

The Cover Story

The Dreaded Ft. Delaware

by Mike Linthicum

During the War Between the States (1861-1865) both sides needed to house prisoners of war captured at the various battles. Names like Andersonville, Elmira and Point Lookout, are well known to those that are students of the war. There is another one that is not often mentioned, sitting on an island named Pea Patch, in the middle of the Delaware River, off the coast of Delaware City, Delaware. [Figure A1 & A2 on Front Cover] Built as part of the United States Coastal Defense system. Construction began at Ft. Delaware in the 1819 to protect against invading fleets that would target Wilmington and Philadelphia. The fort turned out to be only accessible by boat, isolated, very damp and in the winter very cold,

At the start of the War Between the States, in 1861 it was determined that this fort would be ideal to house prisoners, since escape would be extremely difficult with water on all four sides and without a boat, no way off the island. In 1863 the fort population was approximately 11,000 prisoners but toward the end of the war, late 1864 early 1865 there were almost 33,000 inhabitants. Mostly occupied by Confederate Officers, Political Prisoners, Privateer Officers and Federal convicts. Approximately 2,500 prisoners died at the fort during the war.

According to Captain John S. Swann (a prisoner at Fort Delaware), "Prisoners were held in wooden barracks, providing shelter unlike many other Civil War prisons during the Civil War however, after the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, the ranks of prisoners swelled to almost 13,000, leading to horrible conditions. Water became putrefied and food scarce. Scurvy, smallpox and severe malnutrition were prevalent. He also wrote: Not long after my arrival I heard a cry 'Rat call! Rat call!' I went out to see what this meant. A number of prisoners were moving and some running up near the partition, over which a sergeant (sic) was standing and presently he began throwing rats down. The prisoners scrambled for the rats like schoolboys for apples, none but some of the most needy prisoners, and the needy were the large majority, would scramble for these rats. Of course but few were lucky enough to get a rat. The rats were cleaned, put in salt water a while and fried. Their flesh was tender and not unpleasant to the taste."

Today Ft. Delaware can be visited via boat from Delaware City, Delaware. Operated by the Delaware State Park system. During the summer months, living historians often portray both Union soldiers and Confederate prisoners there.

Figure A3; bearing what appears to be Scott# 65 (dull red) is a letter addressed to a Confederate Prisoner W. A. Corsey, 11th Georgia Regiment imprisoned at Ft. Delaware. The cover has a red ink partial strike (Aug 18) of Providence, Rhode Island. This is an odd postmark going to a Southern prisoner. Maybe a relative living up North? Who knows?

Figure A4; is a cover addressed to Mrs. Mary Bullock in Lexington, Kentucky from Major Robert Bullock, her husband. This cover also bears what appears to be Scott # 65 (dull red) along with a censor's stamp indicating the letter had been read and approved from a prisoner of war. The circular date stamp is from Delaware City, DEL, April 28.

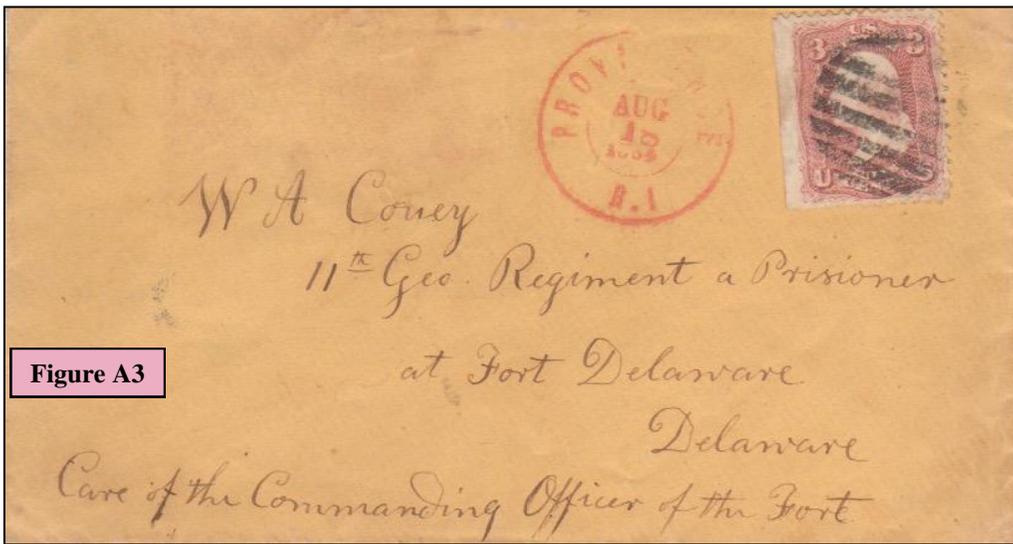


Figure A3

Interesting fact about Major Robert Bullock is that he was a member of the infamous Morgan's Raiders, specifically the 8th Kentucky Cavalry. Bullock was confined first at Johnson's Island (July 19, 1863 - August 1, 1863), then Ohio Penitentiary (August 1, 1863 - March 25, 1864) and later the more secure Ft. Delaware. The transfer to Ft. Delaware on March 25, 1864 was occasioned by the successful escape by John Hunt Morgan and six others

from Ohio Penitentiary on November 27/28, 1863. General Morgan was so feared and hated in the North that subsequent to his capture it was decided that he and his officers required special treatment and would be confined in Ohio State Penitentiary. Morgan and about 27 of his men were confined on Aug. 1, 1863. After almost four months of imprisonment, Morgan and six of his officers made a daring escape during the night of Nov. 27, 1863. After Morgan's escape from Ohio Penitentiary, Maj. Bullock and other raiders were transferred to Fort Delaware in March 1864



Figure A4

After the war Ft. Delaware was occupied briefly and would be abandoned off and on over the years, only to be occupied by the U.S. Army again during the Spanish American war, World War I and World War II with artillery batteries to protect the Delaware River and the ports of Wilmington and Philadelphia.

[Editor's note: For all the details on planning a trip to Ft. Delaware visit: <https://destateparks.com/History/FortDelaware>]

