

West Point: Civil War Concentration Camp

By

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When Lieutenant Thomas Stowell Phelps, United States Navy, stepped ashore at West Point on the evening of May 3, 1862, he was shocked to discover there “about fifty prisoners of the rebels, mostly women and children, living in a horrible condition, in sheds, and without the common necessities of life.” Phelps, in command of the gunboat U.S.S. *Corwin*, reported that “I at once decided to remain and hold possession of the place, protect the people and prevent a further destruction of property by the rebels, until the arrival of the commanding officer of the Navy Division.”

Phelps and the crew of the *Corwin* had joined the race of Union warships up the York River early on May 3 when it became clear that Confederate forces had withdrawn from their lines around Yorktown, where they had kept the northern Army of the Potomac at bay for more than a month. Along with U.S.S. *Currituck*, under the command of Acting Master William F. Shankland, *Corwin* seized Confederate ships and supplies. Shankland’s initial orders were to proceed up the Pamunkey River and burn the railroad bridge at White House, thus preventing use of the Richmond and York River Railroad to evacuate Confederate troops from West Point. Phelps, however, found West Point already abandoned. “Several partially built gunboats and the York River Lightboat were on fire, and two regiments that morning arrived from Richmond on their way to Yorktown were just leaving in the cars. White flags were waving on shore.” The slow Union gunboats could not catch the departing train; Shankland’s orders were countermanded in hopes that the railroad might be used by Union troops engaged in the pursuit of retreating Confederates.

After raising the stars and stripes in West Point, the northern naval officers began interviewing the prisoners who had been left behind by their Confederate captors. They were for the most part Virginians, many from Elizabeth City County (now the City of Hampton), “and sent here by Gen. Magruder on account of their Union proclivities.”¹

The firing on Fort Sumter, April 12, 1861, drew a deep fracture across the map of the United States. It would be a gross oversimplification, however, to conclude that all southerners supported the Confederacy or that all northerners favored Lincoln’s efforts to preserve the union. When Virginia held a public referendum on May 23 to approve the action of a state convention that called for secession, more than 32,000 of its voters (about one in three) opted for keeping the commonwealth part of the United States.² Unionist sentiment was particularly strong in the mountainous areas of the western part of the state (a portion of which would become West Virginia in 1863) and in Hampton Roads, where

¹ Phelps, Thomas S. Letter of 8 May 1862 to Prof. A. D. Bache, Superintendent, U.S. Coast Survey. *New York Times* 23 May 1862.

² Long, E. B., and Barbara Long. *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971, 77.

a federal military presence, then as now, meant that many Virginians' paychecks were signed in Washington, D.C.

People who held the minority viewpoint about secession were feared and distrusted, to an extent in the first year of the war that often bordered on the hysterical. Amid the hysteria, however, there was legitimate concern on the part of governments north and south that disaffected citizens might offer their services as spies to the opposite side. This anxiety translated into the arrests of thousands of civilians, both north and south, often on the flimsiest evidence of wrongdoing. On April 27, 1861, President Lincoln suspended a fundamental American legal privilege—the writ of *habeas corpus*—in the north, citing a concern for public safety. Jefferson Davis did not officially suspend *habeas corpus* in the south until February 27, 1862. In practice, however, southern civilians already were being imprisoned without charges, often “for military necessity.”

This was the prevailing atmosphere when the newly organized Confederate government began to focus on the strategic importance of Tidewater Virginia, where navigable rivers and the Richmond and York River Railroad, with its terminus in West Point, offered an avenue to its capital. On May 3, 1861—exactly one year before Lieutenant Phelps would make his shocking discovery in West Point—Thomas J. Page, acting aide-de-camp of the Virginia Navy, wrote to Harrison Ball Tomlin, a King William County lawyer, with news of his appointment as a major of Virginia volunteers:

Should you accept, you are hereby authorized, under the proclamation of the governor of Virginia, of the 3rd instant, to call out, from the counties of King William and New Kent, two companies of infantry or rifles and one company of artillery.

