Castle Thunder: the Confederate Provost Marshal's prison, 1862-1865

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CASTLE THUNDER:
THE CONFEDERATE PROVOST MARSHAL'S PRISON, 1862-1865

BY

ALAN LAWRENCE GOLDEN

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APPROVED BY

W. Harrison Daniel, Thesis Director
Professor of History

Ernest C. Bolt, Jr.
Professor of History

William Henry Thorn III
Associate Professor of History
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Civil War is, in many respects, one of the most tragic, yet fascinating periods of this nation's history. During the last one hundred years scholars have studied numerous aspects of this conflict in great detail. The subject of this thesis, however, has received meager attention. The focus of this study is the Provost Marshal's prison in Richmond, Virginia, called Eastern District Military Prison or, as it is more commonly known, Castle Thunder. Castle Thunder was the only prison of its kind in the South as most of its inmates were political prisoners, deserters, and criminals, rather than captured enemy soldiers. During the war Castle Thunder became a cause célèbre for the Confederate Government. So notorious did it become that an investigation into reports of inhumane treatment occurred in April, 1863.

As an initial step in the development of this thesis, it is necessary to pose some general questions.
Among the important questions that must be answered are the following:

1) To what extent was Castle Thunder an important prison which contributed significantly to the Confederate war effort?

2) What was the relationship between Castle Thunder and the Confederate prison system in general?

3) How was Castle Thunder perceived by various groups such as the Confederate leaders, the people of the South, and the prisoners themselves?

4) Who was responsible for the conditions and treatment within the prison?

In attempting to answer these questions, an effort was made to locate all relevant documents pertaining to Castle Thunder. Several different kinds of primary materials were utilized, including a wide variety of governmental records which were especially helpful in determining names and places, and in gaining insights regarding the bureaucracy of the Confederate States Prison system. The first of these governmental records was *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. These records gave many useful and essential leads to further research. Various records of the Confederate States Congress were also available. These sources provided indications as to attitudes of that governing
body toward the prison system in general and more specifically toward Castle Thunder. The 1863 Congressional investigation of Castle Thunder was also a major source. Included in the published testimony were statements from guards, prisoners, and other eyewitnesses connected with the prison. Additionally, this testimony contained Commandant George W. Alexander's attempt at self vindication. Finally, this comprehensive report of the Congressional Committee's findings consisted of both majority and minority accounts.

A second major area of primary source material were letters written both to and from people who had a connection with Castle Thunder. The authors and recipients of this correspondence were guards, medical officers, members of the clergy, prisoners, and the Confederate authorities in Richmond. The majority of these letters were found in the Department of Henrico collection of the Virginia Historical Society. These letters portrayed the types of prisoners in the Castle as well as attitudes toward them.

The records from Castle Thunder itself constituted a third area of documentary evidence. These records consist of roll calls, muster rolls, and medical information located in the Virginia Historical Society, Virginia
State Library, and the National Archives in Washington, D.C. In a similar vein, regimental records provided data on soldiers stationed at Castle Thunder and on many of the prisoners who were incarcerated there.

Newspapers were another primary source. Various local papers contained accounts of individual events as seen through the eyes of the editors and other columnists. Although these descriptions were predictably biased, they produced helpful insights into events and related aspects of prison life that could be found nowhere else.

The final, and most important, primary sources used were the records and diaries kept by the prisoners themselves. These consisted of published memoirs and articles by a few of the more notable prisoners. Even though these materials were often self serving, they were valuable firsthand descriptions of conditions in the Castle.
CHAPTER II

PRISON SYSTEM

1) General Information

Much of the tragedy and suffering of the Civil War was personified in the prisoner of war camps of both the North and South. The Confederate prisons, however, have received the most attention from historians and have become a personification of the hopeless and destitute condition of the South. In the early years of the war, the North had more planned prison camps with experienced officers in charge, which was a sharp contrast to the camps of the South that were seemingly designed as the need for them arose. The lack of organization of the Southern prison system was illustrated by the fact that not until the last two years of the war did the Confederacy have a commissary general of prisoners. This lack of organization helped to make life in the prisons very uncomfortable, and at times unbearable, for those inside.

The prison camps themselves were structures of various designs located in all areas of the Confederacy.
The four basic types were fortifications, barracks, old buildings that had been constructed for other purposes, and enclosed grounds with only tents for shelter. The greatest loss to the prisoner himself was the loss of personal liberty. First of all, the newly captured soldier would promise never to bear arms again against his captor. This pledge, however, was rarely kept after the prisoner returned to his own lines. Secondly, the prisoner had to face confinement in a prison under the military authority of the enemy. The custom in dealing with captured soldiers in modern warfare, however, has been one of general humanity as a man is not to be punished for being in the army of the opponent. Furthermore, the prisoner was to receive the same food and clothing as did the army that supported the prison. The following of these last two rules of humane treatment did not mean that the prisoner had an easy existence, as basic survival was a full time task.

The Confederate prison camps were located throughout the South and were in a state of constant change during

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the war. The Richmond prisons were the only major ones with stability as most other areas of the South seemed unsafe for any length of time. The condition of the prisoners varied to a great extent from camp to camp as each prison was run by different personnel and had a differing amount of supplies available. Early in the war the prisons, as a general rule, were much more comfortable for the captives, as food and clothing were readily available. As the conflict was prolonged the Confederates had barely enough food and clothing to supply their own army. The overall conditions in many of these camps were atrocious as starvation, exposure to the elements, overcrowded conditions and death were common occurrences. The prisons that were located in warehouses, or other similar structures, were the scene of poor sanitation and overcrowded conditions which resulted in disease. The outdoor camps offered little or no shelter from the elements which added to the problems of lack of food and poor sanitation. Often the Confederates could not provide adequate food, clothing and shelter for their prisoners, some of whom went through more suffering in one week than they normally would have experienced in a lifetime. In addition to physical hardships, psychological and emotional anguish
was oftentimes more than the captives could cope with. Many of the prison guards and administrators seemed callous and insensitive to the suffering of the prisoners, and some even contributed to that suffering. Fortunately others were more sympathetic and seemed to show a genuine concern for their fellow man. On the whole, however, the existence of the prisoners in Confederate prison camps was grim and the inmates existed with little or no hope.\(^3\)

During and after the Civil War, Southerners tried to justify their cause and all aspects of the rebellion, including their prison system. The conditions in Confederate prisons and the treatment received by inmates in those prisons has been justified by apologists on three grounds. The first of these was that the conditions in the Northern prison camps were comparable to those in the South; indeed, in some cases the situation was worse. A second justification was that the Federal Government made the decision in 1863 to discontinue the cartel for prisoner exchange which resulted in overcrowded conditions in Southern camps. The last rationale used by many of the Confederate apologists dealing with this subject

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was that the Confederacy did not have adequate resources to take care of their own army, let alone the captives. The Rebel troops in the field obviously had priority over the captured enemy but in many instances the prison guards were forced to eat the same food as was served to the prisoners.4

It is difficult to compare the prisons of the South with those of the North in any exact manner. Most historians, especially those writing immediately after the war, believed that the conditions in the Northern camps were a great deal superior to those of the Confederate prisons. The House of Representatives did a study of the prisoner of war situation in the Civil War in 1869 in which they reported the following:

In striking contrast with the uniform kindness of Union soldiers toward their captives taken in battle, was the treatment experienced by our officers and men immediately upon falling into the hands of the enemy. The harsh and brutal conduct of the rebels toward their unfortunate prisoners furnishes a constant and leading theme of the survivors.5

4Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, p. 1.

This claim, however, is not supported by many post-war historians and by the prisoners themselves who were confined in these Federal prisons. Many of the Southern soldiers in the Union camps report the lack of food, overcrowded conditions and poor sanitation much in the way as did their counterparts in Confederate prisons. Johnson's Island, on the shores of Lake Erie, experienced poor sanitation and was severely cold in winter. Point Lookout Prison, on the Potomac and Chesapeake Bay, was also cold in the winter months and the prisoners confined there wrote of the constant lack of food and lodging facilities that gave each man little room to move. It is true that most of the accounts written by the prisoners themselves are biased, but statistics show that the sickness and death rate in Northern prisons were comparable to the rate in Southern prisons. Actual figures show that the total number of prisoners who died in Federal


camps was greater even though the Confederate prisons had a higher mortality rate for its captives.\(^8\)

The second justification for the conditions in Southern prisons seems to be more valid, at least after 1862, than the first. The Federal Government made the decision in that year to end the cartel for prisoner exchange, and any exchanging of major consequence ended early in 1863. This created immediate problems for the Confederacy as the exchanging of prisoners not only helped ease the problem of overcrowding in their prisons but it also replenished their shrinking numbers in the field. The cartel, which was instituted on July 22, 1862, and continued in some form until the summer of 1863, resulted in the exchanging of thousands of captives from each side.\(^9\) The Confederate Government wanted to continue the exchange indefinitely but the Union, which had many more troops in the field and also more supplies and facilities for their prisoners, decided to end the

\(^8\)26,436 out of 220,000 Confederate prisoners died in Northern camps while 22,576 out of 126,950 Union prisoners died in Southern camps. United States War Department. The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 volumes (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. II, vol. VIII, pp. 946-947. (This source will be, from this point, abbreviated as O.R. followed by the series, volume, and page numbers.)

agreement. The Federal Government felt that a continuation, or later reinstating, of the exchange would prolong the war past its normal course, as the Southern armies would be reinforced, thus taking the numbers advantage away from their own troops. Also they felt that the suffering of the prisoners was unavoidable but still would not be as great as the misery that would result from a longer conflict. On the subject of reinstating the exchange in the summer of 1864, General U. S. Grant summed up the government's feelings when he wrote:

It is hard on our men in Southern prisons not to exchange them, but it is humanity to those left in the ranks to fight our battles. Every man we hold, when released on parole or otherwise, becomes an active soldier against us at once either directly or indirectly. If we commence a system of exchange which liberates all prisoners taken, we will have to fight on until the whole South is exterminated. If we hold those caught they amount to no more than dead men.10

When the cartel ended the Confederates were forced to open new camps in the South.

The last major justification used by Southerners for conditions of their prisoner of war camps seems

somewhat valid. The Confederacy never had an abundance of supplies, and as the war was prolonged what little they did have faded away into massive shortages. The Southern citizens and the troops in the field, both of whom had priority over the captured enemy, were constantly in need of rations and other goods. In these times of shortages, the prisoners suffered far more than any other group even though Confederate law specified that the captives were to receive the same rations as did the enlisted men of the army of the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{11} There was little doubt, however, that both sides held back rations and clothing from the prisoners for use by their own troops. The prisoners of the Confederacy were convinced that many of the gifts of clothing and food sent to them from the Federal Government and friends in the North never reached their destinations. These captives believed that Confederate guards in particular were using their influence to obtain the issues for themselves\textsuperscript{12} or to sell them to the prisoners at a high price.

\textsuperscript{11}Matthews, James M., \textit{The Statutes at Large} (Richmond: R. M. Smith, Printer to Congress, 1864), p. 154.

The type of structure or layout of the prison dictated the living conditions of the prisoners who were confined there. There were four basic types of prisons in the Confederacy. As noted earlier, they were fortifications, enclosed barracks, enclosed grounds with only tents for shelter, and old buildings that had been constructed for other purposes. The majority of Confederate prisons would be classified in the latter two categories. Two prime examples of open grounds surrounded by a stockade were Richmond's Belle Isle and Andersonville in Georgia. Belle Isle had no shelter of any kind to protect prisoners from bitter cold and intense heat. On the west side of the compound stood one or two lonely wild cherry trees which provided the only areas of shade in the entire camp. Even these trees soon became useless protection from the sun as the prisoners, despite the vigilance of the guard, cut off the branches for fuel.

The Andersonville prison has become the representation of the suffering and torturous life of the prisoners of the Confederacy. This prison consisted of a strong

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stockade, twenty feet high, enclosing twenty-seven acres. The main wall, formed of strong pine logs firmly planted in the ground, was surrounded by two other rows of similar pine logs. Within the confines of these walls, the prisoners were compelled to perform all necessary functions of life such as cooking, washing, sleeping, exercise and other physical functions.\(^{15}\) The prison opened in early 1864 and soon became overcrowded and filthy as proper policing was impossible because of poor organization. The food was inadequate, the hospital conditions were unhealthy, there was no shelter for the prisoners except what they could construct from the almost non-existing materials, and the Andersonville stream soon became a cesspool of filth and disease.\(^{16}\)

The problems that were experienced in old converted buildings, mostly tobacco warehouses, were much different from the problems of the open prisons but were equally as serious. Two examples of this type of structure were Libby and Castle Thunder prisons in Richmond. Libby, the more famous of the two, was used for the purpose of


confining captured officers. It was a large building of four floors, including the basement, with about forty windows in front, some of which were secured with iron bars while others were tightly boarded and still others were open to the winds and storms.\textsuperscript{17} The main problem with Libby was extreme overcrowding which resulted in discomfort, neglect, and a very unsanitary existence for the prisoners. Exposure was not the problem here but disease and sickness and the possibility of epidemic were constant. Castle Thunder was much like Libby in design and the two were located only a few blocks from each other. The Castle Thunder complex consisted of three buildings; Castle Thunder, Whitlock's building, and Palmer's Factory. The cells were not sufficient in number and were improperly ventilated\textsuperscript{18} which made existence there uncomfortable. The conditions at Castle Thunder were similar to those at Libby but the treatment of the captives was more harsh as the quality of inmates


at this prison was considered to be the lowest in all
the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{19}

2) Types Of Prisoners

There were many types of prisoners in the Confederacy. The first
category was the largest in number—the captured
soldiers. These men were the object of great concern and
publicity both in the North and South, and were treated
with more respect than any other group. The captured
officers were kept in separate quarters for the most part,
and were oftentimes housed in different camps. The over-
all treatment of the officers was better than that
received by others although most of the time they would
not have believed it. The second group of prisoners was
an offspring of the first; the deserters from both sides.
These men were frequently kept in separate prisons, such
as Old Capitol in Washington and Castle Thunder in Richmond,
where they experienced more hostilities and harsher treat-
ment from their captors. The reasons for desertion were
different in each case, but the basic quality and attitude

\textsuperscript{19}Albert D. Richardson, Secret Service, The Field,
The Dungeon, and The Escape (Hartford: American Publishing
Company, 1865), pp. 381-382. Junius Henri Browne, Four
Years In Secessia: Adventures Within and Beyond the
Union Lines (Hartford: O. D. Chase and Comp., 1865),
pp. 295-296.
of the deserters was similar. Some of the captured deserters who were confined in Confederate prison camps were Federal and Rebel soldiers who either had grown tired of fighting or were never really committed to the cause to begin with. There were also those who enlisted, for reasons of payment or to avoid the draft, with no intention of ever engaging in combat. Some of those who were arrested as deserters were loyal to the Confederacy and were imprisoned by mistake while on leave or furlough.

There were many prisoners of the Confederacy who could not have been classified as captured soldiers or deserters. Among these were the Union sympathizers. There was a large concentration of Union sympathy in such areas as Eastern Tennessee and Western Virginia, and this feeling was evident to some extent in all areas of the Confederacy. These pro-Union feelings took different forms which ranged from sympathetic thought to a much more active role. Many Southerners actively rendered aid to escaping prisoners and runaway slaves\textsuperscript{20} but often found themselves imprisoned as the Confederate

\textsuperscript{20}J. G. Randall, and David Herbert Donald, The Civil War and Reconstruction (Boston: D. C. Heath and Comp., 1969), pp. 264-266.
Government closely watched such activity.\textsuperscript{21} There were many loyal Confederates who also were arrested under such charges for at times the Confederate authorities were a bit too energetic when searching for pro-Unionists.

