with the fact that the South remained defiant after years of warfare and frequently described their fight as a struggle for independence. For instance, Tillson wrote that after reaching Atlanta "as well as

⁶⁷ Shearman, *Battle of the Crater and Experiences of Prison Life*, 16-17.

⁶⁸ Shearman, *Battle of the Crater and Experiences of Prison Life*, 16-17.

⁶⁹ William H. Tillson, diary, September 27, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.

other places it was throwed up that Seward said that we would whip them in three months and had not done it in two years and could never whip them.” In a similar vein, a Confederate officer told him, “we are a free people fighting for our independence.” Comments such as these from Southern soldiers and civilians are reflective of the wide dissemination of Seward’s views as well as a keen recognition of a distinct cultural and national divide between the North and the South. After noting these remarks, Tillson added ironically, “little did I think when I passed through Ringold the first time with the Union Army that it would be my fate soon afterwards to pass over the same road as a prisoner of war.”⁷⁰ Julius Ramsdell of the 39th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment also described taunting from civilians as he was marched through the streets of Petersburg after his capture on August 19, 1864, at the Second Battle of Weldon Road south of Petersburg. In his diary, he recorded: “While we were marching through the town, men and women and children came out to the gates of the houses and doors of the few shops there to see the ‘Yanks’ as they called us. At the same time singing out ‘You’ve got Petersburg now a’int you?’ ‘What youins come down here to fight weins for?’” Unchastened, Ramsdell wrote, “we answered by inquiring the price of flour etc, and told them we should soon come into the city in a way they would not rejoice over so much.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ William H. Tillson, diary, September 27, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary. Tillson was referring to United States Secretary of State William H. Seward. At an impromptu speech given by Seward, following the fall of Vicksburg to Union soldiers on July 4, 1863, Seward admitted: “I thought that the war might be ended in three months.” Seward had expressed this belief in a published letter to Charles Francis Adams (U.S. ambassador to Britain) dated November 30, 1861: “this insurrection is sustained by its hopes of recognition in Great Britain and in France. It would perish in ninety days if those hopes should cease.” Frederic Bancroft, *The Life of William Seward*, vol. II (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers: 1900), 401 & 506.

⁷¹ Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 20, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers, The Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

What they saw of the enemy's countryside often surprised prisoners, especially Union soldiers who were frequently astonished by the relative poverty of many of the Southern rural areas through which they passed. Lieutenant Edward Dickerson of the 44th Wisconsin Infantry recorded a remarkably complete and perceptive description of Georgian civilians in his diary as he marched through that state following his capture at Allatoona Pass. He noted in his first such entry, "the country is so very poor and rough and the people are so very poor, what we call the "Poor Whites."⁷² Two days later he expanded on this, writing, "the country we have been marching through is very poor and inhabited by the poorest, most shiftless set of Whites I have ever seen. They have nothing to eat and do not know how they are going to live this Winter."⁷³

Other surprises for Dickerson included the lack of men in the communities he saw due to the large number of Southerners serving in the Confederate army and the living conditions of those left behind: "there were none but women and children at home or in sight, and such homes! It is hard to describe to anyone that has not been in the country – no floors, no windows, no doors, hardly any roof and that of bark, no furniture of any kind, no clothing to speak of, a fire out of doors to cook by when they have anything to cook." Amazed at the utter destitution of the local population, Dickerson marveled that "ninety per cent of their clothing for the women is just a single cotton shift, very much like the old style of underwear called a chemise. It comes just below the knee. The women are bare headed, bare armed, bare legs and

⁷² Edward E. Dickerson, diary, October 10, 1864, Edward E. Dickerson Papers.

⁷³ Edward E. Dickerson, diary, October 10, 1864, Edward E. Dickerson Papers.

bare feet, and they all chew the snuff stick or tobacco. The children are nearer naked, if possible, than the women.”⁷⁴ Dickerson was shocked by the impoverished standard of living, the famished condition of the citizenry and the threadbare condition of their clothing. He also remarked on women’s habit of chewing snuff sticks or tobacco, clearly using that as a distinctive point of contrast with his own, perceived cultural norms.⁷⁵

Other prisoners had much different impressions of the South and described urban centers that, if not rich and bustling at the time because of the war, nonetheless reflected a more affluent and urbanized population than Dickerson experienced in rural Georgia. For example, Julius Ramsdell described Petersburg following his capture, giving a much different picture of the South, even after many months of a grueling siege: “in many places we saw where the houses and stores had been pierced and torn by the iron messengers sent from the ‘Petersburg Express’ Nothing seemed to be going on in the city. There were many large and handsome stores but were mostly closed. Fruit and bread seemed to be the principle articles of trade. Some of the boys who had money got the guard to buy them apples, and bread, three of the former for a dollar and a loaf of bread for two dollars.”⁷⁶ Others noted a rich agricultural countryside, such as Chaplain Charles A. Humphreys of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry Regiment who, after his capture on July 6, 1864, in a cavalry skirmish against Mosby’s Raiders at Mt. Zion Church near Aldie,

⁷⁴ Edward E. Dickerson, diary, October 12, 1864, Edward E. Dickerson Papers.

⁷⁵ For a perspective on Northern nationalism that excluded the South as culturally backward and economically stymied by slavery, see Susan-Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

⁷⁶ Julius Ramsdell, diary, August 20, 1864, Julius Ramsdell Papers. Ramsdell here refers to the shelling of Petersburg by the Union army using large mortars, with nicknames such as *Petersburg Express* and *Dictator*.