It is designed to place at West Point, King William County, a battery (from four to six guns) to prevent the ascent of hostile vessels, and guard the terminus of the railroad. The troops you have been ordered to collect are for the protection and defense of this battery. It will be constructed as soon as the proper officer can be obtained for the purpose, and you are desired to take post at that point, and do all in your power to forward the objects in view, and give instruction and discipline to the troops.³

Tomlin arrived in West Point on May 9 and set to work mustering the requested companies. Within a week he had assembled a battalion of more than 200 soldiers: a King William unit called the Taylor Greys, under the command of Captain William R. Aylett; and two New Kent units, the Barhamsville Greys, under the command of Captain Joseph Richardson, and Pamunkey Artillery, commanded by Captain Robert T. Ellett.⁴

³ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Series I, Vol. 2. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880, 801.

⁴ Tomlin, Harrison Ball. “Letterbook of Major H. B. Tomlin, May 3–October 11, 1861.” Richmond: Virginia Historical Society.

Almost immediately, Tomlin encountered a host of headaches. The naval officer assigned to the battery at West Point was Commander William Conway Whittle, an old salt who before secession had seen long service in the U. S. Navy.⁵ Whittle argued that the Pamunkey Artillery, lacking field pieces of their own, should logically be attached to the “fixed battery” at the point and therefore serve under his command. This fostered both interservice rivalry and a flurry of letters and telegrams between West Point and Richmond. The fixed battery itself, which originally was envisioned to contain “four to six guns,” never had more than three.⁶ Early efforts of both Tomlin and Whittle to curb the sale of “ardent spirits” at the “public bar room” (likely the West Point Hotel) came to naught. Then Camp West Point was visited by a measles epidemic, and Tomlin felt obliged to send the sufferers to their respective homes to avoid spreading the contagion any further.

More sinister threats also occupied Tomlin’s mind. Well aware of the weakness of the post under his command, he must have worried about spies who would communicate this vulnerability to the enemy.

On June 12, Tomlin wrote to Major General Robert E. Lee:

I have in the guard house a man taken on the [Pamunkey River railroad] bridge at midnight, last night. Says he is a Scotchman, though he looks more like a Yankee, and can give no satisfactory account of himself. I have also 9 Yankees from New Jersey in the guard house. Today, I earnestly hoped to have received a letter from you by Mr. Gregory, with whom I sent 3 men to you. Our mails are only every other day. Permit me to ask instructions for my direction in such cases.⁷

Lee’s response was both measured and wise. He encouraged Tomlin to defer to civil authorities when dealing with civilian matters. The case of the midnight bridge walker—later identified as William Forby—was subsequently referred to Joseph Mayo, the mayor of Richmond. Lee also cautioned Tomlin regarding his other prisoners: “The fact of them being from the North ought not to convict them of crimes.”

Had Tomlin continued to report to Lee, it is possible that West Point might not have become a nineteenth-century prototype for concentration camps that, eighty years later, would shock and disgust the civilized world. However, on June 28, 1861, Camp West Point was transferred to the District of Yorktown and placed under the overall command of Brigadier General John Bankhead Magruder.

Magruder was both flamboyant and intemperate. At his best, “Prince John” could put on quite a show. By moving his troops back and forth in the Yorktown defenses, he convinced Union observers and the ever-cautious General McClellan that he had far more

⁵ Mitchell, Henry H. “Captain William Conway Whittle, C.S.N. (1805–1878).” 2006.

http://www.victorianvilla.com/sims-mitchell/history/whittle_william.htm. (14 July 2008).

⁶ “Letterbook of Major H. B. Tomlin.” On July 9, 1861, in response to General Magruder’s request for “any unmounted artillery” to be forwarded to the defenses of Yorktown, Tomlin wrote that the battery at West Point possessed a mere three guns—“two IX-inch shell guns and one 32-pounder.”

⁷ *Ibid.*

men than he actually did. With dramatic flair, he would delay the advance of the much stronger Army of the Potomac for weeks. At his worst, Magruder had a dark side and a capacity for hair-trigger excess.

In early August, Magruder showed something of his dark side.

