

## Prisoner of War: George Washington Nelson

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George Washington Nelson, affectionately known as Wash, was the nephew of Long Branch Plantation owners Hugh M. and Adelaide Nelson, a University of Virginia alumnus, and a Captain in the Confederate Army. Additionally, he was also one of many men captured and imprisoned during the Civil War. George and his companion Thomas Randolph were captured by Union soldiers on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 1863 in Millwood, VA while eating dinner.<sup>1</sup> This domestic capture was the first of many oddities during George's time as a Prisoner of War, since most soldiers were typically captured during, or as a result of, battle. George's experiences as a POW demonstrate the common sufferings of men in Union prisons, while also allowing for a unique comparison between locations, as most prisoners did not move around nearly as much as George.

Recounting his experiences as a POW, George wrote a brief narrative just over 10 years after his exchange on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1865. The first night of his imprisonment was spent at Nineveh, Virginia under Captain Bailey. Wash makes a special note to credit Bailey for his immense kindness during their short period of time together. In Nineveh, the Captain lent George his gloves, and in Strasburg the next evening, Bailey gave the men a "first-rate supper" and tobacco before handing them off to the next set of Union men in Harper's Ferry.<sup>2</sup>

The night spent in the "John Brown Engine House" was the first of Wash's experience in a Union prison. He describes it as having "no beds, no seats, and the floor and walls were alive with lice."<sup>3</sup> After that night, the men were sent to Wheeling, West Virginia, where they found relatively nicer living conditions, but were soon sent to Camp Chase in Ohio only two or three nights later.

At this new location, Wash continued to discover more difficulties of prison life. When attempting to wash his only set of clothing, he "worked so hard as to rub all the skin off [his] knuckles, and yet not enough to get the dirt out of [his] garments."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, before his next move, George also learned that checks to purchase items at the sutler in one location do not carry value to the next, making it difficult to attain additional food and tobacco and other supplies.

Upon leaving Camp Chase, George embarked on the first of many brutal marches between camps toward his first long-term stay. On November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1863 he arrived at Johnson's Island which was located on Lake Erie. Wash would not leave until April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1864. Early on, George realized that the prisoners who fared best were those who had friends and family nearby to supply them with rations, while those who depended wholly on the government were poorly off. Wash was able to contact friends by the 1864 New Year, allowing him "supplies and letter more precious than bank notes."<sup>5</sup> The winter of 1864 still brought many challenges, including weather

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<sup>1</sup> "REV. GEORGE W. NELSON'S NARRATIVE." In Southern Historical Society Papers, 243. Vol. I. Richmond, VA, 1876.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 244-245.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 245.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 245.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 245.

too cold to sleep through and an extreme lack of water, despite a nearby lake closed off due to fear of escape, which Wash attempted twice. George also began to observe harsher prison guards, who would often wound or kill prisoners regardless of the extent of the offense. Finally, George also began to experience his most extreme hunger yet, falling ill by the spring, affording him a transfer off the island.

Expecting an exchange back to Dixie, Wash was disheartened to find out that he was merely being taken to another prison—Point Lookout in Maryland, where he would remain until about June 22<sup>nd</sup>. During this time period, George spent the majority of his time in the hospital, where he received good treatment and was not closely guarded. However, after an influx of wounded Yankee troops in mid-May, he was sent to live in tents as a regular prisoner, entailing a very sudden switch in his standard of treatment. He now received two meals a day, including a small loaf of bread and a small piece of meat for breakfast, and another piece of meat and low-quality soup for dinner. With illness-inducing water, and no more coffee or sugar, George described his only remaining luxury as sea-bathing.

About a month after this switch, Wash was moved yet again, this time to Fort Delaware. Having become increasingly savvy after over a year of imprisonment, George was able to keep the money he had by disguising it in a brown bag in his mouth as chewing tobacco. Through money from friends and purchases from the sutler, Wash was able to avoid starvation during his stay. However, many of his companions did not escape illness, such as one sick man who was unable to walk, and was shot hobbling back from the sink area after the guards deemed he was not moving fast enough. Additionally, beer was drunk in place of water. After about two months, rumors of exchange began circulating, and Wash was selected as one of 600 men who thought they may return to Dixie.

Men who would soon be known as the “Gallant” or “Immortal” 600 were loaded onto a ship called the “Crescent,” and spent about three weeks living in close-quarters under the deck, packed like sardines with four men per bunk during the hottest part of the summer. Guards around them fainted, and men rejoiced when they were allowed to collect and drink fresh rain water. Wash was clever enough to go to the doctor and receive ice water. In spite of these unpleasant circumstances, no men died during the trip, which George attributed to their hope and expectation of exchange. However, every man was disheartened upon the September 7<sup>th</sup> arrival on Morris Island, off the coast of South Carolina, when they realized they were only being transferred to a new camp.

The 600 prisoners on Morris Island would spend the six weeks or so being fired upon by their own Confederate comrades. However, throughout the ordeal, not one of them was wounded, although some of their guards were. During his time on the island, Wash encountered his first black union guards, describing them as “uncouth,” “barbarous,” “thick-headed,” and “apt. to go beyond their orders, or misunderstand,” resulting in unfair wounds to prisoners.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, these underlings were kinder than and preferable to the cruelty of their Colonel,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 251.

who stated that he would have fed the prisoners “oiled rags” if he could.<sup>7</sup> Instead, he fed them a breakfast of a small piece of meat, a dinner of pea soup, and a supper of worm-infested mush or rice, which the prisoners were too hungry to think to complain about. Additionally, coming into October, authorities in Charleston, South Carolina, sent the prisoners supplies until they left mid-month.