Virginia, was transported through the south to his prison. Passing through South Carolina, he wrote, “our oppressors had not the justification of poverty, in their supplies of corn at least, for as we travelled through their country we could see that the fields, which before the war had yielded their rich tribute to King Cotton, now waved with abundant corn. But they were planted for other mouths than ours, and their tasselled tops only waved in mockery as we passed.”⁷⁷

While on their way to prison, prisoners frequently found themselves engaged in political discussions with guards and civilians alike. Following his capture at the First Battle of Manassas, Corporal Merrell related that “at some villages the women thronged about the cars, offering refreshments to the wounded, both Union and Confederate, but more particularly to the former, whom they seemed to regard with mingled curiosity and favor. I suspected that the sympathies of some were even more deeply enlisted than they dared to avow.” He also reported, “we were invariably addressed as ‘Yankees,’ and there were frequent inquiries respecting ‘Old Scott, the traitor,’ and ‘Old Lincoln, the tyrant.’ The ladies generally expressed a benevolent desire to ‘get hold’ of the hero of Lundy’s Lane, in order to string him up.”⁷⁸

Southerners frequently questioned why Union soldiers came south and asked about their motivations. Merrell noted in his journal that the question had become stereotyped

⁷⁷ Charles A. Humphreys, *Field, Camp, Hospital and Prison in the Civil War, 1863-1865* (Boston: Press of Geo. H. Ellis Co., 1918), 125.

⁷⁸ Merrell, *Five Months in Rebelldom*, 15. Brevet Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, in command of the Union army at the opening of the Civil War served as a Brigadier General commanding a Brigade of Infantry at the Battle of Lundy, fought during the War of 1812 on July 25, 1814 near Niagara Falls, Ontario.

already, implying that he and other prisoners had been asked this question numerous times as they journeyed from the battlefield as prisoners. At one point, Merrell related a conversation with the daughter of a Confederate major who, he said, “came up to the window from which I leaned, and asked if she could do anything for me; and then added, ‘What did you come down here for?’”⁷⁹ He then wrote that he replied, “‘to protect the Stars and Stripes and preserve the Union.’ My questioner then proceeded, after the uniform custom, to berate Gen. Scott. ‘That miserable Old Scott—a Virginian by birth—a traitor to his own State—we all hate him!’” After some thought, Merrell wrote that she said, “she thought I could fight as well for the ‘Stars and Bars,’ as for the Stars and Stripes. I playfully reminded her that she had just denounced Gen. Scott as a traitor to his own State, and if I should fight for the ‘Stars and Bars,’ I should be a traitor to the State of New York! This trivial argument was evidently a poser. Oh!. responded she, I had not thought of that!”⁸⁰ Although perhaps embellished, Merrell’s description of these conversations is representative of other interactions between civilians and prisoners as they passed by, especially early in the war. Another example comes from Captain Wash, who described a rather free political interchange between captors and captives shortly after the surrender: “The Yankee boys soon mixed all among us, and were anxious to know why we rebels were fighting so ardently against ‘the best government the world ever saw.’ Some would argue the subject matter like philosophers, others would get mad and fly off. There was an entire freedom of intercourse,

⁷⁹ Merrell, *Five Months in Rebelldom*, 15.

⁸⁰ Merrell, *Five Months in Rebelldom*, 15.

and the Federal officers came in, too, and, when they could distinguish them from the privates, talked with our 'big officers' about things in general."⁸¹

Confederate guards also debated the issue of slavery with their prisoners, especially the North's decision to enlist black soldiers into its regiments in May 1863. William Tillson described one such debate between Union prisoners and their Confederate guards, some of whom played cards with the prisoners: "his name the rebel is Smith and one of our boys Jones. So Smith & Jones to our dislike keep up a continual disturbance. Smith said he would feel mighty cheap to have a nigger to fight beside him. Throwing up the arming of the nigger. The racket caused much cursing." He also wrote that same day about a conversation with a Georgian woman: "At one place quite an Aristocratic elderly lady came down to the train and conversed with us. Said you Noble men of the North West ought not to be under the Lincolns rule that we ought to be with them we were not Yankees but Western men Similar to Southerners. That only those of New England and Middle States to be Yankees. Said the Lincoln to be a monster and she hated him worse than a snail. She use to like to visit Washington but not since Abe Lincoln had been there." This woman also berated Yankees for inciting slave insurrection, "Horrible to try to turn their slaves against them. Believed God to be upon their side." This particular conversation appears to have angered Tillson; it certainly caught his attention as he devoted considerable space in his diary to it. He continued, "while talking with us she put on a dignified and contemptible air and sometimes was very sarcastic. Also said she was not exalting over a

⁸¹ W. A. Wash, *Camp, Field and Prison Life*, 50.

fallen foe, that was not their way. Her way made some of the boys angry, and some unpleasant things were said.”⁸²

The experience of being captured, transported far into enemy territory, and encountering the enemy’s civilian population was hectic, often confusing, as prisoners had little idea what to expect, frequently surprising, and even surreal for many soldiers. The transition from a free man to a prisoner, at the disposal and mercy of their captors, was a humiliating, troubling, and deeply disturbing experience. Long before their arrival at prison, soldiers experienced hardships, trials, and dangers as they travelled from the battlefield. Aside from the ever-present danger of being shot, prisoners frequently suffered from hunger and exposure to the elements, largely due to the enemy’s inability to provide for them on or near the battlefield, or while they were in transit to their prison destinations. Even when prisoners were able to purchase food and other provisions with their own money, this only barely staved off what otherwise amounted to near-starvation rations before they reached the prisons. Further, their experiences often included surprising interactions with enemy soldiers and civilians that frequently exposed underlying ideas of cultural difference and sectional schism that tended to broaden the gulf between the prisoners and their captors. Regardless of the particulars of individual experience, however, the very act of surrender left an indelible impression, leaving prisoners shocked and emotionally overwhelmed as they faced their utter loss of freedom.

⁸² William H. Tillson, diary, September 27, 1863, William H. Tillson Diary.