Captured spies made up a smaller percentage of those confined in Confederate prisons. The exact number of those who engaged in secret espionage was unknown and the ones that were captured represented only a small fraction of those who engaged in such activities. The spies were both men and women, and were the cause of constant problems for both governments as they would infiltrate either army ranks or other important facets of society. The women spies were very successful,\textsuperscript{22} and when caught they received much the same treatment as did the men. Other women were confined in Confederate prisons but this was not widespread. The women prisoners basically received good treatment and were kept in separate quarters.

The last kind of prisoners confined in Confederate prison were Negroes, either freedmen or runaway slaves. These Negroes were the cause of much disagreement between

\textsuperscript{21}Richardson, \textit{Secret Service}, pp. 385-386.

exchange authorities from both sides and were a major reason why the cartel for exchange was ended in 1863. The South did not consider Negroes qualified for exchange and the North wanted full equality for them.\textsuperscript{23} Runaway slaves comprised some of the prison population even though most of them were returned to slavery when captured.

\textsuperscript{23}Randall and Donald, \textit{The Civil War and Reconstruction}, p. 335.
CHAPTER III

GENERAL INFORMATION ON CASTLE THUNDER

1) Building

Martial law was declared in 1862 to deal with the growing problems of crime and violence in the Confederate capital. General John H. Winder had, by that time, collected a force of secret service men to enforce law and order and to keep the peace in Richmond, but his methods were vigorous and complaints were constantly being filed of arrests and imprisonments of citizens on weak or no charges. The police force was composed of petty larceny detectives from Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York called "plug uglies," who interfered intolerably with citizens going about their lawful business, and did nothing to eradicate the system of Federal spies that were believed to be active everywhere.¹ Winder's

¹Alfred Hoyt Bill, The Beleaguered City (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1946), p. 97. This force remained active until the fall of 1863 when General Winder was forced to dismiss all but one of his "plug ugly" detectives for corruption, bribery and incompetence. Emory M. Thomas, The Confederate State of Richmond (Austin: University
men closed all distilleries and saloons and rounded up all persons suspected of disloyalty, drunkenness and other criminal offenses, and incarcerated them in McDaniel's private jail. This place had previously been called "Negro Jail" because it had been used for the detention of runaway slaves. It was renamed Castle Godwin in honor of Captain Godwin, the Provost Marshall of Richmond. Its thirteen "well ventilated" rooms were soon filled to capacity with prisoners. The prison was located in an obscure alley near Dickinson and Hall's auction store on Franklin Street below Sixteenth. The Richmond Enquirer describes a raid on Wednesday night, March 19, 1862, in which the Assistant Provost Marshal Captain George W. Alexander arrested eighty-nine suspicious characters, along with a quantity of contraband liquors, on Hughes Row and vicinity and on Seventeenth Street between old

of Texas Press, 1971), p. 106. It was reported that during the time of this force, which was replaced by another in 1863, grossest abuses of justice were practiced. Any man bearing malice against a citizen in Richmond had only to trump up some story, relate it to a detective and the unfortunate person would be arrested. Browne, Four Years in Secessia, pp. 297-298.

Market and the Dock. As a result of this, and other similar raids, Castle Godwin became overcrowded and a larger prison was sought. By August 4, 1862, General Winder had 221 deserters, political prisoners and disorderly soldiers confined in the Castle Godwin complex.

A desirable location for the new prison was found and on August 12, 1862, it was reported by the Daily Richmond Enquirer that the Provost Marshal for the Eastern District was to move his headquarters from Castle Godwin to William Greanor's tobacco warehouse factory on Cary Street near Eighteenth. This move began the following day and within a few days Castle Godwin fell into oblivion. The paper went on to report that the new prison was to be christened "Castle Thunder" which was a name that was "indicative of Olympian vengeance upon offenders against her laws, and one which, in a point of sound, is as good as any that could be chosen." By August 19, all of the 600 prisoners from Castle Godwin, the hospital and the Franklin Street guard house were removed to Castle Thunder.

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3Daily Richmond Enquirer, 2 March 1862.
4Daily Dispatch (Richmond), 14 August 1862.
5Daily Richmond Enquirer, 12 August 1862.
6Daily Dispatch (Richmond), 19 August 1862.
This new prison was to become the center of constant controversy. Its two primary commanders, Captains George W. Alexander and Lucien W. Richardson, presented a contrast in personality and behavior. Alexander, who commanded the prison from late 1862 to the end of 1863, was an extreme disciplinarian whose heavy handed methods prompted a Congressional investigation into the treatment of the captives at that prison in April, 1863. Richardson, on the other hand, was quiet and efficient and his tenure at Castle Thunder led to an easing of tensions. Richardson commanded the prison until the end of the war.  

7 President Jefferson Davis was informed on April 2, 1865 that General U. S. Grant had broken through the Confederate lines in three places and the guard forces at Libby and Castle Thunder were immediately given the orders to evacuate all prisoners from the city. The invading Union army had arrested over one thousand Confederate stragglers by nightfall of April 3, and confined them in Libby and Castle Thunder. These occupying Federal troops used Castle Thunder as a prison for these stragglers and troublemakers for some months after the conflict ceased. Eventually, Castle Thunder was turned back to its original owners to be used once again as a tobacco warehouse. The key to the front door of the Castle was sold at auction in New York in late April 1865 for the benefit of orphans of Yankee soldiers. Castle Thunder was destroyed by a fire in 1879. Robinson, Justice In Grey, p. 418. Rembert W. Patrick, The Fall of Richmond (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), p. 72. New York Times, 20 April 1865. The Official Guide Company, ed., The Official Encyclopedic Guide to Richmond and Vicinity (Richmond: Richmond Press, 1906), p. 20.
Eastern District Military Prison, the official name for Castle Thunder, was located in the tobacco warehouse district of Richmond, Virginia. Many of the old warehouse buildings in this area were used by the Confederates for prisons, hospitals and supply depots. Castle Thunder was located on the north side of Cary Street, between Eighteenth and Nineteenth. The location was convenient for a prison as it was well protected within the city, but still centrally situated enough to transport prisoners easily in and out. The main problem with having a prison in this area was that the location of so many other buildings in the immediate area made the possibility of a large scale fire a real one. In 1864, a neighboring coffee factory burned causing the walls of Castle Thunder to be seriously scorched. The fire, which caused $100,000 in damages to the factory, did no serious structural damage to the Castle. Across the street from Castle Thunder was Castle Lightning, another prison, and just one block away stood Libby Prison.

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8This site is now occupied by a Philip Morris Tobacco Company parking lot.

9Earle Lutz, A Richmond Album (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, 1937), p. 58.
What is known of the structure, physical layout and pattern of Castle Thunder has been derived mainly from extant photographs and contemporary accounts. Castle Thunder was generally described as an old and very depressing structure and was even compared by one observer to the Tower of London. The prison occupied the three-and-one-half story William Greanor Tobacco Factory but was eventually expanded to include two more buildings and a hospital to make up the complex.

The main building, an ordinary brick structure, was a typical tobacco warehouse with a platform for drying leaves connected and the symbolic tobacco leaf hanging in front. During the war, the prisoners' bedding could oftentimes be seen hanging from the windows. The capacity of this structure was 650 prisoners, but at times held up to 700 inmates. The Castle Thunder complex also included Whittock's building, used for Negro quarters and as a prison for women, which


had a capacity of 350, and Palmer's Factory, for Yankee deserters, that could handle 400 inmates.\textsuperscript{13}

2) Prison Administration

George W. Alexander was one of the most versatile and vigorous, yet controversial figures in the Confederacy. His entire career of service to the Confederate States of America, highlighted by his command of Castle Thunder, was marked by great enthusiasm, dictatorial tactics, and excessive zeal. It was difficult for many of his contemporaries to believe that this man, who was investigated in 1863 by the Confederate Congress, was a music composer in his spare time. Alexander's friends praised him as a loyal Confederate who stood firmly behind his convictions, but his prisoners and others accused him of harshness, inhumanity, tyranny and dishonesty.\textsuperscript{14} There was at one point, rumors around camp that a group of prisoners were plotting to assassinate Alexander and his officers on grounds of inhumanity.\textsuperscript{15} His personality was


\textsuperscript{14}Hesseltine, \textit{Civil War Prisons}, p. 247.

\textsuperscript{15}Committee to enquire into Treatment of Prisoners at Castle Thunder, Evidence taken before the Committee of The House of Representatives, appointed to enquire into
described by one observer as "pompous and excessively vain, delighting in gauntlets, top-boots, huge revolvers, and a red sash."16

George W. Alexander was originally from Washington, Georgia, but later made his home in Maryland. He began his military career in the United States Navy as a third assistant engineer on October 21, 1848. Promotions did not come easily to Alexander while in the navy, but he did receive an appointment as second assistant engineer on February 16, 1852, and as first assistant engineer on June 27, 1855; he resigned on April 5, 1861.17 Shortly after Alexander joined the Rebel forces as a private, he was captured by Federal troops and confined in prison from July 12, 1861 to September 7, 1861.18

The Treatment of Prisoners at Castle Thunder (Richmond: House of Representatives, 1863), p. 6. Testimony of Detective John Caphart. (This source will be, from this point, cited in the following manner: Testimony of [name of witness] before the Committee of Congress, pp. ).

16 Richardson, Secret Service, p. 382.


October 2, 1861 letter to Acting Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin, Alexander summarized his capture, confinement and escape:

Having with Colonel R. Thomas Zarvona captured the Saint Nicholas* I accompanied him on a second expedition. I was captured by Governor Hicks and the Dorchester Guards at Cambridge, Maryland, and confined with Colonel Z. in Fort McHenry about seventy days, when I effected my escape. Springing from the ramparts I sprained my ankle.\(^{19}\)

After recovering from his injury, Alexander returned to duty and on June 12, 1862 he received a nomination for the rank of Captain. In October he, along with Henry Wirz, was confirmed for that rank by the Senate.\(^{20}\) In the summer and fall of that year, Alexander served in the police force of General Winder in Richmond. He proved himself qualified and competent and in November was appointed commander of Castle Thunder. He served in this capacity until December 1863 and was

\*Colonel Richard Thomas Zarvona led the expedition, along with Alexander. Captain Thomas (alias "French Lady") and others, to capture the Federal vessel St. Nicholas.


the subject of much criticism from the inmates. The captives of the Castle had a song about prison life in which one of the lines dealt with their commandant:

He used to take the rations, and sell them for cash, So that he with the ladies, might cut quite a dash. 21

Public criticism of conditions at Castle Thunder prompted the Confederate Congress to appoint a committee to investigate the prison. This committee was appointed by a resolution from that governing body on April 4, 1863. 22 The hearing included testimony from guards, officers, prisoners, hospital attendants and Alexander himself. Because of a rather eloquent defense of his leadership at the end of the trial, in which Alexander stressed his good record and loyalty to the cause, the committee filed a majority report in which they justified his actions. In contrast, minority reports were published by committee members that presented an opposing view. Committee member William D. Simpson of South Carolina, for example, condemned Alexander's methods


22 This investigation will be studied in detail in Chapter IV but is worth mentioning here because Captain Alexander was the focus of most of the inquiry.
and actions, but believed that since the Captain acted out of a sense of duty no formal punishment by the House in this case was necessary. Caleb C. Herbert of Texas, however, argued that both Winder and Alexander showed a lack of judgment and humanity which deserved censure and possible removal.

The remaining part of Alexander's tenure as commandant was characterized by continued controversy. The flamboyant Alexander's adventures at times even took him away from Richmond as on June 6, 1863, when United States Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton reported that the Captain along with two other men were in Washington with plans to various army fortifications in the area. Despite this charge Alexander's expedition appears to have been unsuccessful and the men returned safely to Richmond. While commanding Castle Thunder, Alexander also held the ranks of Assistant Provost Marshal, which he retained until late 1864, and Assistant Adjutant General. After leaving Castle Thunder and Richmond, he

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was appointed as commander of Salisbury prison briefly in June 1864. After hostilities had ended, a Federal report listed Alexander's name as one who committed "cruel and criminal" acts in his "treatment of prisoners of war" while serving at Salisbury and Castle Thunder.\textsuperscript{25}

There was another side to Alexander's personality that was far removed from the accusations of his cruel and injudicious treatment of his prisoners. Possessing what some called a sensitive, artistic talent for musical composition, he wrote a ballad entitled "Southern Soldier Boy" which became an important part of the Richmond musical review "The Virginia Cavalier." This production ran in the capital city for more than a year during the war. Sallie Partington, the "prima donna of the Confederacy," was cast in the role of Nannie and sang Alexander's song about her sweetheart Bob Roebuck, who had gone off to war. The soldiers loved the song and flocked into Richmond to see the entire production.\textsuperscript{26}

The song goes as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
Bob Roebuck is my sweetheart's name,
He's off to the wars and gone,
He's fighting for his Nannie dear,
His sword is buckled on;
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{25}Judge Advocate General Holt to Secretary of War Stanton, 3 November 1865, \textit{O.R.} Ser. II, vol. VIII, pp. 782-783.

\textsuperscript{26}Robinson, \textit{Justice In Grey}, p. 418.
He's fighting for his own true love,
His foes he does defy;
He is the darling of my heart,
My Southern Soldier boy.

He is my only joy,
He is the darling of my heart,
My Southern Soldier boy.

When Bob comes home from war's alarms,
We start anew in life,
I'll give myself right up to him,
A dutiful, loving wife.
I'll try my best to please my dear,
For he is my only joy;
He is the darling of my heart,
My Southern Soldier boy.

He is my only joy,
He is the darling of my heart,
My Southern Soldier boy.

Oh! if in battle he was slain,
I am sure that I should die,
But I am sure he'll come again
and cheer my weeping eye;
But should he fall in this our glorious cause,
He still would be my joy,
For many a sweetheart mourns the loss,
Of a Southern Soldier boy.

I'd grieve to loose my joy,
But many a sweetheart mourns the loss
Of a Southern Soldier boy.

I hope for the best, and so do all
Whose hopes are in the field;
I know that we shall win the day,
for Southrons never yield
And when we think of those that are away,
We'll look above for joy,
And I'm mighty glad that my Bobby is
A Southern Soldier boy.

Chorus. 27

Lucien W. Richardson, Alexander's successor at Castle Thunder, was a quiet man and an efficient officer. He was a striking contrast to the flashy and ebullient Alexander. Richardson began his service for the Confederacy in the artillery, and quickly was placed in charge of a battery in the 1st Batallion Virginia Light Artillery. A short time after that, he was placed in command of the James City (Va.) Artillery. Throughout 1862, and for a good part of 1863, Richardson's thirty-two pound guns were much in demand as defense weapons throughout central Virginia. The qualities of efficiency and reliability made Captain Richardson a prime choice to relieve Alexander at Castle Thunder and, on December 19, 1863, he took command of the prison. In an inspection report made by Lieutenant Colonel Archer Anderson on June 6, 1864, Richardson's system of record keeping and registries were warmly praised. Inspector C. McRae Selph added to this praise by stating that Richardson's office books were neatly and orderly kept and exhibited a complete and comprehensive record of each prisoner received. Moreover,

28 O.R. Ser. I, vols. XI (pt. 3), XXXIII, XXXVI, LI.

29 The books that were kept were as follows: 1) Register of Negroes, 2) hospital books, 3) court-martial books (giving sentences, etc.), 4) morning reports of commitments, 5) index of commitments, 6) register of Yankee deserters, 7) register of other prisoners. O.R. Ser. II, vol. VII, pp. 206-207.
the new commandant appeared to have kept the guard force under strict discipline with all prison rules enforced. The report concluded that the commander evinced a laudable desire to promote the comfort of the prisoners under his command.\(^3\) While serving as commandant of Castle Thunder Richardson, like Alexander, held the offices of Assistant Provost Marshal and Assistant Adjutant General. Not surprisingly the Confederate authorities wanted a man such as Richardson to follow Alexander in order to smooth out the operations of the Castle and also to quell some of the criticisms that were being launched at the Provost Marshal's prison.

