Ending the Civil War and Consequences for Congress
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As the Confederate war effort collapsed in February, March, April, and May 1865, Union officials tried to retrieve the thousands of federal prisoners of war (POWs) still suffering in Confederate prisons. It would prove to be a disordered, tragic, and troublesome process.

Disorder reigned in February and March, when Confederate prison authorities attempted to deliver nearly 8,684 federal prisoners being held in South Carolina to Union military officials in Wilmington, North Carolina. Union forces were at that exact moment engaged in active military operations to capture the city, and the delivery disrupted the Confederate army’s defense and hampered the Union’s subsequent occupation. To add to the confusion, more than 3,000 federal POWs escaped from Confederate stockades and found their own way to the U.S. Army rather than being returned through a formal exchange process.

Tragedy struck in April. Confederates delivered prisoners from Andersonville in Georgia and Cahaba in Alabama to an exchange point at Vicksburg in Mississippi. Careless and corrupt military officials loaded nearly 2,000 of them onto a wooden-hulled steamer that had just made hasty repairs for leaking boilers. A few miles north of Memphis, Tennessee, on the Mississippi River, the boilers of the overcrowded *Sultana* exploded, killing 1,500 men in the worst maritime disaster in American history (figs. 1 and 2).

Trouble finding federal prisoners who remained in Confederate hands marked both April and May. In some remote locations in the South,
Fig. 1. The steamboat *Sultana*, overcrowded with Union ex-POWs, was photographed on the Mississippi River by Thomas W. Bankes the day before its boilers exploded. *(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

Fig. 2. The May 20, 1865, issue of *Harper's Weekly* illustrated the horror of the explosion and sinking of the *Sultana* on April 28, 1865. *(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*
Confederate camp guards disappeared without telling prisoners that the war was over. It took the Union cavalry until the end of May to find the minor Confederate camps and either liberate the prisoners inside or round up former prisoners running around at large in the vicinity of abandoned prisons.¹

The United States did not recover all of its POWs until 1866, and federal soldiers liberated themselves throughout 1865. Between May and December, 257 federal prisoners escaped from locations where they were still being held in the states of the former Confederacy. The bulk of these, 240, bolted in May. But former Yankee POWs continued to trickle home in the following months. Ten arrived in June. A soldier who had been captured at Greenleaf Prairie, Oklahoma, reported back to the army in August. Four more arrived in September. In October, three sailors of the Union navy escaped from the vicinity of Camp Ford, Texas. The last recorded federal POW to escape did so in January 1866, when Corporal Henry Scott of the Forty-Fourth United States Colored Troops (USCT) showed up at the camp of the First Iowa Cavalry stationed in Sherman, Texas. He was the last of thirty-two soldiers from his regiment to escape captivity. The colonel of the Forty-Fourth USCT had surrendered his entire garrison at Dalton, Georgia, in October 1864, and Confederates returned many of the enlisted men to slavery. From January to December 1865, thirty-one of them fled from locations in Mississippi, Georgia, and North Carolina. Henry Scott’s escape from slavery in Texas, several months after “Juneteenth,” marked the end of the Confederate prison system.²


The fiasco at Wilmington, the escape of 3,000 prisoners, and the story of Henry Scott exemplify the challenges of repatriating Civil War prisoners. Processing exchanged, escaped, and liberated POWs posed serious bureaucratic, medical, and humanitarian problems for the federal government, especially because the process often occurred in the midst of the active military operations that ended the war (figs. 3 and 4). Because the process of recovering POWs was chaotic, the consequence for the federal government and Congress was a humanitarian disaster that contributed to demands that Congress recognize the special sufferings of ex-POWs.