Having known for some time past that Hampton was the harbor of runaway slaves and traitors, and being under the guns of Fort Monroe, it could not be held by us even if taken, I was decidedly under the impression that it should have been destroyed before; and when I found . . . its extreme importance to the enemy, and that the town itself would lend great strength to whatever fortifications they might erect around it, I determined to burn it at once.⁸

Perhaps the presence of many citizens with unionist leanings in Hampton—along with the runaway slaves and traitors—strengthened Magruder’s resolve to destroy the town. Needless to say, the unionists not only were left homeless; many were swept up in a dragnet of suspicion, which led to their being sent to West Point, well behind the lines, where they could do no mischief. Whole families evidently were transported to West Point. Now, Major Tomlin had a new headache—where to house this influx of civilian prisoners.

It is unfortunate that Tomlin’s letterbook, now at the Virginia Historical Society, is incomplete, with its latest entry on October 11, 1861.⁹ The missing pages might tell us more about the plight of these families. As the weather began to get colder, concern for the prisoners—especially the women and children—must have been uppermost in their captors’ minds. On December 17, A. C. Myers, the Confederate Quartermaster General, wrote from Richmond to Captain Robert P. Archer, assistant quartermaster at West Point.

Sir: You will have to provide fuel for the disaffected persons held in custody at West Point. The regulation allowance has strictly no application to them, and if from the tender age of some of the children accompanying adult persons or from the exposed character of the building¹⁰ in which they are confined you find it necessary to exceed the usual allowance of fuel you have authority to do so.¹¹

⁸ *Official Records*. Series I, Vol. 4, 571.

⁹ The marbled back cover and an unknown number of leaves are missing. By the end of 1861, Tomlin’s battalion had been combined with other small units and designated as the 53rd Virginia Infantry, with Tomlin as colonel. By the time Union forces arrived in West Point in May 1862, the former garrison of West Point was stationed near Suffolk, Virginia.

¹⁰ No contemporary document makes clear where the prisoners were kept. Few habitable structures stood in West Point in 1861. However, a town “Hand-book” published in 1888 states, “In colonial days West Point was the seat for the collection of revenue for the Crown of Great Britain, when taxes were paid in tobacco. Remnants of the old tobacco warehouses are to be seen now near the ‘Point’ where the King’s revenue in the shape of the narcotic weed was stored.” It is possible that these decrepit warehouses, dating back to the time when West Point was “Delaware Town” and still visible in 1888, housed the prisoners. (Lewis, H. I., Diggs, Isaac, and Bagby, T. P. *West Point, Virginia, and King William County, 1888*. Richmond: Waddy, 1888, 14).

¹¹ *Official Records*. Series II, Vol. 2, Part 1 (Prisoners of War), 1407.

The West Point prisoners, however, were not without someone to champion their cause. As they shivered in their makeshift confinement, a prominent Richmond lawyer was working to bring about their release.

Adoniram Judson Crane was a victim of the most unfortunate timing. Ready to cap a distinguished legal career with his nomination by Abraham Lincoln as U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia on March 26, 1861, Crane watched it all turn to dust and ashes with the commonwealth's secession. Fortunately for Crane, he was free to continue his legal practice. He also was fortunate in his family connections. His father, William Crane, had moved to Richmond from New Jersey and became one of the city's wealthiest merchants. His late wife had been a great-granddaughter of President John Adams. His brother, William Carey Crane, lived in Texas, where he was president of the institution that would become Baylor University.¹²

The elder William Crane was a devout Baptist who had served as a deacon in Richmond's First Baptist Church and helped to found the Richmond African Missionary Society. It's not surprising, given his deeply religious upbringing and recent career disappointment, that A. Judson Crane entered the Civil War era with a desire to represent those who appeared to be victims of injustice.

It is possible that Crane was working for the release of some West Point prisoners by late August. Brigadier General John Henry Winder, Richmond's Provost Marshal, wrote to Secretary of War Leroy Pope Walker regarding several of Crane's clients on August 28, 1861.