A knowledge of the chain of command, especially within the officer corps, is essential to an understanding of the prison itself and the life of the captives inside. The organization of officers and guards was much the same at Castle Thunder as it was in other Confederate prisons. The system at the Castle remained much the same throughout the war, with the exception of the change in command. Thus when Richardson became the commandant he inherited an established format. Selph's June 6, 1864 inspection noted that Richardson was being assisted by

\(^3\)Ibid., pp. 204-205.
three lieutenants who had been detailed upon the surgeon's certificate of disability. There were also six detectives of whom two were citizens over the age of conscript and four were conscripts detailed by the Secretary of War. The duty of the detectives was to transport prisoners, maintain surveillance in the prison, to prevent the smuggling in or out of prohibited articles, and to make arrests. The report listed three clerks, one of whom was a civilian of forty-five and the other two were conscripts detailed by the Secretary of War. Finally, there were three wardens of various ages and backgrounds. The guard force at Castle Thunder was composed of men from the 1st and 2nd Regiments, Second Class Militia Virginia Reserves.

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32 This regiment was organized by an act passed by the General Assembly on March 7, 1862. The command was originally organized as the 1st Battalion Second Class Militia on June 2, 1862, under Major Richard A. Wilkins. It was composed of boys from the ages of sixteen and eighteen, and men between forty-five and fifty-five years of age. The battalion was increased to a regiment on July 15, 1863 and furnished the guards not only for Castle Thunder but also for the City Jail, railroad bridges, the Treasury Department and other posts in Richmond. By April of 1865, the 1st and 2nd Virginia Reserves, their shortened and more common names, guarded Castle Thunder and Mayo's Bridge with seventy-five men. Colonel John B. Danforth was in charge of these companies. It was reported by Danforth that many of the men of the Second Virginia Reserves were, at this late date
3) Lodging, Clothing and Food

Regrettably there are few extant descriptions of the interior of Castle Thunder either from guards, visitors or the prisoners themselves. The most creative of those that do exist was written by a prisoner from Libby who may never have seen the interior of Castle Thunder but based his observations on writings and conversations with those who were confined there. This description, while probably exaggerated and overdrawn, nevertheless colorfully portrays, at least in part, what the physical structure may have looked like on the inside and the devastating impact of this structure on the lives of the prisoners.

In an inner room are some fifty balls and chains with anklets and handcuffs. Within are two condemned cells, perfectly dark—a faded flap over the window peephole—the smell from which would knock a strong man down. In their centre lies a sink, ever open, and the floors are sappy with uncleanness. To the right a door leads to a walled yard not forty feet long, nor fifteen wide, overlooked by the barred windows of the main prison, and by sentry boxes upon the wall top. Here the wretched were shot and hung in the war, without accoutrements. These seventy-five men consisted of three commissioned officers, six non-commissioned officers, and sixty-six privates. Lee A. Wallace Jr., Comp., A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations 1861-1865 (Richmond: Virginia Civil War Commission, 1964), p. 285. (Manuscript in the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia), Virginia Militia, 1st Regiment Infantry, Reserves: Report, 1865 April 2, Richmond, Virginia, of the guard mounted at Castle Thunder.
in sight of their trembling comrades. The brick wall at the foot of the yard is scarred by balls and bullets which first passed through some human heart and wrote here their testimony. The gallows had been suspended from a wing in the ledge above. This little yard, bullet marked, close, and shut off from all sympathy, is the ghastliest spot in the world. Upstairs, in Castle Thunder, there are two or three large rooms, barred and dimly lit, and two or three series of condemned cells, pent up and pitchy, where, by a refinement of cruelty, the ceiling built low so that no man can stand upright. Here fifteen or twenty were crowded together, and in the burning atmosphere, they stripped themselves stark naked, so that when in the morning the celldoors were opened they came forth as from the grave, begging for death. There are two women's cells, too; for this great and violent government recognized women as belligerents, and locked them up close to a sentry's cartridge, so that in the bitterness of solitude they were unsexed, and railed and blasphemed like wanton things. The pavements before the jail were trodden by remorseless guards, who shot at every rag flutter from the cages, and all this little circle of death in life was enacted close to the light river and under the cover of that Capitol where criminal treason held the sinews of was to wring from a reluctant Union and arrogant independence. 33

Detective John Caphart, in his appearance before the investigating committee of Congress in 1863, gave a useful and probably accurate description of Castle Thunder. Caphart described the prison as having a long hallway on the second floor which led to a large room

used for the confinement of citizens and disloyal persons. The third floor had, according to the detective, a very spacious room for soldiers and smaller cells of rooms attached for persons tried, and waiting for trial, by court martial. The citizens room on the second floor was large enough to make it possible for the prisoners to walk around in. This room, which was known as the "prison parlor," had white-washed walls and four windows that were iron-barred. The air inside was tainted by a foul smell emanating from the adjoining "condemned cell." The room was lighted by gas, had a single stove for cooking, a few bunks, and a fairly clean floor. Some of the cells mentioned by Caphart and others were merely fifteen feet square with one window which was usually boarded up.

34 Testimony of Detective John Caphart before the Committee of Congress, pp. 7-8.
35 Testimony of Henry Edenborough before the Committee of Congress, p. 35.
36 Richardson, Secret Service, p. 382.
37 Testimony of T. J. Kirby before the Committee of Congress, p. 23.
Inspector Selph stated in his inspection report that the cells were improperly ventilated and insufficient in number, and that at least four more were needed to add to the five which were already in existence. Selph went on to report that the existing cells should have been reconstructed to allow sufficient air to circulate for the health and well being of the prisoners. The prisoners, he added, were forced to sleep on the floor with little or no covering.\(^{38}\) Similarly their sleep was disturbed at intervals by "the playful gambols of the rats" over their hands and faces.\(^{39}\) These conditions within the prison, as noted earlier, did not remain a secret because of the investigative work of the Confederate Congress in 1863. But even with the exposure of much incriminating evidence, many Confederate authorities tended to ignore or downplay these facts, either by choice or by accident. In fact, the majority report of this committee uncompromisingly after all testimony had been heard, stated that "the prison, as to cleanliness and comfort, was well managed."\(^{40}\)


\(^{39}\)Richardson, Secret Service, p. 381.

Because of massive shortages in the Confederacy, the prisoners suffered from the lack of proper clothing and bedding. Most of the captives in Castle Thunder were issued little or no clothing from the Confederate Government during their confinement and were forced to wear only what they had on when captured. There were some attempts, however, by the Confederate Government to requisition such needed attire for the prisoners as coats, jackets, boots, flannel shirts, socks and pants. But this type of action was rare. Captain Alexander realized the need for additional clothing for his prisoners but there was little he could do to meet these shortages. Occasionally he sent men to battlefields around Richmond soon after a conflict for the purpose of gathering clothing and blankets for the more destitute prisoners at Castle Thunder. Other clothing was furnished through sales by prison Commissary Stephen B. Childrey. Castle Thunder would occasionally receive gifts from the Union Government to be distributed among the Federal prisoners


42 Testimony of Detective George W. Thomas before the Committee of Congress, p. 15.

43 More will be discussed about Childrey's Sutlers store later in this chapter.
there. These packages, mostly blankets and clothes, were small in number and not frequent. 44

The prisoners themselves constantly complained about the lack of proper clothing, blankets and provisions at Castle Thunder. 45 Most of them were very poorly clad. This was particularly true of the captured soldiers, many of whom did not have much save the rags in which they were captured. This group of prisoners had no money or connections in which to obtain additional clothing. 46

Indeed not a few of the inmates were so cold in the winter, because of their thin uniforms, that they could hardly hold the corn bread doled out to them. 47 Some inmates had no bedding at all. Many of the prison authorities felt that it was a matter of common decency for the prisoners to be better clothed, 48 but they were unable

44 Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, p. 119.


46 Testimony of T. G. Bland (Hospital steward) before the Committee of Congress, p. 4.

47 Browne, Four Years In Secessia, p. 296.

48 Testimony of J. F. Shaffer before the Committee of Congress, p. 4.
to do anything about it. To add further to the problem, it was a common practice at the Castle for the healthier and stronger captives to steal the clothing and bedding from their weaker comrades.⁴⁹

In addition to the problem of clothing, prison authorities also had to deal with shortages of food. Confederate law specified that the prisoners were to receive the same quality and quantity of food as the army that guarded them, but this was rarely the case. An official 1864 inspection of Castle Thunder reported that the prison was receiving the same rations for each prisoner as were the other Richmond prisons. The report listed the rations as one pound of corn bread, one-third of a pound of bacon, and eight pounds of peas or ten pounds of rice, for every one hundred rations. All this was served in soup described as palatable and nutritious⁵⁰ by the report but depicted as disgusting by the prisoners. At least one of the prisoners reported after the war that the soup was only issued to the prisoners who had cups while all others were served only two ounces of wheat.

⁴⁹Warden Lewis J. Blankenship, Testimony before the Committee of Congress, p. 51.

bread daily. Another 1864 inspection of Castle Thunder made in the last week of May, stated that on days when soup was not served en masse, the prisoners received one pound of corn bread, one-quarter pound of bacon and a half pint of rice served over a period of several days. This report stated, however, that meat was only issued five or six days in May and on the other days the prisoners would either receive the soup or three-quarters of a pound of bread. Some prisoners themselves observed after the war that they had received up to twenty ounces of bread and one-half of a pound of meat each day—a claim which was largely corroborated by the official Confederate inspection reports.

The preparing and cooking of the rations was done by captured Negroes. The food was then handed out to select prisoners on each floor to be distributed to each man. The prisoners were fed once a day at different times; one day the food might be received at noon and the

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The Castle Thunder inmates could obtain additional food through the Sutler's store of Stephen B. Childrey, the camp commissary. The prices were high at Childrey's store and only the wealthier prisoners could afford even the smallest items on a regular basis. Childrey not only peddled food, but he also sold bedding, clothing and other needed materials. Prison commissaries such as Childrey often made additional profit by purchasing various items from the prisoners for a cheap price in times of need, and later selling the same item back at great profit. Major Carrington revoked Childrey's permission to run the Sutler's store at Castle Thunder on June 30, 1864 for unknown reasons. The more fortunate prisoners not only used their resources within the prison to obtain desired goods, but many also received items from friends and family. The camp authorities examined incoming items very closely but it was still


56Record Group No. 109, Chap. IX, vol. 229 (Manuscripts in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.), Major Isaac Howell Carrington, Special order No. 10, 30 June 1864.
possible to get contraband goods into the prison in various ways. One prisoner sent an order to his wife for paper, pens, apples, walnuts, potatoes, peas, and corn, with a request also to send clothes wrapped in paper so not to get the food on them.\footnote{Henry Thweatt Owen Papers (Manuscripts in the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia), Henry Thweatt Owen to Harriett Adalena (Robertson) Owen, 1 December 1864.} It is very doubtful that all these items came to him as the guards were notorious for keeping many of the incoming items for their own use. A safer but less successful way of obtaining additional food items was by the cultivating of small gardens which were allowed within the walls of the prison grounds.\footnote{O.R. Ser. II, vol. VII, p. 205.} Not much could be grown this way and the gardener had to be constantly on the lookout for fellow prisoners who made frequent midnight raids.

4) Prison Activities

Prisons such as Castle Thunder offered a limited range of activities in which the prisoners could engage. The camp authorities were somewhat stringent in their regulations regarding activities because they were in constant fear of a large scale uprising and escape. The
prisoners were even prohibited from putting their heads outside the windows; in fact, for such an offense, guards were instructed to shout out one warning before firing.\textsuperscript{59} One of the best ways for prisoners to pass the long hours of captivity was by the reading of whatever materials that were available. These materials, although hard to get, ranged from local newspapers to books of various kinds. Books could be obtained by trading with the guards, from townspeople who visited the compound, or by sending requests to family and friends. This latter method was the least successful since the guards were quite free in taking whatever they wanted from incoming packages. Another way for many of the inmates at Castle Thunder to pass the time was to provide services for work either in preparing and distributing food or in hospital assistantship. This was a good way not only to consume time, but also occasionally to obtain extra rations or considerations. One Negro woman named Old Sally, made a great deal of outside money by washing for other prisoners. With this money she purchased needed supplies for the more unfortunate prisoners.\textsuperscript{60} A prisoner could

\textsuperscript{59}Testimony of Lieutenant Cyrus Bossieux before the Committee of Congress, p. 48

\textsuperscript{60}Richardson, Secret Service, p. 384.
carry these services one step further and become a so-called "pimp" of the commandant. These prisoners rendered services that could be classified mostly as informing. Predictably they became favorites who received extra considerations. They were, however, branded by the other inmates as turncoats. As a result these informers suffered mental and physical anguish stemming from the counterattacks initiated by the other prisoners.

Groups of prisoners often created their own activities to pass the time. At Libby Prison, the Libby Chronicle was written periodically not only to provide a comic relief to the long hours but also to give spiritual inspiration to a great many of the inmates. At Castle Thunder, some inmates once held a mock trial for one prisoner who was accused of "malfeasance," while serving as commissary of that particular mess. The indictment charged that he issued soup when he should have served meat and that he stole the beef to sell it for personal profit. One captured newspaper correspondent served as defense while another acted as prosecutor and a third presided as judge. A great deal of remarkable law was cited in Greek, Latin, German and French. The

61Testimony of T. J. Kirby before the Committee of Congress, p. 23.
defense lawyer was fined for contempt of court and several jurors were arrested for falling asleep. Many of the spectators became quite vocal at one point as the sheriff cleared the courtroom, and during certain testimony the judge asked that the ladies withdraw. The jury returned a guilty verdict and the defendant was sentenced to eat a quart of his own soup at a single meal. It was considered to be a "hilarious affair" by the inmates present.62

Most of the prisoners time was spent in idleness. Consequently, promoting daily personal relationships became the center of most of the activity. Time was spent discussing various topics ranging from the state of the nation to possible escape. The latter theme led some to attempt to put these various plans into action. Prison crime was a large problem not only for the victims but also for the Confederate authorities as robbery and beatings were quite common at Castle Thunder. All prisons in the Confederacy experienced this problem which, at times, resulted in murder. Most of the crimes committed at the Castle consisted of stealing by individuals and organized

62 Richardson, Secret Service, p. 388
gangs. The authorities disapproved of such practices and the punishment was at times quite severe. In 1863, one prisoner named McAlister was the leader of an organized group of criminals who, with the occasional assistance of certain guards, passed him stolen clothes, hats, shoes and money into his cell number 4. McAlister would accumulate these goods over time and then sell them back to the other prisoners for a profit. There were also many other reported acts of robbery and violence at Castle Thunder. The weaker prisoners and recent arrivals, called "fresh fish," had to be especially careful of these actions, knowing that whoever resisted would suffer severe beatings. The age of the prisoner would not exclude him from possible danger. In one instance a man of almost sixty experienced such a beating that he almost died.  