The exchange at Wilmington, North Carolina, provides an illustration of the hurdles that prisoners, military officials, doctors, and bureaucrats

and the 44th US Colored Infantry?," http://usctchronicle.blogspot.com/2011/02/what-happened-to-private- pryor-and-44th.html, accessed June 22, 2015. It is my surmise that Scott escaped from slavery; federal records do not indicate his escape location. It is a logical conclusion considering the history of the Forty-Fourth USCT and the fact that other African American soldiers were listed as escaping from a “rebel plantation.” Camp Ford prison in Texas closed in May and the Tenth Illinois Cavalry burned the remnants of the compound in July 1865. F. E. Lawrence and Robert W. Glover, Camp Ford C.S.A.: The Story of Union Prisoners in Texas (Austin, Tex., 1964), pp. 76–79.
faced as the war ended. When U.S. and Confederate officials concluded an agreement in February 1865 to exchange federal POWs being held in South Carolina, a federal joint army-navy operation had recently captured Fort Fisher on the North Carolina coast, the last Confederate stronghold for blockade runners. By February 19, federal forces under the command of Major General John M. Schofield were closing in on the port city of Wilmington from three directions. But neither Schofield nor the Confederate generals defending the city had been informed by their respective governments that federal POWs from South Carolina were being sent their way for exchange. Confederate Major General Robert F. Hoke became discombobulated when 2,500 federal prisoners of war arrived, with thousands more on the way, just as he was trying to move government property from the city in advance of evacuating his garrison. Under a flag of truce, Hoke sent a message to Schofield proposing to deliver the prisoners immediately. Since Schofield was unaware of any exchange agreement and did not want anything to impede his advance, he asked the Confederate general for more
information about the terms of delivery and continued to press toward Wilmington with his troops. The beleaguered Hoke sent panicked dispatches to Confederate prison officials ordering them not to send any more prisoners to Wilmington. He sent staff officers to the front lines to impress on commanders the necessity of delaying the federal advance in order to gain time to remove the prisoners.\(^3\)

The result was chaos and humanitarian disaster. Hoke sent the prisoners to Goldsboro, North Carolina, where they were turned out into an open field with no shelter. Transporting the federals out of Wilmington took up the train cars that were supposed to evacuate Confederate naval stores. Confederate prison officials and railroad managers had no idea where to put thousands of other prisoners who were on their way to Wilmington, who could not now be delivered, and ended up moving them back and forth between points on the railroad at Salisbury, Greensboro, Raleigh, and Goldsboro, consuming the transportation that was needed to move military supplies. At least 2,500 of these prisoners were severely ill from exposure and malnourishment. Three hundred and sixty of them were put in a makeshift hospital on the fairgrounds outside of Goldsboro. Confederate prison officials, no strangers to the suffering of federal prisoners, reported that the “neglect, filth, and squalor” of this place was unequaled in their experience. It was a “state of affairs that I felt disgraced our character for humanity,” admitted Colonel Henry Forno, the officer in charge of moving federal prisoners out of South Carolina.\(^4\)

Early on the morning of February 22, Confederate forces evacuated Wilmington and withdrew across the Northeast Cape Fear River, abandoning


200 federal prisoners who had escaped and hidden for three days in the swamps and woods around Wilmington, waiting for federal forces to capture the city. The advance units of the Union army, including the Third New Hampshire and the Seventh Connecticut, encountered these escaped prisoners as they emerged from their hiding places, or found them dead along the road. Hoke, from his position in the field across the river, contacted Schofield again and urged him "in the name of humanity" to accept the delivery of the federal prisoners waiting at Goldsboro and other points. "They have been subjected to great suffering and considerable mortality by the delay," he pointed out. On February 23, firmly in command of Wilmington, Schofield agreed to halt active operations along the Northeast Cape Fear River and to receive 2,000 prisoners a day, beginning on February 26.5

Between February 26 and March 4, Confederate officials delivered 8,684 federal POWs to the exchange point at a railroad crossing on the Northeast Cape Fear River.6 From the moment of their arrival, Union medical officials scrambled to appropriately address the returned prisoners' medical needs. Regiments stationed at the Northeast Cape Fear River, on order from Schofield, had prepared a feast with plenty of strong coffee for the famished prisoners, who mobbed the cooking kettles and devoured as much food as they could get their hands on. When the prisoners arrived at Wilmington, federal soldiers stationed in the city also fed them, and initially the federal commissary distributed sugar, meat, onions, soft bread, and hardtack. "We drank the army coffee until we were filled, and still its delicious fragrance filled the air and intoxicated our senses," wrote one former prisoner. "I drank


so much of it that I was positively and helplessly drunk.” Others became desperately ill as their famished and debilitated stomachs rejected the food. Too late for many prisoners, who suffered the consequences of the orgy of eating for weeks, army physicians intervened. They watched over the prisoners to keep them from overeating and ordered the commissary to issue limited rations four times a day to keep the returned prisoners from eating their food all at once, a temptation that proved impossible to resist.7