Sir: I have had the honor to receive your letter of the 23d instant inclosing a statement made by A. Judson Crane, esq., in the cases of the following prisoners, viz: Samuel Lumpkin, Joseph Rawlings, Simon Schermerhorn, B. Kimball and Belleville or Bellfield, with instructions to make inquiry and report in each case. I have the honor to state that I have searched the Adjutant-General's Office and the War Office and can find no documentary evidence in any of these cases. Yesterday, however, I saw General Magruder, from whose jurisdiction these prisoners were sent, and from him I learn that except Lumpkin these are all dangerous persons and ought not to be at large; that there can be no doubt but they would as two others have done immediately go to the enemy with whatever information they might have to communicate. General Magruder will as soon as he returns to Yorktown send a full statement in each case. I will therefore withhold the report until General Magruder's communication is received.¹³

Winder's letter does not make it clear where the prisoners named in it were being held. Subsequent Confederate records, however, give the dispositions of four of these cases, in which the prisoners Simon Schermerhorn, William Belvin (*sic*), Benjamin Kimball, and Joseph Rollins (*sic*) are named. Kimball is identified as a resident of Elizabeth City County, the home of many West Point detainees. Note how "guilt by association" fac-

¹² Cathcart, William. *The Baptist Encyclopaedia*. Vol. 1. Philadelphia: Everts, 1881, 288.

¹³ *Official Records*. Series II, Vol. 2, Part 1 (Prisoners of War), 1374.

tored into one of the arrests, and how these “dangerous persons,” on closer examination, turned out to be not so dangerous at all.

Simon Schermerhorn—Native of New York; forty-five years of age; a cripple; for aught that appears before me his arrest and confinement were cruel. He was arrested near Yorktown by a guard and never examined. He has some children here and some in New York, and some property there. Prefers to remain in Virginia if he can do so without losing his property at the North.

William Belvin [likely the man identified in Winder’s letter as Belleville or Bellfield]—Native of Virginia; of Gloucester; oysterman, twenty-seven years old; has three brothers in our army at Gloucester Point; a married man; no charge against him. He ought to be discharged.

Benjamin Kimball—Fifty-five years of age; native of Maine; resident of New Market, Elizabeth City County; married and has four children. His wife was a widow with children, and one of her sons, a Virginian, in our army. Belvin married his daughter; an oysterman; took the oath of allegiance; no charge against him. I think he ought to be discharged.

Joseph Rollins—A native of York County. No charge against him. He ought to be discharged.¹⁴

If Crane was successful in securing the release of some of his clients, it appears that he continued to work unsuccessfully for the release of others. As in the case of Major Tomlin’s letterbook, a missing letter written by Crane might provide so much more information about those being held in West Point than the sketchy details currently available. What we do know is that Crane wrote to Judah P. Benjamin, the second Confederate Secretary of War, on February 3, 1862.

Sir: Some four or five weeks ago I had the honor of communicating to you a memorial of sundry persons now held at West Point as prisoners of war. That memorial set forth certain grievances and asked relief. Having heard nothing from the Department over which you preside in reference to that communication I respectfully request to be informed what action if any has been had on the said memorial and what expectation the said memorialists may longer indulge of having their condition corrected, and I have the honor to be

Your most obedient servant,

A. Judson Crane

Benjamin wrote at the bottom of Crane’s letter, “Have inquired into the matter and find that they have been communicating with the enemy and cannot safely be discharged

¹⁴ Ibid., 1430.

while our troops occupy the Peninsula.” He then instructed A. T. Bledsoe, Chief of the Bureau of War, to forward this response to Crane.¹⁵

In the end it was not Crane’s exertions but the arrival of federal gunboats that brought about the release of the prisoners remaining in West Point. We may assume that many of them returned to Elizabeth City County, now in the hands of Union forces. Like thousands of civilians, both Union and Confederate, they faced the prospect of rebuilding their homes and lives from ashes and ruins. West Point would continue to host participants in the great drama of the Civil War, but perhaps none so distressed as these few dozen civilians who had been swept up in the storms of suspicion and hatred that fractured the union and continue to resonate to the present day.

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¹⁵ Ibid., 1419.