Contact with the outside, which was very important to the prisoners, came in the form of letters to family, friends and military officials, and also visitors from

63 Individual punishments will be discussed in Chapter IV.

64 Testimony of Warden Lewis J. Blankenship before the Committee of Congress, p. 51.

65 Testimony of Frederick F. Wiley before the Committee of Congress, p. 47.
the area. Since mail was censored, no valuable information could be sent out, but the prisoners were allowed many freedoms in their everyday letterwriting. The long term prisoners needed this correspondence not only to send and receive personal information but also to take care of various official matters. This latter group of letters were written mostly by those inmates who wanted freedom very badly and felt that correspondence with various Richmond officials was a way to achieve that goal. These prisoners believed that they were not guilty of the charges brought against them or that the charges were not serious enough to warrant a long term confinement. Many captured Union deserters and other civilian prisoners went as far as to volunteer to join the Confederate States armed services if that meant freedom. Confederate authorities received letters every day from Castle Thunder prisoners who were requesting a hearing or review of their case on the grounds that they were confined without charge. Many of the prisoners of war simply requested to be treated as captured soldiers and not criminals. Such a recognition by the Confederates normally entailed a transfer to Libby

66Department of Henrico Papers (manuscripts in the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia), George W. Burke to General John H. Winder, 23 February 1863, Arthur Dutertre to General Winder, 23 September 1863.
or Belle Isle. The letters for many of the prisoners constituted their only contact with the outside world and perhaps the only hope for freedom.

It was possible for the more fortunate prisoners at Castle Thunder to have various forms of communication with individuals outside the prison. One female prisoner, Dr. Mary Walker, was allowed the liberty of leaving her private cell at the Castle to walk down the city streets of Richmond displaying her bloomer costume, blouse, trousers and boots. By taking these strolls, she achieved a great deal of attention and notoriety.\footnote{Mary Walker claimed to be a Confederate surgeon but her claims were suspect. Reverend J. L. Burrows, "Recollections of Libby Prison," Southern Historical Society Papers, vol. XI (1883): p. 89.} One other case has been recorded of prisoners allowed outside the walls of Castle Thunder. In May 1864, there was a shortage of troops available to defend the city against the invading Federal troops. Captain E. W. Vowles organized a group of Castle Thunder inmates, under the authority of Lucien Richardson, to aid in the defense of the city. These prisoners, who were all under an oath of allegiance to the Confederacy, generally acted in good conduct in this service and were recommended for parole.
upon their return to the prison. The few who disobeyed orders were immediately returned to the Castle under strict penalty. These instances, however, were unusual for the average prisoner was not allowed outside of the prison walls and any contact with outsiders came in the form of visitors. These visitors would oftentimes aid the captives by bringing in desired goods and, at times, by providing help in escape plans. Elizabeth Van Lew, a famous Richmond pro-Unionist and spy, not only helped Yankee prisoners in escaping to friendly lines but also provided aid for those who remained in prison. She both sent and brought to them gifts of food, books, clothing, and luxuries including various types of delicacies. These benevolent acts, most of which were financed by her own resources, continued until her property and possessions had been fully depleted. Miss Van Lew apparently had the freedom to carry on these pro-Union activities because she projected, in the eyes of the Confederate authorities, an image of a harmless, eccentric personality.

68 Record Group No. 109, Chapter IX, vol. 250 (Manuscripts in the National Archives, Washington, D.C.), Special Orders No. 117 and 120, Department of Henrico and Richmond, and Provost Marshal's Office, Richmond, Va., May 17, 20, 1864.

The prisoners with money, or influence that could lead to the obtaining of money, had the best opportunities to receive outside gifts and services. The famous "Bohemians"70 had no trouble in obtaining cans of preserves, butter and books because of their consistant ability to get secret money. They received Federal currency from the North in various ways and had no trouble changing that currency for Confederate script. The United States dollar was in great demand among the guards and other prisoners. Often they would change their U.S. money at a rate of one to fifteen.71 The Bohemians were given special privileges because the Confederates knew that word could travel quickly back to the North of any mistreatment. They were considered different and were shown to prison visitors by the Rebels "as if they were polar bears in a zoo." Some of these men were permitted to have an attorney—a privilege that was denied political prisoners in the North. One prominent lawyer

70The Bohemians were a group of newspapermen, war correspondents, who were captured at various places and placed in Castle Thunder as political prisoners. More will be discussed on these correspondents in Chapter V.

71Browne, Four Years In Secessia, p. 305.
hired by the Bohemians was Humphrey Marshall, a Kentuckian. Marshall's petition for parole for these men was denied by Robert Ould, the Confederate Commissioner of exchange, but he continued to work on their behalf. Other lawyers also made their services available to the wealthier inmates but had little success in obtaining their freedom. On the whole they received permission to see the prisoners at regular intervals and, in general, to carry on their legal procedures. The Rebel camp officials required a third party present at meetings between lawyers and clients, usually in the person of an officer. This was done to alleviate the problem of the passing of illegal contraband, and in cases of a sensitive nature.

Not all of the prisoners' contact with the outside world were of a pleasant or helpful nature and Castle Thunder officials had to deal constantly with the problem of prisoner harrassment of passers-by. This was the main


73 Testimony of William F. Watson before the Committee of Congress, p. 38.

74 Testimony of V. T. Crawford before the Committee of Congress, p. 29.
reason why the captives were not allowed to put their heads outside the prison windows. The warning shots fired by the guards frequently had little observable effect in deterring this practice. As a means of retaliation the prisoners sometimes took bricks from the chimney and threw them through the front windows at guards and hostile onlookers.\textsuperscript{75} Visitors to Castle Thunder were warned to be alert to this danger as they entered the prison. In a few cases beef bones large enough to knock a man down were thrown at visitors. On one occasion Alexander and all of his officers were forced to retreat from a shower of bones. To counteract this threat, prison officials engaged in whipping and other forms of punishment.

As suggested earlier, the threat of prisoner escape was a very large problem for the Castle Thunder officers and guards. Commandants Alexander and Richardson made every attempt to give the Castle better security. For the most part they were successful in limiting large scale escapes, but they were unable to prevent individuals and small groups from fleeing the prison. These escapes

\textsuperscript{75}Testimony of Lieutenant Cyrus Bossieux before the Committee of Congress, p. 48.

\textsuperscript{76}Testimony of John Caphart before the Committee of Congress, p. 78.
occurred throughout the war. On December 4, 1863, the United States ship Anacostia picked up eight of the successful escapees from the Castle a few miles north of the mouth of the Rappahannock. Numerous attempted escapes were foiled because of inside informers or traitors in the prisoners' ranks. Despite the fact that these informers were scorned by their prison comrades, they continued to collaborate with officials in exchange for special privileges such as extra rations and bedding. Even though this inside help did not eliminate the concern by prison authorities regarding escape, the leaders of Castle Thunder publicly assured the prisoners of their confidence in thwarting any potential outbreak. After one unsuccessful escape attempt, several of the recaptured prisoners were brought in front of Captain Alexander who declared in his usual pompous manner:

There is no use men, of trying to get out of here: it is absolutely impossible! You can make no movement; you cannot breathe; you cannot have a thought that is unknown to me. You might as well attempt to scale Heaven as escape from

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The Castle; so you had better behave yourselves, and become resigned to your situation.\textsuperscript{78}

The next night these prisoners and twelve others escaped from Castle Thunder and were never seen again by Captain Alexander.\textsuperscript{79}

There were various ways that the prisoners used to attempt this "impossible" escape, many of which showed great creativity and ingenuity. Some of the most popular attempts ranged from the lowering of the escaping captive from a window to the digging of tunnels or passageways. Descending from a window to the street below was quite risky, but still popular. More often than not, however, the fleeing captive would be discovered before he could get a few yards from the prison. This method required the use of all available resources at the prisoner's disposal. It was believed by at least one of the guards that one-third of all blankets distributed at Castle Thunder were cut up for the purpose of escape. Much of the material used for this purpose was obtained through theft and once the ropes were made they were zealously guarded by the prisoners.\textsuperscript{80} Tunneling was also a very

\textsuperscript{78}Browne, \textit{Four Years In Secessia}, p. 299.

\textsuperscript{79}Ibid., p. 299.

\textsuperscript{80}Testimony of Frederick F. Wiley before the Committee of Congress, p. 46.
popular, yet risky way of attempted escape. On many occasions tunnels and passageways were discovered before they could be put into operation. One case of escape through this method at the Castle occurred when a few prisoners removed a large stovepipe, which passed the floor of their room, and crawled through a hole to a basement where they easily made their escape.  

Another example of escaping via under-floor passageways involved a man named Booth and three others who were condemned to death on a charge of murder. Booth cut a hole in the floor of his cell while his comrades sang and danced as a means of making sufficient noise to drown out the sound of their activities. The four men later descended cautiously through the aperture into a store room where they found four muskets. They then made their escape out to the street by knocking down a couple of sentinels and killed another as they made their way safely to Union lines.  

There were many other more subtle ways of escaping from prison. Not the least of these methods was the

bribing of guards, either with goods or money. Oftentimes guards would pass on information to the escapees' friends outside as to meeting points and plans, and enough of a bribe could even get the guard physically to aid the fleeing prisoner. These plans in many instances, ran quite smoothly until the very end when small details would prevent the final realization of the goal. There was one frustrating case reported of a group whose plans were never realized because the guard was given the wrong roll of script which fell short of the specified amount.\textsuperscript{83} The guards were careful only to render aid of this sort for a very high price. It was frequently easier for a prisoner to wangle his way out of Castle Thunder by engaging in deception. George W. Hudson, a New York spy who knew escape was his only hope to gain freedom, persuaded a Negro to help him obtain a false order of discharge so that he could forge the signature of General Winder. Realizing that personal neatness would be later important in his flight to freedom, he spent several days washing clothes and cleaning up. Meanwhile his assistant left the falsified order on the desk of the Prison Adjutant.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., pp. 395-396.
Within days, his papers had been processed and he gained his freedom. 84

A more common way for the prisoner to escape through deception was to slip out in disguise or pretend to be sick or dead. A considerable number of prisoners at Castle Thunder were involved in a plan to smear their faces with croton-oil to produce eruptions. The surgeon, called in at exactly the right stage, would declare the disease to be smallpox. The "sick" prisoners would then be driven to the smallpox hospital in unguarded ambulances from which they jumped and ran for their lives. The doctors were puzzled at the agility of the patients and finally, after examining several of the cases, realized the deception. 85 One prisoner carried this form of contrivance one step further. While singing and dancing in front of his fellow prisoners, James Hancock raised his hands in the air, staggered around the floor, and seemingly passed out. The doctor pronounced Hancock dead in the great confusion that ensued. The body was placed in a cheap coffin for the long ride to the burying place. But

84 Ibid., pp. 391-392.

85 Ibid., pp. 389-390.
much to the surprise of the driver, Hancock had seemingly risen from the dead to jump off the wagon to safety.\textsuperscript{86}

Other prisoners, not going to this extreme, chose merely to pose in disguise in order to facilitate their escape. One prisoner reportedly blackened his face with burnt cork, borrowed an old suit of clothes and, after grabbing a bucket, followed the Negroes down three flights of stairs and past the sentinels. Hiding in the Negro quarters until after dark, he then made his escape. Another captive, who was sent to General Winder's office for examination, told the guard that he was a clerk of the Castle. He then ordered the guard to go to the corner to wait; and while the unsuspecting soldier obeyed orders, the prisoner leisurely walked off.\textsuperscript{87} There were numerous other ways in which these desperate men made their way out of Castle Thunder but their numbers were not great compared to those who were captured in the attempt.

Religion was an important part of the lives of many Confederate prisoners. Little is known of the worship

\textsuperscript{86}Burrows, "Recollections of Libby Prison," pp. 91-92.

\textsuperscript{87}Richardson, The Secret Service, pp. 390-391.
practices of the inmates at Castle Thunder, but several clergymen visited the camp from time to time. Camp Lee Chaplain Henry Brown made frequent visits to Castle Thunder as he seemed to have a genuine concern for the welfare of the prisoners. Castle Thunder had, for a short time, a camp chaplain. This Presbyterian Minister distributed tracts and preached every Sunday either in the yard or in one of the larger rooms. Catholic priests also made frequent visits to the prison to minister to both the mental and physical needs of the captives of that faith. Many of the day to day religious needs of the prisoners at Castle Thunder were tended to by various members of the clergy, such as Rev. William G. Scandlin, who were also captives there.

5) Medical Care: General Hospital #13 (Castle Thunder)

The medical care and hospital conditions for wounded soldiers and prisoners was of great concern to Confederate governmental and military authorities. During the first

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89 The name of this minister cannot be found in any available sources on Castle Thunder.

year of the Civil War, the Confederate Congress appropriated $50,000 for hospital construction, a figure which was to rise to $200,000 by the last year of the war. After a few months of fighting, civilian hospitals began to disappear and soon only military hospitals existed in the Confederacy run by appointed surgeons who were required to visit each sick or wounded patient at least once per day. As the war was prolonged, both hospital supplies and quality of care decreased and entrance to many hospitals was felt by the patients to be sure death. Richmond, which was the chief hospital center for the Confederacy, made use of factories, warehouses, stores, hotels and churches for the medical needs of the city. By January of 1864, however, there were only thirteen hospitals left in the capital city, one of which served Castle Thunder.\(^9^1\) Castle Thunder Hospital, or General Hospital No. 13 as it was officially known, occupied the abandoned tobacco factory of the Christian and Lea Company on the east side of Twentieth Street between Main and Franklin.\(^9^2\) This four-storied, flatroofed

\(^9^1\)Wyndham B. Blanton, Medicine In Virginia In the 19th Century (Richmond: Garrett and Massie Inc., 1933), pp. 297-302.

\(^9^2\)This site is now occupied by the Ideal Fishing Float Co., Inc.
brick building was also known as the Prison Hospital, Eastern District Military Hospital or Lunatic Hospital. General Hospital No. 13 opened its doors to mental patients and the sick and wounded from Castle Thunder in June of 1862. Prior to this time, the mental patients had been held in quarters with a capacity of fifty patients.93

All of the Confederate General Hospitals were under the direct supervision of the Surgeon General of the Confederate States Army who was, for much of the war, S. P. Moore. Serving directly under the Surgeon General, for the city of Richmond hospitals, was Surgeon W. A. Carrington who was the Medical Director of the city.94 It was Carrington who was responsible for relations between each of Richmond's hospitals and the government and army, and had a hand in all decisions and major inspections. There were many hospital inspectors who filed comprehensive reports on the conditions and treatment to Carrington's office at regular intervals. Finally, under all this bureaucracy, stood the hospital chief


94 "Medical Directors of Hospitals," Confederate States Medical and Surgical Journal, v. 1, n. 9 (Richmond: September, 1864), p. 152.
surgeon or medical officer. In the prison hospitals such as General Hospital No. 13, this surgeon not only had to deal with his medical superiors, but also had to answer to the camp commandant. The main problem confronting the chief surgeon was how to take proper care of his patients, many of whom were beyond help, while dealing with the problems of lack of supplies and proper facilities. In these prison hospitals, disease epidemics was a serious and frequent problem, often made worse by the lack of needed space.

