Rats an' Poker on Johnson's Island
by Horace Carpenter, lieutenant in the 9th Louisiana Battalion

Johnson’s Island prison housed roughly 2500 mostly Confederate officers, who often found novel ways to keep their minds occupied; while they, many from the deep South, endured hunger and extreme cold, especially in January, 1864, when several prisoners died.


Carpenter gathered up this conclusion of soldiers: . . . when not engaged in trying to kill you, a Yankee was a first-rate fellow. You see, we knew so little of each other before the war . . . I am sure that the men both North and South will bear me out in the assertion that as soon as your enemy captured you he became your friend as far as consistent with his duty. We were soon to learn the distinction between front and rear. **In order to know how to treat prisoners, you should have a hand in capturing them.**
In giving my experience as a prisoner of war for eighteen months, sixteen of which were spent in the military prison on Johnson’s Island, in Lake Erie, I shall confine myself strictly to an individual experience, or to such events as came under my immediate observation. . . (p. 705)

...Johnson’s Island is situated about three miles north of Sandusky, Ohio, in Lake Erie, and was the place selected by the United States Government for the custody and storage of Confederate officers, and it was well adapted to its purpose. Notwithstanding frequent attempts, I cannot remember a single instance of a prisoner who escaped.
The prison was situated on the west end of the island, the prison officers' quarters on the outside, together with the inclosure containing the prison buildings, occupying most of the available space.

. . . They were the ordinary frame houses, weather-boarded but unsealed on the inside, and it can be readily noted that while they were well enough in summer, except towards the last, when overcrowded, they offered but slight protection against the rigors of a Northern winter. (p. 709)

The (ordinary frame houses-ED) were better, however, than outdoors, as they protected us from wind and rain. The sinks were situated in the rear of the buildings, one for each block, and but two or at most three men were allowed to visit them at one and the same time, and this notwithstanding that the blocks contained on an average over two hundred and fifty men each.

It was the severity of the winters that told so heavily on us. Many were from the extreme South, and some had never seen a fall of snow.

Coming from New Orleans, and wearing such clothing as was adapted to its climate in the month of September, the first day of January, 1864, was a revelation. **On that day the thermometer marked twenty-five degrees below zero, and the writer was not more warmly clad than when now on a summer's night in that same city he writes these lines.**
So intense was the cold that the sentries were taken from the walls and the ice king kept watch and ward for Uncle Sam. The big gate could have been left open and few of the prisoners would have taken the chance of escape in view of almost certain death. The entire winters were bitter cold, and from our exposed position I am satisfied that the cold was much more intense than on the mainland. Occasional gales would now and then sweep across the island, testing the strength of our buildings, and it was during one of these that two officers took refuge in a dry well as affording the greatest protection against the storm. **One of these, on being asked by the other to offer up a prayer for their preservation, replied that he was acquainted only with the Lords Prayer, and there was nothing in that to cover the emergency.**

Other steamers, loaded with excursionists, would occasionally run close in, prompted by curiosity, and taunt us with their shouts and jeers. Their favorite pastime was, or seemed to be, the singing of patriotic songs, which was admissible, and I could find no reasonable cause of complaint as to the sopranos and contraltos, but when basso-profondos and barytones musically expressed their intention to rally round the flag, I thought of thousands of Northern men already engaged in that occupation far to the front, who, if not so vocalistic, were at least equally patriotic.

. . . I was advised at once to study Piersons Ten Commandments (NOTE: named after the commander of the prison-ED). The first eight of this decalogue, with the exception of No. 6, referred to matters of police and fatigue duty only, but the rest were of a different character and were well worth committing to memory in order to avoid serious accidents. They were as follows:

**Order No. 6.** All persons will be required to remain in their own quarters after retreat (sundown), except when they have occasion to visit the sinks;
**Order No. 7.** lights will be extinguished at taps (10 PM);
**Order No. 8.** and no fires will be allowed after that time;
**Order No. 9.** No prisoner will be allowed to loiter between the buildings and the north and west fences, and they will be permitted north of the buildings only when passing to and from the sinks nor will they approach the fences anywhere else nearer than thirty feet, as the line is marked out by the stakes.