Because the prisoner exchange took place during an active military campaign, there had been no preparation to receive the prisoners. The arrival of 8,684 captives exhausted local resources and military supply lines and threatened the health of the community. Caring for the POWs hindered the federal army’s ability to occupy and stabilize Wilmington. The majority of the prisoners were forwarded by steamer within a few days to Camp Parole in Annapolis, Maryland, but 2,475 were too sick to be moved for several weeks. Several hundred of these prisoners died before they could be removed from the city; deaths averaged seventeen a day. Military commanders had to improvise and provide ad hoc care. Warehouses were converted to hospitals, and citizens took men into their homes. Major General Alfred H. Terry diverted shoes and clothing intended for Major General William Tecumseh Sherman’s army to the paroled prisoners, and was therefore unable to immediately supply Sherman when his army arrived in North Carolina. The emergency was not alleviated until March 19, when the United States Sanitary Commission arrived to take charge of the prisoners, bringing a steamer from New York City with enough food (including 3,300 pounds of chocolate), clothing, and medical supplies to adequately care for the sick prisoners. Ultimately, caring for returned POWs delayed the advance of the Union troops out of the city for their intended rendezvous with Sherman’s army.8

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Prisoners who returned to Union lines, no matter when or where, faced an extended journey home that usually lasted weeks. The three enemies of a short passage were convoluted transportation routes, government bureaucracy, and the wasted bodies of the liberated prisoners. Escaped prisoner Chauncy S. Aldrich spent seven days in Washington, D.C., trying to obtain his necessary paperwork. He visited the adjutant general’s office, spent two full days sitting in the Quartermaster’s Department, and finished with an examination by auditors who finally issued the necessary certificates for him to visit the paymaster. His terse diary entry summarized his feelings: “Got very much vexed.”

Benjamin Booth’s journey from Wilmington to his home in Iowa exemplified the physical and mental endurance necessary to transform out of the condition of being a POW. The government provided aid for only part of the journey, which contributed to Booth’s physical decline. The federal steamship *Sunshine* transported Booth from Wilmington to Camp Parole, Maryland, a processing station for returned prisoners (fig. 5). There, military officials lined up the ex-prisoners of war, issued a complete suit of clothes, and marched them en masse to the bath house to an assembly line for cleanliness that was so efficient it took ten minutes per person. The returned prisoners were stripped naked, had their heads shaved to remove lice, were scrubbed in the bath by two strong men, were wiped dry with coarse towels by two others, and were passed to the final room, where they put on their new clothes. After his cleansing, Booth filled out paperwork and received twenty-five cents a day for every day he was in prison; the pay was for rations he did not receive from the Union army while he was incarcerated in Confederate prisons.

The government provided transportation for part of Booth’s journey from Annapolis to his home in Iowa. Trains took Booth on an eight-day journey through Baltimore, Columbus, and Indianapolis to Benton Barracks in St. Louis. The trip was difficult because of Booth’s extreme physical weakness. His digestive system was a wreck. “To me, everything eatable is loathsome, yet I am hungry all the time,” he wrote of the common

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*Carolina, March, 1865, and upon the Physical Condition of Exchanged Prisoners Lately Received at Wilmington, N.C.* (New York, 1865), pp. 3–9, 17.

*Army Life and Prison Experiences of Major Charles G. Davis,* Special Collections, University of Tennessee-Knoxville Libraries; C.S. Aldrich, Civil War Diary, SM1, Folder 1, Chauncy S. Aldrich Collection, Pritzker Military Museum and Library, Chicago.
symptom experienced by returned prisoners that lasted for months after
the war: an insatiable desire to eat accompanied by the inability to eat. His
desire to get home obsessed his mind and turned minutes into weeks. He
hid his burning fever from the doctor so he would not have to go to the
hospital.