The chief surgeon at Castle Thunder Hospital was a Virginian, Dr. H. T. Barton, who served in this capacity for most of the war. Following his tenure, Dr. W. W. Coggin briefly held the post. Under Barton, three to five assistant surgeons who were qualified doctors from various locations around the South functioned as assistants. This made the doctor-patient ratio anywhere from four to six doctors for the one hundred-fifty patients.95 There were from twenty to thirty other minor medical personnel who assisted the surgeons at General Hospital No. 13.96 Many of the stewards and orderlies were Southern citizens and

96 Waitt, Confederate Hospitals In Richmond, p. 14.
military personnel who had been assigned to hospital duty. Also many prisoners volunteered to work in the hospitals for a variety of reasons. These included the obtaining of extra rations for some, while others performed these duties not only to pass the long hours of captivity but also to render aid to their ailing comrades. The fact that many of the hospital supplies were constantly being stolen meant that still other prisoners could have volunteered for this duty to obtain materials that could be sold for exhorbitant prices.

The patients at Castle Thunder Hospital were admitted for a variety of reasons ranging from battle wounds to disease and mental illness.\(^{97}\) Surgeon's records and correspondence between the staff and Richmond military officials contain information as to the sicknesses experienced by prisoners in the hospital. The records show a wide range of stomach, circulation and respiratory problems along with typhoid, pneumonia, and infection due to poor sanitation. A substantial percentage of the patients were suffering from consumption and other such degenera-

\(^{97}\)There is very little record or material of any kind available on the mental patients and it can only be assumed that they were placed in the hospital in separate quarters receiving little or no treatment.
tive diseases which, at that time, were terminal. There were a number of confined soldiers who seemed to be ailing from a general feeble condition with no specific illness. Many of the older patients suffered from rheumatism and similar disorders. Although it was true that the conditions at General Hospital No. 13 were better for the patients than their cells in the prison itself, many prisoners still believed that admission to it was tantamount to a death sentence. The surgeons could recommend to the Confederate prison authorities various courses of action in dealing with their patients. Often they suggested that some of those who were too sick to be of any harm to the Confederacy, and were beyond help in the hospital, should be released. To do so, they argued, was not only humane, but a practical way of providing additional care for those who presumably could be saved. Epidemic was also a large problem for all Confederate hospitals including General Hospital No. 13. Smallpox was always a threat to the prison population. The

98Department of Henrico Papers (Manuscripts in the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia), Reports of Surgeon M. T. Bell to General Winder, 10, 11, November 1863.

crowded and unclean conditions at Castle Thunder were a breeding ground for infection. Thus surgeons and prison officials were always extremely careful to isolate any prisoner who carried a contagious disease. Whenever this occurred immediate treatment was given.

Many of the patients at Castle Thunder Hospital were only in for short-term treatment before they were either to go back to prison or to trial. Most of the correspondence from General Hospital No. 13 patients focused not so much on poor treatment as on their inability to have their cases heard. These communications were mostly requests to Alexander, Richardson, Carrington, or Winder asking for a trial or hearing date or for some kind of special consideration because they were ill. Some of these patients claimed to be loyal Confederates and many volunteered for active service when they regained their health. Others argued that their offenses were not serious enough to warrant imprisonment. Assistant Surgeon M. T. Bell noted in a letter to General Winder that since many of the sick may be loyal they should receive hearings before the Confederate States Commissioners or be allowed to sign an oath of allegiance.100 A few of the sicker patients

100Ibid. 11 November 1863.
claimed that since they were far too ill to pose a threat to the Rebel cause they should be allowed to spend their last days with their family. There were several cases of patients at Castle Thunder Hospital, as there were in the prison itself, whose only request was to learn the charges against them. Many of the sick did not know the reason for their arrest. ¹⁰¹

To gain admittance to the hospital, a prisoner could either approach a guard or medical officer about his sickness or wait until his condition was discovered. Each morning the breakfast roll would be called and if it were learned that a man was sick, the warden would report his name to the hospital surgeon. ¹⁰² By far the largest problem at General Hospital No. 13 was the lack of space. Assistant Surgeon Bell realized the extent of this problem and suggested that many of the prisoners in the hospital be put on immediate parole to make room for the very sick. In late 1863, Bell noted that the problem of overcrowdedness had become so acute that

¹⁰¹ Department of Henrico Papers (Manuscripts in the Virginia Historical Society), General information from correspondence of patients at Castle Thunder Hospital, Department of Henrico Papers.

¹⁰² Testimony of Baldwin T. Allen before the Committee of Congress, P. 21.
many of the sick were forced to lie on the floor.\textsuperscript{103} It was noted by one of the hospital stewards, T. G. Bland, that many of the pneumonia patients were unnecessarily there because of the punishment they had received of being placed in the prison yard for long periods of time with little or no cover. Bland also observed that the attitude of many of the hospital staff toward these men was extremely nonchalant and unconcerned.\textsuperscript{104} Bland, who was very critical of the mistreatment of the prisoners at Castle Thunder, was finally dismissed on the charge of moral incompetency.\textsuperscript{105} The question was raised in the 1863 investigation of the Castle that Captain Alexander may have mistreated some of the sick, but he denied all charges. He claimed that all punishment was first cleared through the surgeon and no man was inflicted with anything he could not handle.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{103}Department of Henrico Papers (Manuscripts in the Virginia Historical Society), Surgeon M. T. Bell to General Winder, 11 November 1863.

\textsuperscript{104}Testimony of T. G. Bland before the Committee of Congress, pp. 3-4

\textsuperscript{105}He was accused of appropriating the hospital liquor but the Castle Thunder authorities were simply looking for an excuse to get rid of him.

\textsuperscript{106}Testimony of Dr. John DeButts before the Committee of Congress, p. 39.
on the whole, the medical personnel assigned to Castle Thunder sought to provide adequate health care to the patients. Moreover, they often were compassionate in their efforts to obtain freedom for those whose medical prognosis suggested an incurable illness. The efforts of the surgeons and their assistants, however, frequently fell short because of the limited hospital space and the lack of sympathetic cooperation by prison officials.
CHAPTER IV

TREATMENT OF PRISONERS AT CASTLE THUNDER

1) Treatment

The verse of an old Confederate song is a humorous reference to the serious problem regarding the mistreatment of prisoners at Castle Thunder:

I'd ruther be on Grandfather Mountain
   A-taking the snow and rain
Than to be in Castle Thunder
   A-wearing the ball and chain. 1

There were varying degrees of punishment at Castle Thunder that at times were quite severe. This punishment was not a daily experience for most of the inmates and was meant to deter the prisoners from any violations of camp rules. The prisoners themselves thought that these punishments were far too harsh but the camp officials believed that it was quite important to maintain prison discipline.

The most common form of punishment at Castle Thunder was whipping. This flogging was done on the bare backs

or buttocks of the prisoners by heavy leather straps secured onto wooden handles. The entire instrument was from eighteen inches to two feet in length and weighed one and one-half pounds. Alexander would often order all officers to be present at these floggings which were usually given by the strongest of the guards. Most of the punished captives were given six to eight lashes, but some received as many as twenty-five or fifty for more serious offenses. The orders were given by General Winder, Captain Alexander or a general court martial and became, by 1863, a quite common occurrence at Castle Thunder. In preparation for this punishment, the prisoner would be tied to a post with rope and stripped almost completely. The guards testified that no excess suffering was incurred but the prisoners claimed that the cuts and bruises were at times quite severe. The offenses which warranted such a punishment were wide-ranging: stealing,
fighting, rioting, attempted escape and physical abuse of fellow prisoners. Groups of prisoners were frequently punished by this method together. In one case ten to fifteen men received a dozen lashes each while Captain Alexander called "lay it on." Prisoners were not the only victims of this flogging at Castle Thunder; Negro servants also would often receive from five to twenty-five lashes. Some eyewitnesses observed that black boys no more than eight years old and black women over sixty were turned over a barrel and severely whipped.

A punishment that was often more severe than flogging was the requiring of the prisoner to spend considerable time in the prison yard. One prisoner whose crime was attempted escape, was left outside in the late fall for three days with nothing to eat but bread and water. There was another more famous case of several prisoners receiving this punishment. These men made a minor explosion inside their cell, from small amounts of gunpowder taken from cartridges, for the purpose of waking up several North Carolina prisoners who were sleeping

6 Testimony of T. G. Bland before the Committee of Congress, pp. 3-4.
7 Richardson, Secret Service, p. 384.
8 Testimony of Warden Marion C. Riggs before the Committee of Congress, p. 31
near the wall. As punishment for this crime, Alexander and Winder placed all prisoners of this cell outside for three days since nobody would turn in the names of the guilty parties. The time of year was November and the men were exposed to constant freezing rain with no covering available. Many of these prisoners had to be taken to the prison hospital afterwards and several died of pneumonia.

"Barrel Shirts" constituted another form of punishment that was both uncomfortable and degrading. This device was made by sawing a flour barrel in half and cutting arm holes in the sides with an aperture in the barrel head for the insertion of the wearer's head. This punishment was not quite as painful as others but the prisoners might have to wear it for three days. The barrels were very heavy; but the humiliation was greater. Prisoners accused of fighting were often required to wear this cask.

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9 Testimony of Dennis Conners before the Committee of Congress, p. 30.

10 Testimony of William Causey before the Committee of Congress, p. 2.

11 Testimony of T. G. Bland before the Committee of Congress, p. 5.
"Bucking" was equally as degrading and more painful than were the "barrel shirts." It was done by passing a split across the elbows and tying them beneath the thighs "after the manner of a calf going to market."\textsuperscript{12} This punishment had to be endured for two to four hours and in one case a prisoner was forced to assume this position for part of two days.\textsuperscript{13} After a few hours the prisoner's hands were often black from the stagnation of blood in them.\textsuperscript{14} The Confederate prison officials used this torture to degrade the victims as much as possible. In one instance twenty were "bucked" in a row\textsuperscript{15} and in another case a captive assumed this position for four hours in front of the main office entrance where he could be in plain sight of all visitors.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12}Testimony of Warden Marion C. Riggs before the Committee of Congress, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{13}Testimony of T. J. Kirby before the Committee of Congress, p. 24

\textsuperscript{14}Testimony of Warden Baldwin T. Allen before the Committee of Congress, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{15}Testimony of T. G. Bland before the Committee of Congress, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{16}Testimony of James McClasher before the Committee of Congress, p. 43.
The most painful of all punishments at Castle Thunder was the hanging of prisoners by their thumbs from suspended rods. This thumbing, or "trysting up," was taken from an old sailor's punishment and was used for various offenses.\(^{17}\) The men were tied up as high as they could go on their tiptoes with their hands secured by a small size whip cord. Prisoners would at times be in this position from morning until night, causing their thumbs to become discolored.\(^{18}\) Most victims of this punishment were accused of stealing or fighting.

The handcuffing or temporary tying up of prisoners was a common punishment at Castle Thunder for minor offenses. Prisoners' hands often turned black from the tightness of the rope and the long hours of waiting to be untied.\(^{19}\) For more serious offenses, Alexander would order the prisoner to be tied to a post so tightly that he could not stand or sit. When the blood began to

\(^{17}\) Testimony of J. F. Shaffer before the Committee of Congress, p. 10.


\(^{19}\) Testimony of Warden Baldwin T. Allen before the Committee of Congress, p. 20.
stagnate the guards finally took pity on them, and removed the rope. 20 Five hours in this position was not uncommon punishment for crimes such as bribing a guard. At times it was also accompanied by gagging which was simply the placing of a stick or foreign object in the prisoner's mouth so he could not speak or yell. One step beyond the tying up or handcuffing of the prisoner, was to place the unfortunate captive in irons or attach him to the infamous ball and chain. The minor offenders were placed in irons but the worst characters were forced to wear the ball and chain for as long as six months. 21

Alexander admitted that he used hot irons for the "branding" of some of the inmates. This seemed overly cruel even to the Confederate authorities but was defended by Alexander who claimed that surgeons chose the location for the irons to be placed and could also recommend certain men to be too ill for this torture. 22


21 Testimony of John Adams before the Committee of Congress, p. 36.

There was at least one small cell at Castle Thunder, which the prisoners referred to as the dungeon, in which they were kept for varying lengths of time depending on the offense. This room was also referred to as the "sweat house" and was only six feet square, making it impossible for the prisoners to extend themselves fully.\(^\text{23}\)

Solitary confinement in this cell was frequently accompanied by the placing of irons on the victim. A man could lie down but there were no windows or protection from heat or cold.\(^\text{24}\) The guards allowed the prisoners to leave the cell once per day to walk around for a short time. When the prisoner returned he found himself with plenty of air and water, but the lack of light made the cell seem smaller and the hours longer.\(^\text{25}\) Prisoners complained that the floor was all mud and water and no warm or dry spot could be found in certain seasons. Confinement in this cell could last as long as two days and two nights.\(^\text{26}\)

\(^{23}\) Testimony of T. G. Bland before the Committee of Congress, p. 4.


\(^{25}\) Testimony of Dennis Conners before the Committee of Congress, pp. 30-31.

\(^{26}\) Testimony of John Adams before the Committee of Congress, p. 36.
It was documented by witnesses that two prisoners at Castle Thunder were shot and killed during the first year of the prison's existence. Both of these men failed to heed the warnings of guards as they rushed to freedom. 27 One of these prisoners was a transferred captive from Libby who presumably was mentally deranged, but the guard who shot him probably was not familiar with his condition. 28 In all cases of shootings at the Castle, witnesses testified to the fact that the victims could have been subdued by other means. 29 Alexander claimed that the general order to shoot when other methods were not possible came directly from General Winder 30 but prisoners argued that the commandant instructed the guards to shoot at anyone who did no more than place his head outside of a window. 31 There were many other reported instances of prisoners being fired at for standing near or looking out of windows.

27 It was believed by many that others were shot during this time and many more were also killed afterwards.

28 Testimony of J. F. Shaffer before the Committee of Congress, pp. 2-3.

29 Testimony of William Causey before the Committee of Congress, p. 2. Testimony of Warden Marion C. Riggs before the Committee of Congress, pp. 31-32.


31 Testimony of John Adams before the Committee of Congress, p. 37.
This apparently occurred because Alexander, who supposedly said that he had to kill ten men to keep order at the Castle, expected his directions to be followed completely. This activity continued after Alexander left the prison. On March 2, 1864, the Richmond Whig reported of one guard who fired into a window from which prisoners were throwing objects at passers by. Detective J. L. Wooters immediately went to the room to see if anyone had been hurt. Wooters thoughtlessly stuck his head out the window and was immediately shot in the left eye by the same guard who had fired before. He died that night.