**Order No. 10.** Guards and sentinels will be required to fire on all who violate the above orders. Prisoners will therefore bear them carefully in mind. (p. 710) and be governed by them; to forget under such circumstances is inexcusable, and may prove fatal.

. . . It was on this side of the inclosure that Captain J. D. Meadows of the 1st Alabama Regiment was shot by the guard on Post 13 and severely wounded.

. . . At the time I was at Johnson's Island there were about 2500 officers in confinement, and the quarters were well crowded. The sleeping arrangements consisted of bunks in tiers of three each furnished with the usual army bedticks stuffed with straw and for
Sleeping arrangements consisted of bunks in tiers of three, each furnished with the usual army bedtick stuffed with straw, and far superior to the earth and ditch which had been our beds for months previous to our capture.

The crowded condition of the prison necessitated that two men should occupy each bunk, which had the redeeming feature in winter that the occupants were sheltered by two blankets instead of one. It was an evil genius that selected my bunk, for it lay just under the roof, and sometimes the snow, finding its way in, would cover me with a wet blanket. I have a vivid recollection of the result in the form of an attack of lumbago that sent my forehead to my knees and put it beyond my power to assume the position of a soldier for many days. "With the thermometer well down in the tube, scantiest of bedclothing, and no fire, you can well imagine what portion of tired nature's sweet restorer fell to our lot." Under the circumstances it is not strange that pulmonary and rheumatic complaints should have prevailed to a great extent. I know one man who is now, after the lapse of twenty-five years, chained to his chair hopelessly crippled, a souvenir of his imprisonment.

Rations of wood were brought in daily, and to each mess was delivered an ax and a buck saw. These were collected and taken out each night, and should any mess fail to return them no wood was brought in until the missing tools were given up. This happened once during my stay, but private enterprise, looking to the escape of a few, had to give way to the public weal, and the ax and saw showed up. (p. 711)

Details from the mess were made each day for police and fatigue duty, and the most fatiguing duty, as I remember it, was sawing wood; not that there was so much to saw, but the most of us were not used to it. Shortly after reveille a non-commissioned officer and guard entered the room and we were mustered for roll-call.

Sometimes the guard would bring us the newspaper, giving double-leaded information, oft-times revised and corrected in subsequent issues. After roll-call we were free to kill the monotony of confinement as best we could, all parts of the inclosure being for our use except the north side and beyond the dead-line. Retreat sent us to our quarters, and, knowing the penalty, we were strict observers of this rule.

It was for an alleged violation of this rule that Lieutenant Gibson of the 11th Arkansas lost his life. He was visiting some friends in a neighboring block, and hearing retreat sounded, he started to his room, and was about to enter when the sentinel ordered him back to his quarters. He endeavored to explain that he was then going into his room, but the explanation was evidently unsatisfactory. The sentinel fired and killed him.
The only antidote to the terrible ennui of prison life was occupation, and very few were without employment of some kind. In fact, during the latter part of our stay it was an infallible sign of surrender when men became listless and no longer cared for the things which had heretofore been either their work or their recreation.

Work-benches sprang up in every available spot; rings were made of gutta-percha buttons; rulers and oyster shells were transformed into charms, rings, and breast-pins, equal in artistic design and execution to the best specimens of professional handiwork. In one instance, with nothing better than the wood-pile on which to draw for material, one of the men fashioned a violin; and a four-bladed penknife, complete in all its parts, attested the skill of one of my messmates. Articles manufactured by the prisoners were in demand and found a ready sale, the medium of traffic being the prison officials, who sold them on the outside, returning the proceeds to the manufacturer, who was enabled to better his condition until such time as money lost its purchasing power.
I do not remember that a visitor was ever allowed inside the prison walls, but I do recall that a wife once obtained permission to visit the island, and, standing on the outside of the pen, was allowed to look at her husband as he stood on the landing of the stairs of Block 2. I do not think the termination of the war would have been delayed five seconds had they taken him under guard to the wife or allowed her to enter the prison.