Booth reached Iowa City on March 18. He had not eaten for two days.
In some cities, local charity organizations provided soldiers’ rest stations for
returned POWs with food, a place to stay, and information to ease the tran-
sition. Booth found no such help. The government did not provide trans-
portation for the final twenty-five miles of his journey from the train station
to his home. He and a comrade hired a ride and stopped at a farmhouse for
dinner ten miles from his home. There Booth collapsed, “powerless to move.”
The kind lady of the house offered her bed, but Booth refused because he
still had vermin crawling on him, despite his cleansing in Annapolis. He
lay on the ground and writhed in pain. The next morning his wife and
brother-in-law arrived to take him home in a wagon. For the next three
weeks Booth was delirious and unconscious, unable to recognize the wife
who nursed him day and night. Although he had reached home in March,
Booth was not able to record his homecoming in his diary until Decem-
ber 20, 1865.10

10Booth, Dark Days of the Rebellion, pp. 233–43; Austin A. Carr, Three Years Cruise of
Austin A. Carr in Co. F 2nd N.Y.S.M. or 82nd N.Y. Vol. Second Division, Second Corps, Army of the
There were more than 164,525 former POWs in the North after the war, and Congress faced the consequences of their physical devastation. The belief that the Confederate leadership and its minions deliberately and systematically abused federal prisoners was pervasive in the North and played a critical role in postwar politics. The Northern public was saturated with stories of atrocities and starvation that appeared regularly in the press and in congressional reports. Andersonville in particular, and federal POWs in general, became the overarching symbol used in the North to represent the barbarity of the rebellion. Congressmen debating plans for Reconstruction in 1866 referred to reports about Confederate prisons to justify their proposed programs; the Republican Party’s 1868 election campaign continually referenced Andersonville and images of Confederate stockades. The initiation ritual for the Grand Army of the Republic, the politically powerful veterans’ organization, involved dressing the initiate as a POW and marching him past a coffin labeled with the name and regiment of a soldier who died at Andersonville. The House of Representatives investigated the treatment of federal POWs in 1869 and concluded that atrocities were the “inevitable results” of slavery, treason, and rebellion. Historians have suggested that bitterness over this issue obstructed reconciliation between Northerners and Southerners through the decade of the 1870s. The historian of one of the Union regiments that witnessed the exchange at the Northeast Cape Fear River encapsulated in 1885 the lingering anger. Even though Northern and Southern soldiers now meet in fraternal friendship, he wrote, the deliberate abuse of prisoners “is a crime never to be forgotten nor forgiven.”


Most former POWs never fully recovered from their captivity, even when they enjoyed a generally fulfilling life after the war. Physical ailments plagued them until death, and sharp, clear, unwanted memories of life in prison were deeply embedded in their minds. Modern science suggests that biochemical reactions produced during traumatic experiences cause persistent, detailed, and intrusive memories of the event. One former POW wrote that his experience “did not leave a misty impression upon the mind, but is eaten into the imagination as if by an acid—etched indelibly upon the memory.” Union ex-POWs became a distinct and honored subset of veterans whose claim to have endured the greatest suffering and sacrifice for the cause of any Union soldier was conceded to them by other veterans and by the Northern public.\textsuperscript{12}

Because former POWs claimed to have endured unique and long-lasting suffering, they demanded that Congress automatically grant a pension to any man who could prove that he was confined in a Confederate prison during the war. This demand took place in the context of a national debate over federal pensions for veterans. In order to reward and care for citizens who fought to save the Union, Congress had passed a series of ever more liberal and expansive pension laws between 1861 and 1879 that incorporated increasing numbers of veterans into their provisions. Applicants for pensions had to prove that they suffered a disability owing to wounds or disease that was a direct result of their military service. Proponents of liberal pensions argued that the nation owed this debt to veterans who had sacrificed their health, rather than their lives, to save the Union. Opponents feared the drain on the Treasury, accused the Pension Bureau of corruption and fraud, and

worried that liberal pension laws undermined the manly independence of veterans.\textsuperscript{13}