At Castle Thunder, some of the prisoners had been sentenced to hang and were waiting only for their execution date while others were expecting the same verdict. There were several instances of hangings of prisoners accused, for the most part, of spying. These condemned prisoners were taken from Castle Thunder to Camp Lee where the premade scaffold was waiting for them. The sentenced prisoner would usually arrive at Camp Lee the morning of

32Testimony of Dr. Lundie before the Committee of Congress, p. 22.
33Richmond Whig, 2 March 1864.
34Kimmel, Mr. Davis's Richmond, p. 142.
the execution for the purpose of spending his last few hours with a clergyman. When the time for the hanging drew near, the prisoner would be led to the scaffold through the crowd of onlookers which was usually quite large.\(^{35}\) After a brief prayer, a black hood was placed over the condemned man's head before the noose was secured tightly around his neck.\(^{36}\) The event did not always run smoothly as more than one instance was recorded of the rope breaking or the noose slipping. These occurrences did not discourage the Confederate guards as the sentence would always be carried out to completion.\(^{37}\)

One example of an execution at Castle Thunder by hanging was the case of a Captain Deaton. Deaton was a Tennessee loyalist confined in Castle Thunder on the charge of espionage. He was treated very roughly by the Castle Thunder guards and officers as his trial approached. False evidence was brought against Deaton and he was con-

\(^{35}\)Allan Pinkerton, The Spy of the Rebellion (Chicago: A. G. Nettleton and Co. Pub., 1884), pp. 550-559


\(^{37}\)Pinkerton, Spy of the Rebellion, pp. 554-558. Browne, Four Years In Secession, pp. 310-312.
demned to death. On a cold and dreary November day his execution was to take place. This execution, unlike most of the others, was at the Castle. John Caphart was in charge of the event and seemed in very good spirits on this occasion. Caphart had once boasted that he had assisted at the death of all persons executed in Richmond for many years. It was reported that he treated Deaton quite roughly and cursed the condemned prisoner who was suffering and in generally poor health. The rope was placed around Deaton's neck and an underling was ordered to pull the drop. The rope broke and a surprised Deaton sat down on the scaffold. Caphart "flew up" to the platform and cursed the prisoner again as he once more tied the rope around his neck. Deaton seemed to recover from his weariness and tried to support himself. Caphart, fearing that he would fall before the door was sprung, cried, "Hurry, hurry! The damned Yankee will die in your arms if you don't hang him quick!" The second time the rope did not break and Deaton died.38

Among the charges made against Alexander was his alleged use of a vicious black Russian bloodhound named "Hero" who upon command would savagely attack the prisoners.

38 Browne, *Four Years In Secessia*, pp. 310-312.
It was reported among the Negroes at the Castle that this dog subsisted on human flesh. Other reports, from people not associated with Castle Thunder, were made of this dog being turned into the cells of the prisoners where he tore the life from the "sickly men who couldn't have survived even the best treatment." Whether the dog was as harmful as was reported remains a question, but he was exhibited all over the North, after the war, as a vivid reminder of Rebel war atrocities.

2) Congressional Investigation

The precise motives for the 1863 Congressional investigation into the treatment of prisoners at Castle Thunder are difficult to determine. They were probably a combination of genuine concern on the part of Confederate authorities for the reports of cruel punishment, and a

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40Ferguson, Life Struggles, p. 36.


42Some outside observers reported that the only thing formidable about "Hero" was his size. One claimed that he was deathly afraid of smaller dogs. Burrows, "Recollections of Libby Prison," p. 89.
staged act to quell much of the criticism of the Confederate prison system. To some of the Rebel officials present at the trial, the testimony was little more than a formality as the innocence of Alexander, and the system in general, was a preconceived and obvious truth in their minds. There were others, however, who took the trial seriously and weighed all testimony fairly. The investigation was a result of the continuous accusations of barbarous and inhumane treatment at the Castle in the first few months of that prison's existence. A resolution of Caleb C. Herbert of Texas in the Confederate States House of Representatives was adopted on April 4, 1863, stating that a special committee of five was to be appointed to inquire into, and report to the House as soon as possible, information concerning:

1) What punishments, if any, in violation of law had been inflicted upon the prisoners confined at Castle Thunder; and the kind and character of the punishment inflicted by the officers of the prison.

2) How many captives had been killed, by whom and the circumstances under which they were killed.

3) The resolution declared that: the committee was to have power to send for all persons and papers needed.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{43}O.R. Ser. II, vol. V, p. 866
On April 6, 1863, the special committee of investigation was announced. The original members of the committee were: Caleb C. Herbert of Texas, William R. Smith of Alabama, Daniel C. DeJarnett of Virginia, William W. Clark of Georgia and William D. Simpson of South Carolina. Four days after this announcement, Clark moved that he be dismissed from the committee. That same day, Augustus R. Wright of Georgia was appointed to take his place. The testimony itself was taken from April 11-19, 1863. There were many witnesses including guards, officers, civilians and prisoners. On April 29, 1863 Caleb C. Herbert was granted permission to suspend congressional rules so that the testimony could be reported and printed. On May 1, 1863, a majority report signed by three committee members, and two minority reports were presented to the chair to be made public.44

It was obvious from the first day of testimony, that the majority of those present sympathized with Captain Alexander and his men. On April 13, Alexander helped his cause immeasurably by presenting a four-page defense of his actions. He was quite convincing and

eloquent as he quickly obtained the sentiment of those present. Knowing that much of the testimony was going to be damning against him, Alexander was wise in requesting early in the trial that all witnesses that had not yet been called, be removed from the courtroom during the testimony. He began his presentation by quoting Napoleon and the defining of a "good officer" which, according to Alexander, described the defendant perfectly. Alexander continued by stressing his good service record and loyalty to the Confederacy to illustrate the point that all actions were done with good intentions. The oration was concluded with a defense of his actions, many of which were listed separately. After telling the committee that Castle Thunder was the only military penitentiary in the Confederacy, he described the "terrible" character of the inmates, arguing that disciplinary measures were at times needed to keep order. The commandant firmly believed that the corporal punishment he used had a salutary effect. But he was quick to

45 Alexander made the distinction between penitentiary and prisoner of war camp. Castle Thunder was the only jail for many of the civil offenders in the South.
point out that it was only necessary in about twenty
cases of the thousands handled.46

The majority report of the committee, signed by
Smith, Wright and DeJarnett, stated that: "the prison
as to cleanliness and comfort was well managed, the
discipline was rigid but good and successful, and the
treatment of the prisoners was as good as the circum-
stances would allow." As to the report condemning the
whipping of prisoners, it stated that it was only done
in cases of obvious violation of prison law and occurred
before Congress had passed a law prohibiting this mode
of punishment in the army. Other forms of punishment were
also condemned by the report, but in each case the point
was stressed that no permanent harm to individuals was
done. The report also emphasized that these actions
occurred in a small number of cases and only obstreperous
leaders were punished. The majority report concluded with
the point that Alexander had shown good traits of character
and had done an excellent job in administration: "Con-
sidering the nature of military prisons and especially in
view of the desperate and abandoned characters of the

46 Defence of Captain Alexander before the Committee
of Congress (Richmond: House of Representatives, 1863),
pp. 55-58.
inmates of Castle Thunder who are described by witnesses as being in the main murderers, thieves, deserters, substitutes, forgers and all manners of villains . . ."

Alexander was praised for his promptness and determination to enforce the rigid discipline that was necessary. \(^47\)

In opposition to the majority report, the first minority report, dated May 1, 1863, was signed by W. D. Simpson. Simpson believed that certain actions taken by the Castle Thunder officials toward the prisoners should be condemned. These actions included the killing of two prisoners, the shooting of a third, the infliction of corporal punishment by whipping on the bare back and the confining of prisoners in the prison yard exposed to adverse weather conditions. Simpson reported that even though many of the modes of punishment were regrettable, Captain Alexander should not have been dismissed because of the lawless and desperate nature of the prisoners he was dealing with. He further stated that Alexander's discipline was at times illegal, improper and unjustifiable, but since no serious consequences resulted further action by the House was not necessary. Simpson firmly believed that Alexander acted not out of wantonness and

cruelty but rather from a desire to maintain proper discipline. ⁴⁸

A second minority report, from committee member Caleb C. Herbert, was presented on the same date, May 1, 1863. Herbert began his report by listing the stated goals and reasons for the hearing. He continued by commenting that the witnesses proved in their testimony that the punishment at Castle Thunder was cruel and degrading. Herbert further observed that much of this mistreatment came from direct orders of General Winder while Captain Alexander was responsible for the remainder. Herbert believed that many of the practices at the Castle should be censured by Congress. One specific practice mentioned in the report was that of having the same guards who accused the prisoners of camp violations sit as witnesses against them. This, he called, "a novel and original method of enforcing the discipline of a prison." Individual abuses of prison discipline and punishment were listed by Herbert who called them barbaric and shameful acts which could not be defended by reasonable men. To those who claimed that the desperate character of the

inmates warranted the abusive treatment, he responded that the function of a military prison was to protect society from such people. Herbert continued his report by stating that the two shootings at the Castle were without provocation since no danger to the guards existed in either case. The report concluded with the statement that both Winder and Alexander had shown poor judgment and, therefore, should not only be censured but removed from their positions of authority. Herbert considered it to be a tragedy that the officers and guards of the Castle imitated Alexander's cruelty and injustice.49

Despite the weight of the testimony detailing prison abuses, the investigation never came to any conclusions as to the responsibility for the poor conditions; thus no dismissals or reprimands ensued. As a result the conditions of the prisoners improved very little in the last two years of the war. Andrew Johnson, a prisoner confined at the Castle in late 1863,50 complained of the


50 This was not the same Andrew Johnson that was to become President.
"horrible treatment" he received but, as in the case of previous complaints, nothing was done. The women inmates, on the other hand, received generally good treatment and seemed to have only kind things to say about Captain Alexander. It appeared that these women were not only treated well, but also were never witnesses to any of Alexander's infamous modes of punishment.

3) Attitudes toward Castle Thunder and its prisoners

Within the Confederacy, there were differing opinions concerning the prisons and the prisoners ranging from one of sympathy to extreme resentment and animosity. These views were reflected among civilians, government officials and military personnel. The prison system was always of primary concern to Confederates as seen by the fact that twice during the war the Confederate Congress investigated charges of prisoner mistreatment. Both times, however, the army was exonerated and on March 3, 1865, a joint Committee of Congress went as far as to say that prisoners


52 Testimony of Charlotte Gilman before the Committee of Congress, p. 28.
in the South were almost coddled whereas Confederates in
the North were starved, smothered, shot and robbed. 53

Castle Thunder, with its prisoners of reportedly
"desperate and abandoned character," 54 was viewed differ-
ently from other Confederate prisons by Southerners.
A large percentage of Southerners considered the Castle
to be the holding place for many of the undesirable and
criminal elements in the South. Not everyone in the
Confederacy was antagonistic to Castle Thunder and its
inmates, however, as many either were sympathetic to the
plight of the unfortunate residents or rendered direct
aid in various ways. At least one Confederate Congressman
believed that not only was Captain Alexander responsible
for the mistreatment of the inmates there but General
Winder and the Richmond prison bureaucracy were also to
blame for much mismanagement. 55 The conditions of the
prison were closely watched by many concerned Southerners
as both army authorities and clergy voiced their distress

54 Kellogg, Life and Death in Rebel Prisons, p. 368.
for the well being and comfort of the inmates. It was not too uncommon for local residents to have sympathetic attitudes toward Castle Thunder that, as we have learned, at times culminated either in gifts of food, clothing and other needed goods or in direct aid in escape plans. There was a fairly large concentration of Unionist women in Richmond that aided the Union cause, mostly through help to prisoners at Libby, Belle Isle and Castle Thunder. A large group of these women raised over $13,000 in gold to aid escaping prisoners but their visits and gifts of food and small luxuries were more appreciated. Many of these women were treated with great cruelty by the Rebels when captured and most, ironically, were confined in Castle Thunder. Elizabeth Van Lew was the most famous of these. As noted in an earlier chapter she rendered great aid to Union prisoners in Richmond while the Confederates thought of her as the harmless and eccentric "Crazy Bet."

The attitude of the officer corp at Castle Thunder toward the inmates ranged from indifferent to hostile.

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57 L. P. Brokett and Mary C. Vaughan, Woman's Work in the Civil War, (Philadelphia: Zeiger, McCurdy and Co., p. 779.)
Each prisoner at the Castle was looked upon differently according to his or her offense, but the disloyal Southern citizens seemed to receive the majority of the verbal and mental abuse. George W. Alexander, in his tenure as commandant, set the tone for the officers and guards toward the prisoners. He seemed to possess a sense of ultimate power and superiority over all captives which, at times, resulted in overzealous punishment. This punishment, which took the form of both physical and verbal abuse, resulted, as we have seen, in the 1863 investigation of Castle Thunder by Congress. Alexander considered himself able to rule the camp with an iron hand and believed that his orders should be carried out to the fullest extent. It was the implied right, according to Alexander, for the commandant to closely monitor and screen all activities within the camp. 58

In the testimony of the Congressional Committee's investigation, it can clearly be seen that Captain Alexander and his underlings were far more concerned with the punishment of the "low quality humans" in Castle Thunder than they were with making life better for them. Alexander used stern and abusive language when dealing with the

58 Defence of Captain Alexander, pp. 55-58.
prisoners such as "shove them in there," and "put them in there, God damn them."\(^\text{59}\) Castle Thunder Detective Robert B. Crow believed that even though he had a great deal to excite and provoke him, Captain Alexander at times spoke to and treated prisoners harshly when there was no occasion for it.\(^\text{60}\) Alexander was not viewed as abusive by all his subordinates, however, Commissary Stephen B. Childrey believed that he was a positive man, in dealing with the desperate lot of prisoners, who only wanted discipline and loyalty to his command.\(^\text{61}\) There was little doubt that Captain Alexander had his favorite prisoners who constantly received extra considerations. Many of the prisoners believed that one such group that received preferential treatment were the journalists, perhaps because Alexander had a certain degree of literary pretension dealing with his own writing ability.\(^\text{62}\) These

\(^{59}\) Testimony of Detective William Causey before the Committee of Congress, p. 9.

\(^{60}\) Testimony of Detective Robert B. Crow before the Committee of Congress, p. 11.

\(^{61}\) Testimony of Stephen B. Childrey before the Committee of Congress, pp. 18-19.

\(^{62}\) Browne, Four Years In Secession, p. 295.
favorites often would go unpunished for crimes that would warrant severe discipline in other cases. 63

Alexander refused many prisoners the right to counsel for defense for the simple reason that that was his right as commander. 64

The lower ranking officers and guards at Castle Thunder shared Alexander's feeling of superiority with respect to the prisoners. Following the pattern set by their leader, they too became abusive. In doing so, they justified their actions with the rationale that harshness was needed to bring such dangerous captives under control. Detective John Caphart, who exemplified this attitude, believed that the inmates at Castle Thunder were the worst set of prisoners he had ever seen. In fact, he argued, it was unsafe for any Confederate official to walk in their midst. But despite the threat posed by these inmates, Caphart added, they received better treatment than that received by prisoners in related institutions. 65

63 Testimony of T. J. Kirby before the Committee of Congress, p. 9.

64 Testimony of V. T. Crawford before the Committee of Congress, p. 28.

65 Testimony of Detective John Caphart before the Committee of Congress, pp. 5-6.
The reliability of Caphart's testimony was seriously questioned by fellow detectives. Not only did they challenge his qualifications as an officer, but cited instances in which he shook his fist at, cursed, and threatened several prisoners with little or no provocation.  

Detective Robert B. Crow testified before the investigating committee that Caphart exulted in the punishment of prisoners. On one occasion he was reported to have said: "damn them (prisoners), I'd take a knife and cut them to pieces." In all, the prisoners came to believe that Caphart consistently functioned as a vile and inhumane officer—a willing subordinate who was primarily responsible for carrying out Alexander's "tyrannical orders."  