Books and newspapers were admitted after due examination, and with many of us formed our sole refuge. Classes were opened, old studies resumed or new ones begun.

A first-class minstrel band known as the Rebellonians gave entertainments from time-to-time and played to crowded houses. All the popular airs of the day were conscripted and the words rewritten to express our peculiar views of the situation. The dramatic element had its innings, and "I think that Peeler's Battle of Gettysburg had the unprecedented run of three weeks, at one performance per week." We never succeeded in putting on a first-class ballet. These performances took place in the afternoon, for, as before stated, the guards had very pronounced views as to our being absent from quarters after retreat.
All letters to and from the prisoners were opened and examined by our jailers, and, if found in order, were stamped with “Examined” and the initials of the man who had read the letter and passed it. Our correspondence was limited only as to the number per diem, space, expression of political sentiment, and ability to pay postage. With these exceptions there were no restrictions. We were allowed to write on one side of a half-sheet of paper, and our correspondents were subjected to the same rule. (p. 712).

I have received notifications that letters addressed to me were held because they violated this rule, and have been instructed to inform the writers accordingly. To be placed on the black-list meant stoppage of our mail, and in order to realize the severity of the punishment you must put yourself in the position of a prisoner with letters your only communication with the outside world. It must have been from this cause that I acquired a terse, jerky style that has clung to me ever since.

Sentimentally, cleanliness is indeed next to godliness; practically, it is conducive to health and comfort, and we tried to enforce its unwritten laws. **“When a “fresh fish” (NOTE: nickname for new arrivals-ED) was assigned to our room he was initiated by being required to take a bath and to boil his clothes,** long experience in army matters having proven that this was the only way of getting rid of that energetic little pest known as the Pediculus vestimenti. It was one of the species crawling on a lady’s bonnet-string that suggested an ode to the poet Burns. As our clothing gradually grew worse, soap and water seemed to lose their powers, and we resorted to dyeing such garments as needed renovation, using for that purpose a liquid dye. You simply emptied the vial into a pot of boiling water, immersed the garment to be operated on, and voila!

One of my mess was a Lieutenant Blank, who knew some things very well, and he, wishing to improve the appearance of an old flannel shirt, sought out the hospital steward who sold the liquid and put the question, **“What is it you fellows dye with here? The steward, supposing that he had some inquisitive statistician on his hands, answered that they died of different things, but thought that pneumonia had the call just then. Well, said B., give me a two-bit bottle. Of course the story leaked out, and the lieutenant ran the gantlet.”**

Some mornings afterward B. mounted a chair and made a speech. In crude but unmistakable words, and with a depth of meaning in their utterance, he announced that the next man who said pneumonia in his hearing would have him to whip. Most of us, knowing the difficulty of the undertaking, were so much on our guard that we did not dare to cough or to give in any manner the least suggestion of a pulmonary complaint, lest we should have cause to regret our indiscretion.

Retreat found us in our quarters, and at 10 PM, taps extinguished our lights. I have heard that for a violation of this rule the guards would often fire into the block. Believing this to be true, I can vouch for its having happened at least once during my stay.
It was during the evening that we gathered around the stove or the long table and discussed matters of interest, the war, the absorbing question of exchange, swapped yarns, some of the number being exceptionally good raconteurs, or listened while some Truthful James taxed our credulity to the verge of courtesy. And here, lest I forget it, I desire to apologize in behalf of our stove. I have known it, when doing its best, fail to melt the frost on the window-panes less than eight feet distant.

Taps sent us to our bunks, except such night-owls as grouped together and conversed in undertones. **Sometimes a voice would start in song, another and another would join, and though neither voices nor execution were of a high order, the wet eyelids of many a homesick Reb would pay tribute to Home, Sweet Home, or Only Waiting.**

It was at night, alone with our thoughts, that we carried the heaviest load, when fancy bridged the distance that separated us from the homes that had been silent to us for many months. I do not know how nostalgia ranks as a separate disease, but I do know that it handicaps a man terribly in his struggle for life.