Former POWs joined associations that lobbied Congress to recognize them as a special class of veteran. These organizations served multiple purposes in helping ex-POWs navigate their long recovery. Meetings served as a place where they could share the powerful memories they endured; they began by singing prison songs, and then each veteran had the opportunity to share some of his experiences. Constitutions for such organizations proclaimed the intent of preserving a historical record of the causes of the war, the true character of Confederate prisons, and the sufferings endured by their inmates. Members pledged to cultivate a spirit of forgiveness toward their torturers and to share their resources with destitute comrades. Former POWs produced an abundance of prison narratives that described the horrors of Confederate prison, proclaimed that suffering in prison was as noble and heroic as battlefield wounds, and demanded that the public acknowledge that prisoners played a central role in the Union victory.\textsuperscript{14}

Felix LaBaume, the president of the National Ex-Prisoners of War Association, sent just such a message to Congress in one of the numerous petitions that flowed into that body. He pointed out that the U.S. government decided not to exchange prisoners during 1863 and 1864 so that healthy Confederate POWs would not be able to return to the front lines and fight. Therefore, he argued, Union POWs played an active part in the war by being confined in prison; they helped end it sooner than it would have otherwise ended. But many former prisoners could not secure pensions because of flaws in the law regarding evidence: they could not secure a surgeon’s affidavit either because U.S. surgeons had not examined them or because their physical symptoms did not fall under the categories covered by the laws. “It should be clear by now that all former prisoners of war were permanently disabled by being in prison,” LaBaume exhorted the members of Congress.\textsuperscript{15}


Congressmen responded with two proposals to provide pensions to all former POWs. In 1880 during the Forty-Sixth Congress, Representative Joseph Warren Keifer of Ohio, who had been a major general of volunteers during the war and would serve as Speaker of the House for the Forty-Seventh Congress, introduced HR 4495 to represent the demands of his 1,500 constituents who were members of the Ohio Association of Union Ex-Prisoners of War. Echoing LaBaume’s language, the proposed bill stated that all POWs were permanently injured but their debilities often were too general and indefinable to be covered under existing law. The bill required the government to place on the pension rolls all men who were confined for more than six months in a Confederate prison and to pay eight dollars a month to those men who were confined for six months to a year. Any former POW who was confined for longer than a year would get an additional dollar for every additional month of his confinement. When this bill failed, Ohio Representative James S. Robinson introduced a more liberal bill, HR 5968, in the Forty-Seventh Congress. Former POWs who were confined for two to six months would get a half pension, those confined for six to twelve months would get a three-quarter pension, and those in prison for twelve months would receive a full pension. In addition, ex-POWs would receive two dollars a day for every single day they spent in a Confederate prison. As the historian Brian Matthew Jordan has pointed out, this legislation would have written into law the “harrowing consequences of captivity” and deemed mental injuries “worthy and heroic.”

Despite four efforts to secure passage of these and similar bills during the 1880s, they failed. Not all Americans conceded that confinement in Confederate prisons created an automatic disability that lasted for life. Democrats in Congress, many of whom were former Confederates, worried about economy in government spending and the sectional bitterness such proposals stimulated. Former POWs did not have their special sufferings encoded as they wished. But survivors who lived to 1890 did receive a pension. In that year, Congress passed the Dependent Pension Act, which granted a pension to

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any disabled veteran who was honorably discharged after at least ninety days of service. The veteran did not need to prove that his disability was incurred during military service. By 1893, the federal government was devoting 43 percent of its expenditures to pensions.17

Federal soldiers who were confined in Confederate prisons faced a long process of repatriation that extended across the months and years after the war and a long personal recovery that lasted for decades. In 1889, the last federal POW returned to his home. John B. Hotchkiss had escaped from Andersonville prison during the war and headed to Florida. But illness induced amnesia. Residents of a small coastal town found him compulsively trying to board any vessel heading out to sea. He could not identify himself or explain his intentions. The villagers thought he was crazy. Eventually he reached Key West and lived and worked there as John Schooner. One day Hotchkiss read an obituary in the newspaper about a man killed in Brooklyn, New York. The widow’s brother had disappeared during the war but she never lost faith that she would recover him. The article triggered his memory and his realization of his identity. He was John Hotchkiss, escaped POW, and he was finally free.18