Other minor Castle Thunder officials were noted for their abuse and constant degrading of the prisoners while a few seemed more compassionate. Warden Baldwin T. Allen,  

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66 Testimony of William Causey before the Committee of Congress, pp. 8-9.  
67 Testimony of Detective Robert B. Crow before the Committee of Congress, p. 10.  
68 Testimony of T. J. Kirby before the Committee of Congress, p. 25.  
69 Testimony of G. W. Bland before the Committee of Congress, p. 12.
who was quite often intoxicated, was considered a rough man and prisoners reported that only on rare occasions would a kind response come from him. 70 Warden Marion C. Riggs, on the other hand, was well liked by all the prisoners who thought of him as a kind man. Prisoners were known to have said that they could have escaped at times when it was Riggs' night on duty but they would not do so for fear of compromising his character. He was known to even have stayed up until midnight at times with the prisoners drinking whiskey. 71 Riggs could walk among the captives without molestation at all times, but was looked down upon by his fellow guards and was often-times "snubbed" by Alexander. 72 Riggs, in turn, had a feeling of disrespect toward the other Castle Thunder officials. He could not tolerate Alexander's cruelty, Allen's abusiveness, and Caphart's brutality. 73 Fortunately, there was no problem with such treatment from the

70 Testimony of T. J. Kirby before the Committee of Congress, p. 24.

71 Testimony of Frederick Wiley before the Committee of Congress, p. 46.

72 Testimony of T. J. Kirby before the Committee of Congress, p. 25.

73 Testimony of Marion C. Riggs before the Committee of Congress, p. 31.
hospital staff; at all times they were considered to be generally kind.
CHAPTER V

SPECIAL GROUPS OF PRISONERS

Castle Thunder was a unique Southern prison in that it housed different kinds of prisoners in addition to captured soldiers. These groups, as we shall see, constituted a very interesting cross-section of inmates from both the North and the South, many of whom were celebrated personalities. In all, there were five such groups including spies, Confederates, "Bohemians," women and postwar prisoners.

1) Spies

One facet of any war that adds an air of mystery and excitement is the secret undercover activity known as spying. Such activity was widespread during the Civil War as it was quite easy for these agents to enter enemy ranks to obtain intelligence data. The Confederate Government was aware of this practice and many were arrested for espionage. Many of those engaged in spying infiltrated the enemy army ranks or other circles of
society. These men would frequently gather a great deal of information and then leave for friendly lines, while others had connections that would channel information home. Espionage also took the form of one posing as a private citizen to collect valuable information from inside sources in the civilian hierarchy. Some of the most successful spies were women who were able to get close to the decision making process in different ways. These women seemed harmless in their dealings with high ranking governmental officials, but gathered much data and information from these unsuspecting victims. The Confederates had a broad definition of espionage activity and anyone suspected of any undercover dealings was arrested even if there was little incriminating evidence. These officials realized the potential and actual danger that existed behind the large pro-Unionist sentiment in the South. The captured spies were placed, for the most part, in Castle Thunder where they received relatively poor treatment and had little chance of freedom. Spying was often punished by hanging.

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1 Kane, Spies for the Blue and Gray, pp. 11-12.
One accused Union agent who was confined in Castle Thunder was Spencer Kellogg. Kellogg was born in Kansas and grew up during some of the bloodiest fighting in pre-Civil War America. He joined the United States Navy in 1861 but soon found that his interests were more in obtaining information from the enemy through deception and illegal activity. At the age of twenty, Kellogg had his first chance at espionage; he boarded the Rebel gunboat "General Polk," on the Mississippi River, under the guise of a Yankee deserter. At first the Confederates were wary of Kellogg and his partner, a man named Trussel, but quickly took a liking to the young Kansas native. The two men seemingly worked hard for the Rebels, but all the time were observing the details of the ship and Confederate shore batteries. As time passed the Confederates became suspicious of Kellogg's inquisitiveness so he was forced to join their army where he kept up his masquerade. At the first opportunity he escaped to Union lines and reported all the information he had learned to General U. S. Grant.  

\[\text{2Stern, Secret Missions, 108f.}\]
Spencer Kellogg volunteered in late 1862 for another mission of espionage in which he was captured after sinking a ferryboat on the Mississippi. Realizing who he was, the Rebels quickly sent him to Castle Thunder to stand trial. He was convicted of spying and sentenced to hang on September 25, 1863. At half past twelve on the date of execution, Kellogg arrived at Camp Lee and mounted the scaffold after a brief prayer. As the noose was placed around his neck, Kellogg removed his hat and tossed it into the large crowd that had gathered to witness the event. It struck an onlooker to whom the condemned prisoner remarked, "excuse me sir." Detective John Caphart then tied the prisoner who continued to remain calm. His hands and feet were tied, and he was given his hat to wear one last time as a Negro fastened the rope around the top beam. Kellogg feared that his fall would not be sufficient to break his neck and requested a readjustment. The rope was changed and, after another brief prayer, he pronounced himself ready. With that, the door was dropped and Kellogg died. Spencer Kellogg seemed very philosophical about the execution as he had reportedly remarked to a passer by on the way to the gallows: "Did you ever pass
through a tunnel under a mountain? My passage, my death is dark, but beyond all is light and bright."³

The story of Timothy Webster's capture, confinement and execution at Castle Thunder as a spy is a similarly tragic, yet fascinating drama. Webster engaged in numerous spy activities in 1861 in Richmond and January 1862 made another trip to the Confederate capital to obtain information from the many connections he had there. By late January, he had obtained considerable data but became too ill to make the long trip home. He was living in secrecy in a Richmond hotel and was ably nursed by his close friend Mrs. Hattie Lawton; but his condition did not improve. The Union authorities became quite anxious about Webster's condition and sent two other agents, Price Lewis and John Scully, to find him. Through connections, the two agents located Webster in the Monumental Hotel, but the suffering spy told them to leave town quickly as he suspected trouble. Scully and Lewis were arrested by General Winder who told them they would hang if they did not give desired information. The first to talk was Scully who told the entire story to Winder. A plan was worked out whereby Scully was to ask Webster to testify

³Ibid., 118-120.
in his behalf at the trial on the grounds that he was a valuable witness. Upon arriving at Winder's office, Webster and Mrs. Lawton were arrested as spies and confined in the Castle. 4

Webster's trial for espionage was immediately set. Lewis and Scully were prime witnesses and even though they tried to lessen the effect of their testimony, the evidence against Webster was overwhelming. The sickly Webster was calm and composed throughout the trial and did not waver even when the guilty verdict was pronounced. After the day of execution had been set Hattie Lawton, who had been released after only a few days in prison, was permitted to see Webster for the first time since the trial had begun. She fixed up his cell at the Castle in order to provide the condemned man the most comfort, and arranged a meeting with President Jefferson Davis. Davis, however, was engaged with General Lee so Mrs. Lawton could only plead Webster's case to Mrs. Davis. Hattie Lawton's pleas went unheeded; thus she and Webster were forced to accept the condemned man's fate. Webster accepted his execution with calmness and dignity, but he could not endorse hanging as the means. He went to General Winder to request that his sentence be carried

4Pinkerton, Spy of the Rebellion, pp. 485f.
out by a firing squad, but the General denied the request and declared that the hanging was to commence on schedule.\(^{5}\)

On the date of execution, Captain Alexander arrived at the condemned man's cell at quarter past five o'clock in the morning and in a sad scene, the prisoner said good by to his devoted friend Mrs. Lawton. As Webster arrived at Camp Lee, a crowd of spectators had already gathered. Upon arrival he was directed to a small room to spend his last few hours with a clergyman. At ten minutes past eleven Webster, who was quite sickly, made his way to the scaffold. He ascended the steps and gazed out on the large crowd that had assembled. The black cap was placed over his head and the signal was given to spring the trap door. As happened so often, the hangman's noose slipped, and Webster fell to the ground. The rope was again placed around his neck, this time painfully tight. Webster declared that he had to suffer a double death as the rope would choke him to death before he hanged. After the deed had been done, Webster was removed, but not until after Mrs. Lawton had requested to see him one last time. The bereaved woman accused Alexander of

\(^{5}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 541f.}\)
On the scheduled execution date, Captain Alexander arrived at the condemned man's cell at quarter past five o'clock in the morning and in a sad scene, the prisoner said goodbye to his devoted friend. Pinkerton, *Spy of the Rebellion*, 554-556.
murder but, as if stung by the accusation, the commandant laid his hand on Webster's forehead and declared:

As sure as there is a God in heaven, I am innocent of this deed. I did nothing to bring this about, and simply obeyed my orders in removing him from the prison to the place of execution.

Mrs. Lawton's plea to have the body sent North was denied and Webster's corpse was burned.⁶

2) Confederates

The Confederates did not hesitate to put into prison their fellow Southerners, and Castle Thunder contained many such "disloyal" citizens. Not all of these captives were deserters and disloyal citizens, some of them were officers of prominent members of Southern society. Their imprisonment was well known but they did not received any special consideration. Oftentimes disloyal Confederates were treated very badly because the guards and officers of the Castle looked down on those they thought were traitors. Captured Southerners often were isolated from the other prisoners. Not a few of them, it should be observed, had friends locally who were willing to render them whatever aid they could. The three

⁶Ibid., p. 550f.
case studies used for illustration focus on people with completely different backgrounds and who found themselves imprisoned in Castle Thunder for different reasons.

The first two, William Croft Hyslop (Heslop) and Moses Overton, were connected directly to the Confederate States Army at the time of their arrest and imprisonment. Hyslop was a secret courier for the Confederate Army whose job it was to transport messages in cipher from one place to another. One day in early 1863, he arrived in Richmond with a coded message that could only be read when one key word, that was only known to him, was inserted. As he reached the Confederate capitol, he realized that he had forgotten the word, thus making the message useless. The Confederate authorities immediately locked the unfortunate Hyslop in Castle Thunder until a time when his memory could improve. He finally recalled the word and the message was then translated. It conveyed information to General Lee that if his army was near Baltimore, two hundred men could be called upon for aid in the campaign. Hyslop was released from the Castle but was relegated to smuggling drugs for the Confederacy as he was no longer trusted with secret messages.  

Moses Overton had dealings of a different nature with the Army of Northern Virginia. He was arrested and sentenced to Castle Thunder for desertion from his regiment. But he received special notoriety and publicity since, as it turned out, he was General Lee's personal bodyguard. In view of his special circumstances, Overton considered himself very lucky not to be executed because his leaving camp was a personal insult to the General. While in prison, Overton was the model inmate and, at one point, passed up an opportunity to escape via a hole that led to the basement. If captured, he surely would have been hanged.8

A final case study dealt with the most famous and influential Confederate confined in Castle Thunder during the Civil War, Samuel Ruth. Ruth was Superintendent of a fifty-five mile section of the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad that stretched from Richmond to Hamilton's Crossing, a point five miles south of Fredericksburg. This section of track was an essential supply line to Lee's armies during 1862 and 1863 since much of the fighting was centered around Fredericksburg. Lee had always complained of the inability of his army to

8 Kimmell, Mr. Davis's Richmond, p. 142.
receive needed supplies and reinforcements in that area when called for, and blamed the problem of slowness on Ruth's casual attitude and lack of energy. General Lee based his accusations on the fact that Ruth laid off employees of the railroad for a supposed lack of funds and that he also had taken many months to rebuild the strategic South Anna bridge when it was destroyed in 1862. At times, General Lee even wondered if his troops could maintain their positions around Fredericksburg because of the general slowness in the moving of supplies. Jefferson Davis was informed of these problems as Lee strongly urged the president to replace Ruth with a more efficient superintendent.

Despite all of Lee's accusations against him, Samuel Ruth remained in charge of the R. F. and P. until early 1865. Confederate authorities, including Davis, Secretary Seddon and Ruth's boss Peter V. Daniel Jr., in ignoring Lee's requests, did not realize the extent of Ruth's pro-Unionist sentiment. Ruth did no more in

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his role as Superintendent than was necessary to maintain his job but nothing positive could be proved against him. By 1864, however, Ruth had become involved in espionage activity and had regular contact with Federal intelligence. These activities included: 1) reporting the strength of the guard force of the R. F. and P. and Virginia Central Railroads, 2) sending account books of the commissary stores of the R. F. and P., 3) reporting of the transfer of supplies from blockade runners to railroads, 4) giving the Federals the precise number of troops sent by Lee to defend Wilmington in December 1864, 5) communicating to Grant the size of Jubal Early's forces in the Shenandoah prior to a defeat at the hands of Sheridan at Waynesboro (March 2, 1865), 6) informing Grant of Confederate strength in southwest Virginia just before a devastating Union cavalry raid through the region in December of 1864, 7) giving to Northern authorities a report on the lack of Lee's supplies and the amount of destruction of railroad track in Richmond and Petersburg, 8) describing Lee's intention to attack Fort Stedman in March 1865, 9) and reporting of a Confederate attempt to exchange tobacco for bacon smuggled through Union lines which resulted in the Federal capturing
400,000 pounds of tobacco and the prevention of the bacon reaching Confederate lines.\textsuperscript{11}

From the years 1863 to early 1865 some of Ruth's assistants were arrested but the superintendent eluded all charges. In early 1865, Confederate authorities became quite suspicious of Ruth but not for the activities heretofore mentioned. Ruth was involved in plans to aid escaping citizens and prisoners to Northern lines and, on January 19, 1865, eight of them were arrested. From testimony taken from these people, Ruth was arrested on January 23, 1865 on the charges of treason against the Confederate States Government, and was immediately confined in Castle Thunder.\textsuperscript{12} The first public account of the arrest of Samuel Ruth came in the \textit{Daily Examiner} of January 25, 1865 which said that he was captured after remarkable disclosures of his aid rendered to escaping parties of Italians, wealthy Jews and others. The paper went on to note that Ruth and his two associates, J. H. Timberlake and Isaac Silver, had been helping escapees to the banks of the Potomac for several years.\textsuperscript{13} \texttt{The Sentinel}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11}Ibid., pp. 37-40.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Stuart, "Samuel Ruth and R. E. Lee," pp. 91-94.
\item \textsuperscript{13}\textit{Daily Examiner}, 25 January 1865.
\end{itemize}
reported the next day that the trial was to be delayed a couple of days so that many key state's witnesses would have time to arrive in Richmond. Predictably, many close associates of Ruth found these charges hard to believe because of his good character.\textsuperscript{14} No substantial evidence against Ruth was produced and he was released from the Castle on February 1, 1865. Both the \textit{Daily Examiner} and \textit{The Sentinel} were quick to report this and the latter paper went further to say that this action was expected all along.\textsuperscript{15} After the war, Ruth reported of all his activities and claimed that he, a loyal Pennsylvanian, was a patriotic Unionist from the beginning of the war until its conclusion.