Later on, during my convalescence in the hospital, **one of my command lay near me, and I could hear him murmur to himself, I shall never see home again; and, steadily sinking, Lieutenant Stains turned his face to the wall and died.** During the earlier portion of our stay we constantly looked forward to exchange, and it was this hope that served in a great measure to mitigate the ills of our prison life. The grape-vine spoke to us of little else. The main feature of this prison telegraph was its complete unreliability. As I remember, it was never correct, even by accident; but it sang songs of exchange and release, and, while feeling the notes to be false, we yet liked the music and hoped it true. It was towards the fall of 1864 that I began to give up all hope of exchange, and could see no prospect of release save the close of the war, or death. I looked the matter squarely in the face, and could see no rational reason why the North should either desire or consent to an exchange. . . . (p. 713).

Our treatment by the officers of Hoffman’s Battalion (Brig. General Hoffman oversaw the Commissary of all Northern prisons.-ED) was, as far as I know, courteous enough; and as to the enlisted men who guarded us, my principal objection, aside from their propensity to shoot, lay in the fact that most of them could not address us as Rebels without qualifying the term with the adjective “damned.”

Our food was abundant, owing to our ability to purchase from the post sutler and the hucksters who came into the prison daily, besides which many were in receipt of supplies from friends and relatives in the North, and hence were entirely independent of the prison rations and fed on dainties not found on the prison menu. The men looked well and strong.
**Just when the change took place I do not remember, but it came suddenly.** I connect it in some way with the spring of 1864. We bade a final adieu to sutler and purveyors of every kind, and realized that a limited ration would hereafter be our only supply; that we must content ourselves as best we could with such quantity as the Government saw fit to give. Money could buy nothing in the way of food; and speaking for myself **I reached at last that stage when, were it in my power, would have bartered gold for bread, ounce for ounce.**

We were forbidden to write for food, and it was only by strategy that, if written, such letters reached their destination. It sometimes happened that the post surgeon responded. . . . (he) would allow such packages as reached the island to be delivered to their owners. (p. 714).

He evidently had a professional dislike to sickness and suffering. The vital question with us was the victuals question. As to the daily ration, I remember that it consisted of a loaf of bread and a small piece of fresh meat. Its actual weight I do not remember, if I ever knew . . .

Coffee was unknown, and I remember on several occasions far apart receiving two potatoes and an onion. If these were given medicinally the dose was homeopathic, and it was certainly scurvy treatment. As the months passed on, a marked change was noticeable in the appearance of the men.

They became depressed and listless, and unsuspected traits of disposition cropped to the surface. The parade-ground was dotted with gaunt, cadaverous men, with a far-away look in their eyes and with hunger and privation showing in every line of their emaciated bodies. It was believed by many among us that this mode of treatment was enforced as a retaliatory measure, and this belief certainly received strong support when, looking across the bay, we saw a city whose waste alone would have supplied our wants.

**I have seen a hungry Reb plunge his hand into the swill-barrel of some mess, and, letting the water drain through his fingers, greedily devour what chance had given him if anything.** **Speaking for myself, and well aware of what I state, I assert that for months I was not free from the cravings of hunger. One-half of my loaf and the meat portion of my ration was eaten for dinner. I supped on the remaining piece of bread, and breakfasted with Duke Humphrey. I sometimes dreamed of food, but cannot remember in my dreams ever to have eaten it, becoming, as it were, a sort of Johnson’s Island Tantalus.

**When we arrived on the island the rats were so numerous that they were common sights on the parade-ground. Later on they disappeared. Many of the prisoners ate them.** **If asked if I myself have ever eaten one I answer no, because to cook a rat properly
(like Mrs. Glasses hare) you must first catch him. I have sat half frozen in our mess kitchen armed with a stick, spiked with a nail, but was never fortunate enough to secure the game. A dog would have served the purpose better, but the chances were that some hungry Reb would have eaten the dog.

I had entered the prison weighing over 140 pounds, and then weighed less than 100. To a demonstrator of anatomy I would have been invaluable as a living osteological text-book. The prolonged confinement had told severely on us, and the men could not but yield to its depressing influence.

