

# Alabama Confederate POWs at Camp Douglas Prison Camp in Chicago, Illinois

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Camp Douglas was originally created in Chicago area at the beginning of the War Between the States. It was established on the south side of the city and was named in honor of Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas. It occupied a portion of Oakenwald, the Douglas estate built on low ground and flooded with every rain and was a sea of mud during the winters. Henry Morton Stranley of Co. E, 6<sup>th</sup> Arkansas, wrote about his time in Camp Douglas prison. "We were soon in a fair state of rotting while yet alive."



The camp covered sixty acres and was divided by partitions to create compounds of various sizes and each named according to its purpose. It was first used as a satellite camp for reception and training center for the Northern District of Illinois. When a place was needed to accommodate overwhelming number of Confederate Captives, Camp Douglas was chosen. The first group,

consisting of 3,200 Confederate prisoners arrived in Chicago on February 21, 1862, from Fort Donelson. They were searched and taken to their quarters.

At first the prisoners were properly fed and clothed. Due to the curiosity of the local citizens, an observatory was built and spectators were permitted to watch the prisoners for ten cents. Following Union victories, more prisoners arrived at the camp. At first there was prisoner exchange that kept the population in check. But when Lincoln and Grant refused to send Confederate soldiers back to the South because they often went back to their units to fight, the population of the camp became overflowing. By September of 1862, 9,000 captives were in the camp. Illnesses and death began increasing as the population grew. The camp commandants frequently changed but none made improvements of the poor conditions. Colonel Charles V. DeLand, 9<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry, was the only commandant of Camp Douglas who had been a prisoner in a Southern prison which may have contributed to his harsh treatment of prisoners at Camp Douglas.

Colonel Benjamin J. Sweet became commander of the camp in 1864 ordering the guards to "shoot to kill" any prisoner crossing the dead-line. He incorporated a variety of corporal punishments for breaking the camp rules. He introduced the Morgan's Mule. The sawhorse was nearly fourteen feet tall and accommodated several soldiers at a time. The one positive move he made was he insisted on the prison area be cleaned everyday improving the sanitary conditions at the camp.

In July of 1862, the Sanitary Commission stated a proper sewage system was needed immediately but it was never built. The Commission recommended the camp be abandoned due to the poor condition of the camp. The prison hospital was in poor condition, the sick lay on cots without mattresses or any bedding, there were no change of clothes and they men became covered with vermin. By the early part of 1863, the mortality rate at Camp Douglas was at ten percent a month, making it higher than any other prison camp in the war, North or South. The prisoners found the Chicago weather extremely wet, cold and windy. They died from typhoid fever, pneumonia, filth, bad weather, and lack of heat, food, and clothing.

By the ending of 1863, Northern POW population stood at 41,000 Confederates while the Confederacy held 21,000 Union prisoners. The camp's commandants were rotated in and out of the facility. Colonel Hoffman wrote, "There has been the greatest carelessness and willful neglect in the management of the affairs of the camp." Escapes were a big problem for the commandants, Colonel Benjamin J. Sweet, 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment Veteran Corps assigned supervision of the camp in May of 1864 made radical changes to prevent escapes but the deteriorating condition of the health and welfare of the camp continued to be ignored.

At General Halleck's suggestion, the Union government had rations reduced to equal the Confederate prisons. It did not matter that the South was without supplies because of the blockades where the north had no problem with supplies. For Halleck, this was a matter of retaliation - not economy. A reduction of rations took place in 1864 with the withdrawal of vegetables, scurvy occurred in epidemic portions. Chicago citizens offered relief and assistance to the captives out of compassion. People often gave their time and financial aid to the sick and destitute prisoners until the Federal Government put a stop to it even though the population of the camp had grown to 11,000 captives. There were 12,082 Confederate POWs in Camp Douglas by December 1864.

In November of 1864, bodies of Confederate prisoners were found to be taken from their graves. Historians believe cadavers were taken and sold for medical research during this period of time. By the end of the war, conditions were so bad with death a daily occurrence making the prisoners oblivious of their surroundings. Robert T. Bean of Co. I, 8<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Cavalry, stated as a prisoner in Camp Chase, "There is more inventive meanness in the yankee composition, then any other nation upon God's green earth could conceive of during thousands of years!"

After Lincoln's assassination, Some Chicagoans wanted to kill the prisoners and the whole Southern population. Thomas Head, prisoner, stated "the prison was threatened with a mob of Chicago citizens, but the excitement soon abated." The last of the prisoners were released by July of 1865. A total of 30,000 POW is believed to have been held at Camp Douglas during the war. The U.S. Government concedes that as many as 4,454 perished at the camp, a low estimate. The dead are not all nameless of the 6,000 who sleep there the names of about 4,700 are known. It is estimated that there more Confederate soldiers buried in Chicago than any other northern town. The

government quickly sold off the land after the war and it became the city's first baseball field.

The atrocities that occurred in Camp Douglas were even more heinous than those at Andersonville according to the book *To Die in Chicago*. The total number buried in a mass grave at Camp Douglas is unknown. General William C. Oates obtained a list of Alabamians who died at Camp Douglas as Commissioner of the Confederate Memorial Association in 1908. He listed 435 Alabama men died at Camp Douglas but no one knows for sure how many Alabamians died in Chicago.



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author

In one section of Oak Woods cemetery is known as Confederate Mound where the monument stands facing north. It has been erected to the memory of the men who gave their lives in Camp Douglas for the South. It took three years to build the monument stand over forty feet from the ground to the top of the figure. The pedestal is of pearl granite from quarries at Constitution Hill, near Atlanta. Around the monument are cannon, shot and shell. President Cleveland, his cabinet along with estimated 100,000 people attended the ceremony of the dedicate on May 30, 1895.



A large number of veterans from both sides attended.

Melville E. Stone of Chicago wrote to General Joseph Wheeler on November 1899 asking General Wheeler to come up to speak. He wrote, "You may remember that Chicago was the first city in the North, indeed the only one, to erect a monument to the Confederate dead." In the Pittsburg Dispatch: 1895, the article "Honors to the Dead. Preparations for the Confederate Monument Dedication. Both Sides Will Participate. Six Thousand Graves at Oakwoods." The monument was erected through the instrumentality of ex-Confederates of Chicago, Camp 8 United Confederate Veterans.

References:

Speer, Lonnie R., *Portals To Hell, Military Prisons of the Civil War*, © 1997, Stackpole Books.

Levy, George, *To Die in Chicago, Confederate Prisoners at Camp Douglas 1862-65*, © 1999, Pelican Publishing Company

Known names of soldiers buried in a mass grave in Chicago:

<https://www.graveyards.com/IL/Cook/oakwoods/confederate-names/tablet005.jpg>

<https://campdouglas.org/history-of-camp-douglas/>

<https://www.graveyards.com/IL/Cook/oakwoods/confederate.html>