3) "Bohemians"

In any conflict, the war correspondents stand apart from all others and are an interesting and unique group of professionals. They have been described as being neither soldier nor citizen, as being with but not in the army, and as being at but not in the battles. In the Civil War the Bohemians, as they had been christened in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Sentinel}, 26 January 1865.
\item \textsuperscript{15} \textit{Daily Examiner}, 2 February 1865. \textit{The Sentinel}, 2 February 1865
\end{itemize}
that conflict, led a romantic, carefree, half-literary and half-vagabondish life.\textsuperscript{16} These newsmen not only reported the war, but also brought battles alive for those at home. They studied strategies, troop movements and personalities closely, and then wrote in a manner designed to make the fighting an interesting and continuously flowing story. Many Southerners resented Northern journalists, believing that they only reported a one-sided story without proper fairness to the Rebel cause. To report accurate accounts of the battles, the reporters were forced to travel with the army and at times found themselves in the midst of the fighting. These newspapermen often fell victim to the enemy forces as many were killed, wounded or captured. The unfortunate Bohemians were confined, for the most part, in Castle Thunder. In the Castle, they received relatively good treatment as the authorities were afraid of stories of mistreatment reaching the Northern newspapers. At times, the Castle Thunder officers even seemed proud of these well known reporters in their prison and showed them off to visitors like polar bears in a zoo. The list of

\textsuperscript{16} Browne, \textit{Four Years In Secessia}, pp. 13-14.
Bohémians confined in the Castle was not a long one but did include five renowned reporters:

1) Leonard A. Hendrick- Herald (New York)
2) Soloman T. Buckley- Herald (New York)
3) George H. Hart- Herald (New York)
4) Albert Deane Richardson- New York Tribune
5) Junius Henri Browne- New York Tribune.\(^\text{17}\)

The memoirs of two of these journalists, Albert Deane Richardson and Junius Henri Browne, which were published after the war, give a fascinating account of their travels with the Federal army and their later capture and imprisonment in Castle Thunder. In early May, 1863, Richardson, and his comrade Junius Browne, joined Richardson H. Colburn of The World on boarding a barge for the purpose of traveling down the Mississippi River fifty-five miles past Vicksburg to meet Grant's troops. River travel was much shorter in time and distance than was the trip by land, but it was also quite dangerous since Confederate shore batteries had to be passed. The trip of the three reporters was interrupted by gunfire from these batteries as shells exploded around their vessel. Browne watched from the deck much to the dismay of his two friends who shouted constant warnings.

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., p. 303. Richardson, Secret Service, p.387.
A couple of days later, a report was given to General William T. Sherman of the presumed death of these newspapermen whose barge was supposedly sunk. But the three Bohemians were, in actuality, captured and taken to the Confederate provost marshal in Vicksburg. The men were promised release via exchange but instead they were sent to Libby Prison in Richmond. There were pressures from many in the North, including Secretary Stanton, for their exchange, but Confederate authorities refused to release them. Robert Ould, the Confederate agent, claimed that noncombatants should not be in a war zone and also that the reporters should in no way receive special treatment.  

On September 3, 1863, Richardson and Browne were transferred to Castle Thunder to relieve the overcrowding at Libby. Browne reported that the Castle, though disagreeable on account of its occupants, was better on the whole than Libby because there was less tyranny and malice evident. He went on to say, however, that tedium was easily relieved at Libby by conversations with intelligent and well bred officers; but at the Castle the Bohemians were forced to depend on their own society.

18 Starr, Bohemian Brigade, pp. 184-189.

19 Browne, Four Years in Secession, p. 295.
Richardson, in agreeing with this last point, regretted leaving the Libby officers and the organized classes in Greek, Latin, French, German, Spanish, Mathematics and Phonography. He also missed the surgeons and chaplains who were on hand at Libby to encourage amateurs in Physiology and Dialectics. While at Castle Thunder, Browne and Richardson soon welcomed Leonard A. Hendrick and Soloman T. Buckley of the Herald who were captured by Mosby's raiders. George H. Hart, also of the Herald, captured by Mosby, and the five imprisoned Bohemians soon had camaraderie in their filthy room. When alone, they played whist and talked of little but escape. The five reporters were in the same mess at Castle Thunder and assisted each other in relieving the long hours of boredom. Boxes and books received from the North helped them live in relative comfort. In commenting on how they utilized their time, Browne said:

The days of our cooking and playing scullion had passed; we had assistants there to perform menial offices; and consequently, we had ample leisure for reading and indulging in our favorite amusement of whist, in which, from long practice, we attained considerable skill. The Castle was lighted with gas, which burned all night when we did not turn it off to hide some attempt to escape--so that we could

20Starr, Bohemian Brigade, pp. 188-189.
sit up as late as we chose. We had nocturnal lunches from our bountiful supplies, and often sat over coffee and sardines and preserves, smoking our cigars, until the sentinels beneath the grated windows called the hours of two and three in the morning. During no period that we were in captivity, did we of The Tribune subsist beyond a few days at a time on prison rations.\textsuperscript{21}

Junius Browne was sick much of the time during his captivity but his indignation toward the enemy and his determination not to die in a Southern prison greatly helped his endurance.\textsuperscript{22} Hart and Hendrick were exchanged after two months confinement for a couple of Richmond Enquirer reporters imprisoned in the North, and Buckley was released on another special exchange, but Richardson and Browne remained at Castle Thunder.\textsuperscript{23} The two Tribune men were permitted to hire an attorney to seek their release. Their lawyer, however, was denied all requests to gain their parole. The two reporters then petitioned Secretary of War James A. Seddon for freedom but without success. On February 4, 1864, Browne and Richardson were transferred to Salisbury Prison.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Browne, \textit{Four Years In Seccessia}, pp. 304-305.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Richardson, \textit{Secret Service}, p. 383.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Browne, \textit{Four Years In Seccessia}, pp. 303-304.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Starr, \textit{Bohemian Brigade}, pp. 189-190.
\end{footnotes}
4) Women

The story of Castle Thunder is made perhaps more interesting by the fact that women were imprisoned there along with the men. They were housed in separate quarters and were there, like the men, for various offenses. What we know of these women convicts comes from personal memoirs of both men and women, prison records, and newspaper accounts. The Daily Richmond Enquirer reported on July 25, 1863, that many of the Castle Thunder records were made available to them because of the transferring of their records to a new set of books. The Enquirer noted that these records furnished an interesting field of entertainment which blended the history and romance of the war. The paper proceeded to say that one of the most fascinating aspects of the items from Castle Thunder which they were allowed to report dealt with the female prisoners. Conclusions drawn from these items were that approximately one hundred women had been imprisoned in the Castle up until that time for reasons of treason, disloyalty, disaffection, demoralization of soldiers and a host of minor offenses. It also appeared that the imprisonment usually ended in the transportation of the

24 Starr, Bohemian Brigade, pp. 189-190.
parties to the North. The *Enquirer* then listed several of the most interesting cases of women prisoners, concluding with the statement that the women existed in prison in pitiful condition no better than the savage.25

One of the minor offenses to which a woman could be charged at Castle Thunder was posing as a male either in the army or other related areas. Cases such as these were not infrequent and resulted in only short-term imprisonment. Madame Loreta Janeta Valazquez was the best known of these individuals. In her memoirs published after the war, she tells of disguising herself as a man for the first years of the war so that she could obtain valuable information for the Confederacy. When arriving in Richmond, she was under suspicion by General Winder and mistakenly arrested as a Union spy and placed in Castle Thunder. She told Captain Alexander the entire story concerning her exploits and was finally released from the Castle and continued her career in male attire.26

Similarly, Mary and Molly Bell were two young women from southwest Virginia who for two years masqueraded in


male attire and served in the Army of the Confederacy. They were finally discovered in their disguise after one had become a corporal while the other had risen to the rank of sergeant. They were immediately arrested when discovered and held in Castle Thunder until the time when they could be released in the custody of relatives.²⁷

Another woman, Margaret Underwood, a native of Washington, D.C., was arrested and imprisoned in Castle Thunder under suspicion of being a spy and having doubtful political and moral character. It seems that Mrs. Underwood, having a sweetheart in the Confederate service, donned male attire and mustered into the company as a substitute. Her deception was soon detected and she was immediately sent to Castle Thunder where she remained for seven or eight months before being sent North.²⁸

There were many other reasons for women being imprisoned by the Confederacy that were at times not well defined. The terms suspicious and disloyal had broad definitions ranging from Union sympathy to actual aid to the Federal cause. The case of Dr. Mary Walker has already been mentioned and seems quite unusual.

²⁷Lutz, A Richmond Album, p. 58.
²⁸Daily Richmond Enquirer, 25 July 1863.
when compared to the other Castle Thunder inmates. Mary Walker was imprisoned for falsely claiming to be a surgeon in the army. She could seemingly come and go from her private cell at the Castle as she pleased. Another unusual case at the Castle was that of Mary Lee. Miss Lee, after being in prison for three months on a charge of disloyalty, gave birth to a baby girl to which she named Castellena Thunder Lee in honor of the prison. She was released upon recovery since no charges were sustained against her. Mary would return from time to time to Castle Thunder with little Castellena who reportedly looked "gay and healthy as if she had been born in a palace." 29 Some of the prisoners, both men and women, at the Castle were charged with nothing. Charlotte Gilman was kept there with no charges against her because she was a star witness in a counterfeiting case. The unfortunate Gilman was imprisoned for over one year before gaining freedom. 30

The final case study is that of Miss Laura J. Johnson of Raleigh, North Carolina. She was engaged to be married to a soldier who left her to go with his company

29 Ibid., 25 July 1863.
30 Ibid., 25 July 1863.
to Virginia. Miss Johnson attempted to follow her fiancé and reached Petersburg before her money ran out. She walked through that city and on to Richmond, but ruffians along the way ravished her. When released, she continued to the capital in a weary, sad, and sick condition. That night she came upon the guard at Mayo's Bridge in Richmond and, with no pass and unable to give a coherent account of herself, was carried to Castle Thunder. After her story proved to be true, she became the center of much attention and sympathy among the officers of the Castle. By subscription, they bought her clothing and refreshments, and gave her enough money to return home after a few days of rest.\footnote{Ibid., 25 July 1863.} This incident illustrates that those at the prison were not devoid of all humanitarian concerns.

5) Post War Prisoners

The occupying Federal troops used Castle Thunder as a prison after the war for those local residents who were branded troublemakers and disloyal to the United States. The Castle also contained those arrested for robbery, looting and other criminal offenses as it became
an extension of the city jail. Mixed in with the drunkards, rowdies and felons were some prominent residents of the city who did not find the transition to Federal rule a pleasant one. Frequently they refused to show some of the United States officials the respect that they demanded.

Two of the more famous inmates of Castle Thunder in post-Civil War Richmond were journalist Anthony M. Keiley and Lucius Ballinger Northrop, the former Commissary General of the Confederacy. Keiley was the editor of the *News*, which was a newspaper founded in Richmond on May 13, 1865. In its columns, Keiley attacked the military authorities then in control of Virginia with great animosity and bitterness. These attacks resulted in the paper being suppressed on June 23, 1865, and its editor arrested and imprisoned in Castle Thunder. Keiley was paroled on July 3, but the publication of the *News* remained forbidden.32 Lucius Northrop was a native of South Carolina and classmate of Jefferson Davis at West Point. At the conclusion of the Civil War, in which he served as Commissary General for the Confederate States, Northrop returned to a recently purchased farm near

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Raleigh, North Carolina. On July 3, 1865, Northrop was arrested by Union authorities on the charge that he had willfully starved Union prisoners of war. These charges were never substantiated but the former Confederate Commissary was confined in Castle Thunder, which he referred to as "Chateau de Tonnerre," until November 2, 1865 when he received his parole.

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CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Historical interpretation of the Civil War, especially in the period immediately following the conflict, has been critical of the Confederacy for inefficiency and lack of organization in government. The Southern prisoner of war system has been the brunt of much of this criticism as it has been believed that the lack of proper planning, along with widespread apathy, led to extensive suffering. Close analysis, however, indicates that the Confederate prison system was a great concern to the Confederate leaders. These men considered this to be a considerable problem with no apparent solution. There is no doubt that these prisons were the scene of much suffering and human misery as, for whatever reason, the Confederates were unable to take proper care of their captives.

Many Southerners have tried to justify the Confederate cause and various aspects of the rebellion. They have rationalized the prison system with three basic
justifications: 1) equal suffering was witnessed in Federal prisons, 2) the ending of the cartel for prisoner exchange led to overcrowding in Confederate prisons, 3) there were great shortages of all supplies all over the South and as a result proper care could not be given to the prisoners. There is some validity to all these justifications, but the Confederate States Government must take full responsibility for the suffering that was evident in their prisoner of war camps.

This thesis has attempted to answer three basic questions: 1) what was the importance of Castle Thunder to the Confederate war effort? 2) what was the attitude of various Southern groups toward Castle Thunder and its prisoners? 3) who was responsible for the condition of the prisoners at Castle Thunder? In answer to the first question, Castle Thunder served a valuable purpose for the Confederacy in that it housed the majority of the South's non-combatant prisoners. There were a few captured soldiers in the Castle, but the prison's major function was for the confining of various other groups of prisoners. In answer to the second question, there was a great range of mixed emotion dealing with this prison ranging from sympathy to extreme resentment.
There were many who showed a genuine concern for the inmates of Castle Thunder but most Southerners considered the prison to be a necessary evil. The Confederate Government could be classified in the latter group as they realized the need for such a prison but did not like the constant adverse publicity that surrounded it.

The final question on Castle Thunder concerned the responsibility for the living conditions in the prison. This issue is the focal point of the thesis as all aspects of Castle Thunder were considered in dealing with it. There was no doubt that the conditions at the Castle were quite uncomfortable and daily survival seemed to be a major concern for many. The living conditions were dirty, unhealthy and overcrowded and the food was inadequate. To a certain extent, rationalizations for this situation were valid as there were shortages and a lack of facilities throughout the Confederacy. When a close look is taken at Castle Thunder, however, it seems obvious that more vigorous measures could have been taken by Confederate authorities to improve conditions at the prison. There are many documented cases of gross mistreatment of prisoners. To many in the Confederacy the beatings, whippings, and hangings were justified because the inmates
of Castle Thunder were thought of as the lowest form of humanity.

Many of the abuses and miserable conditions that were experienced in all Southern prison camps, however inhuman, remained unpunished after the war. There was, however, a large outcry against the Southern prisons in post war America. This sentiment was only slightly pacified by the trial of Henry Wirz, the commandant of Andersonville prison. Wirz seemingly was chosen as the lone sacrifice as not only was he a non-American by birth, but he also represented the camp that was the epitome of human misery and considered by many to be a living hell. Captain George W. Alexander was also a representation of the system. Alexander, however, never received the notoriety that plagued Wirz. Captain Alexander also had the advantage of dealing with a mixture of prisoners that did not include many captured soldiers so the Northern vindictiveness was not focused on his prison.

The study of Castle Thunder is more than simply a look into one of the many Confederate prisons. This Provost Marshal's prison in Richmond not only served a unique purpose for the Confederate army, but was also and interesting story of human interest. Among the inmates
were thieves, deserters, disloyal citizens, Negroes, captured soldiers and women. This mixture of inmates made for a variety of unusual stories and events. In general, the treatment of the prisoners at Castle Thunder was not always humane and was at times quite severe. There were numerous stories of human interest in Castle Thunder that set it apart from other prisons, but life for the captives within its walls was, for the most part, a miserable experience.
APPENDIX
VIEW OF CASTLE THUNDER, IN RICHMOND.—[SKETCHED BY A. W. WARREN.]
Castle Thunder, grim Confederate civil and military prison
CASTLE THUNDER PRISON YARD
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VITA

The author was born in Los Angeles, California on March 20, 1956. He then moved to Ohio with his family at an early age. There he received his primary education, with the exception of one year spent in Illinois, as well as his secondary education which culminated in graduation from Upper Arlington High School in 1974. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts in History from the University of Richmond in 1978. In September 1979 the author commenced employment at the Virginia Historical Society.