. . . Many of us were far into the second winter of our confinement, and with all hope of release gone we had nothing left only to wait for the end, whatever that end might be; and it was weary waiting.

It was generally known among us that some mitigation of our condition would be afforded such as took the oath of allegiance, and as this meant increased food and better clothing some few availed themselves of the offer.

. . . It is small wonder, then, that many found their way into the prison hospital (then managed by Confederate physicians, prisoners like ourselves), and thence to the prison grave-yard. . . . headboards were placed at the graves of our dead, and as very many of these were carved in our room I have some personal knowledge as to their being numerous. (p. 715)

Carpenter writes about being exchanged and going home, experiencing the extreme contrasts:

It was early in January, 1865, that the writer fortunately found himself occupying a cot in the hospital and slowly recovering from an attack of fever. . . and one day in February the big gate swung open and a number of us took up our line of march across the frozen bay homeward bound and bid a final adieu to a spot unmarked by a single pleasant recollection.

We left Sandusky knowing nothing, caring nothing, of our route so long as our course pointed towards Dixie. The passenger-coaches which brought some of us sixteen months before were replaced by box-cars which we warmed by packing the floors with earth, on which we built a fire which afforded a minimum of heat with a maximum of smoke. It was at Grafton, West Virginia, that we side-tracked long enough to enable us to sit regularly at table and indulge in the novelty of a first-class meal . . . One of ours stated that he felt the first mouthful of food swallowed by him strike on the sole of his foot. . . It was here or at some neighboring station that we met a batch of Federal soldiers returning from the South.

We learned that they were from Andersonville, and as usual we mingled together, comparing notes, and indulging in the usual chaff which was generally a feature of such meetings. As we separated they expressed their intention of again visiting us, and in turn were solicited to bring their guns with them. This practice of poking fun, in spite of its frequency, was rarely carried beyond the bounds of good temper.

A slow, fatiguing, and uncomfortable trip brought us via the outskirts of Baltimore to Fort McHenry, and thence to Point Lookout . . . Thinking that we had exhausted the capacity of prison life for harm, we were little prepared for the sight which met our eyes as we entered this place, but seeing these unfortunates we felt that we stood in the presence of men who had touched depths of suffering that we had not reached.

**It was entirely unnecessary to mine for information the nuggets of misery lay scattered on the surface and told the pitiful story without assistance from human tongue.** Since that time I have conversed and compared notes with men who had a story of imprisonment to tell, and am satisfied that, as compared with the enlisted men at Point Lookout, Elmira, Rock Island, Camps Morton, Chase, and Douglas, the officers at Johnson’s Island merely tasted purgatory; the men went beyond that.

A few hours too many and we were checked off and counted and loaded on the steamer that was to carry us to City Point, the last stage of our journey.

Finding myself seriously ill . . . , I left by rail, going as far as Charlotte, N.C., where that mode of transportation came to an abrupt termination. Blazing with fever and dazed from its effects, in company with several who were bound for the extreme South, I took up the tedious walk which slowly carried me through the State of South Carolina, and it was when nearing Milledgeville, GA., that I
the tedious walk which slowly carried me through the State of South Carolina, and it was when nearing Milledgeville, Ga., that I thought for the first time that the eruption which had made its appearance on my body was in some manner connected with the smallpox on the steamer; and all doubts, if any existed, were dispelled when, on reaching Montgomery, Ala., I was ordered to the pest-house. It was in April, 1865, that General Wilson captured the place; but thanks to the pest-house, backed by a parole, I was unmolested, and once more started for home.

I was indeed a veritable tramp walking, or having an occasional lift on a wagon, and wholly dependent for food on the bounty of such as lived on my line of march; often scanty, for the South had been raided until it seemed as though all had been swept away. It was when nearing Jackson, Miss., that I learned of Appomattox and that our service had been in vain; that the voluntary contribution of death and suffering had been given to a Lost Cause. We were all prisoners of war. (p. 717)

Two years to the month had passed since I was locked up in Port Hudson, and during that period I had heard actually nothing from my home. I opened the gate, and, walking up the lane that led to the house, I could see the female portion of the family sitting on the gallery, none missing. In fact, there was a little niece that had put in an appearance since my departure. Soldiers were too common a sight to excite curiosity, but a half-look of recognition swept over their faces, and as they rose from their seats to get a better view I dropped my valise and sung out, "Come on! it's me!" I know I should have said "It is I," but I didn't. Then followed a rush and a hugging match, in which the odds were four to one against me. (p. 718)

Postscript – Henry Shepherd remembers:

While life on the island implied gradual starvation of the body as an inevitable result of the methods which prevailed, I found food for the intellect in devotion to the books which had been supplied to me by loving and gracious friends whose home was in Delaware. There was no lack of cultured gentlemen in our community, and in their goodly fellowship I applied my decaying energies to the Latin classics, Blackstone's Commentaries, Macaulay's Essays; and found my recreation in Victor Hugo, whose "Les Misérables" had all the charm of novelty, having recently issued from the press. The poet-laureate of the prison was Major McKnight, whose pseudonym, "Asa Hartz," had become a household word, not with comrades alone, but in all the States embraced within the Confederacy. I reproduce "My Love and I," written upon the island, and in my judgment, his happiest venture into the charmed sphere of the Muses.

1. "My Love reposes on a rosewood frame
(As 'bunk' have I)
A couch of feathery down fills up the same
(Mine’s straw, cut dry).

2. “My Love her dinner takes in state,
And so do I,
The richest viands flank her plate,
Coarse grub have I.
Pure wines she sips at ease her thirst to slake,
I pump my drink from Erie’s limpid lake.

3. “My Love has all the world at will to roam,
Three acres I.
She goes abroad or quiet sits at home,
So cannot I.
Bright angels watch around her couch at night,
A Yank, with loaded gun keeps me in sight.

4. “A thousand weary miles now stretch between
My Love and I –
To her this wintry night, cold, calm, serene,
I waft a sigh –
And hope, with all my earnestness of soul,
Tomorrow’s mail may bring me my parole.

5. “There’s hope ahead: We’ll one day meet again,
My Love and I –
We’ll wipe away all tears of sorrow then;
Her love-lit eye
Will all my troubles then beguile,
And keep this wayward Reb from ‘Johnson’s Isle.’”

Useful Local Links:

John Yates Beall of Charles Town, WV – Who Lincoln Hanged – 7908 words
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John Yates Beall The Video – 382 words
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Rats an’ Poker on Johnson’s Island – 6319 words
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Lincoln, Beall and The Gallows – 2775 words
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Page from Horace Carpenter’s Service Record – Confederate Service records – National Archives


detail from “Officers of the 114th Pennsylvania Infantry playing cards.” Library of Congress


Johnson’s Island Depot


photo of group of men – Jim Surkamp

men standing in cold


Worn-out socks


Johnson’s Island, battery


Captain on an excursion boat


2 prisoners sleep on Johnson’s Island


Depot of Prisoners
Johnson’s Island Prison Sutler’s Tickets.

Sentry warning


prisoners sitting around a fire
Rideing, William H. “Garrison Life at Governor’s Island, New York Harbor.”


bullet carved into “acorn”

Carrie
Hoffman.Miller7.p53.jpg


women visitors

Rebellonions


writing by candle


lice
Insetti, Pediculus vestimenti. [Femmina del Pidocchio delle vesti]. Tav. 27, cm 92 x 67, L. Maggi. "Leopoldo Maggi (1840-1905) – una lezione per immagine"
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The Rat Islands (Aleut: Qaḵum tanangis) are a volcanic group of islands in the Aleutian Islands in southwest Alaska, between Buldir Island and the Near Islands group to its west, and Amchitka Pass and the Andreanof Islands group to its east, at about 51°47'17"N 178°18'10"E / 51.78806°N 178.30278°E. The largest islands in the group are, from west to east, Kiska, Little Kiska, Segula, Hawadax or Kryssei, Khvostof, Davidof, Little Sitkin, Amchitka, and Semisopochnoi. The total land area of the Rat