Even after the harsh experience on Morris Island, the worst for Wash was still yet to come as he was part of the group selected to go to Fort Pulaski, Georgia next. With its gloomy and monotonous atmosphere, and tolerable food rations, the fort was initially better than Morris Island. However, after the General caught word of bad treatment of Yankee prisoners in the state, he cut rations for his Confederate prisoners in retaliation. Soon, George began suffering from scurvy, which entailed loosened tooth, rotted gums, and atrophied muscles in his limbs. His companions, all lacking clothing, willed themselves to die of starvation and disease. By the New Year of 1865, men, including George, began catching and eating cats. Feeling pity, one Yankee guard helped them catch a kitten. By March, men heard yet another rumor of exchange and after their harrowing experience at Fort Pulaski, needed the hope, and soon received marching orders.

However, after reaching Fort Monroe, VA, the men continued to travel north back to Fort Delaware, arriving mid-March. Many men died upon their arrival, after losing hope of exchange yet again. Wash was still alive, and noticed the shocking discrepancy between him and his group and their old companions that were left behind after the 600 left for Morris Island. He notes that:

“I thought they were the fattest, best dressed set of men I had ever seen. That they looked thus to me, will excite no surprise when I describe my own appearance. A flannel shirt, low in the neck, was doing duty as shirt, coat and vest; part of an old handkerchief tied around my head served as a hat; breeches I had none - an antiquated pair of red flannel drawers endeavored, but with small success, to fill their place. I was very thin and poor and was lame, scurvy having drawn the muscles of my right leg. When I add that I was in better condition, both in flesh and dress than many of our own, some idea can be formed of the appearance we made.”<sup>8</sup>

Given their sorry state, their old companions gave Wash and the others clothes, money, and vegetables to help nurse them back to health. This trip back to Fort Delaware was George’s final transfer until his release, which occurred on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1865, a little more than two months after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox.

Paralleling his memoir ventures, Wash continuously sent and received letters to and from his wife-to-be, Mollie Scollay, who was living around Long Branch at the time of the war. These letters reveal the personal toll of the POW experience. Letters received by each lover were more frequent during Wash’s longer stays at camps, with post at more trying or shorter stays often lost in route.

Throughout his letters, there are a number of issues that Wash downplays in order to not

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 250.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 256.

worry Mollie, such as stating that he only had a “touch of scurvy” at Pulaski, which in his memoir, he described much more vividly, and whatever disappointment he felt when transferred instead of exchanged, telling Mollie instead that he knows “his time will come” and that the only thing that concerns him is being able to receive her letters.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, while at Point Lookout, he urges Mollie not to worry about him in the hospital as he has “a small room, all to myself, where I can read, write, think or sleep” or when he returns to camp, as he enjoys roughing it with the other soldiers, although, as revealed in his memoir, conditions were much harsher outside the hospital.<sup>10</sup> The only feelings he does not brush off involve missing Mollie, her letters, and “old Virginia.”

George’s letters also reveal more about his personal life in prison, such as his teaching other prisoners gymnastics, and playing chess and the card game whist in Fort Delaware. Additionally, as a token of affection, Wash sent Mollie a ring made in prison from Johnson’s Island, displaying a variety of talents and trades within the camp.

Finally, one of Wash’s last letters to Mollie during his imprisonment details the difficulties of Confederate soldiers at Fort Delaware after the surrender at Appomattox. The prisoners were required to sign an oath of allegiance to the United States of America, which all but 161 out of about 2300 did, according to the May 3<sup>rd</sup> letter. Wash admits he had to swallow his pride in order to take the oath, but what troubled him more was the delay in release even after signing.

Although Wash Nelson’s experience was unique in his numerous stays at different camps, in comparison to other Confederate prisoners of war, his imprisonment was in no way singular, demonstrating the cruelty of Union prisons during the war, where the prisoner death rate was over four percent higher than in Confederate prisons.

Two of Wash’s fellow “Gallant 600” men, Captain Barnes and Captain Frayser, recounted the experience at Morris Island to be just as harrowing as George did. Barnes, who was willing to share much more than his counterpart, remembered the brackish water and poor food on the way to the island, along with the cruelty of Commander Hallowell and the negro guards, who he did not speak as even-handedly about as Wash. Barnes did not have as negative an experience at Pulaski, and was moved to Hilton Head, where he experienced poor treatment comparable to the numerous camps Wash described. When not starving, Barnes remembered men overeating to the point of death.<sup>11</sup>

In relation to life at Point Lookout, Commander Charles Loehr’s telling fills in many experiences that Wash first missed due to his time in the hospital, and subsequently left out of his letters to Mollie for fear of worrying her. According to Loehrer, disease was rampant, tents leaked, and after having all but one blanket and the clothes on their back taken away, many suffered from the cold. Additionally, Confederate soldiers faced many difficulties adjusting to “negro guards” and the cruelty of their Major Brady. While food, as Wash recounted, was decent, it was still thin and served with brackish water, leaving many hungry. Finally, Loehr, like

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<sup>9</sup> George Washington Nelson to Mollie Scollay, June 14<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1864 and April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1865.

<sup>10</sup> George Washington Nelson to Mollie Scollay, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1864.

<sup>11</sup> “IMPRISONED UNDER FIRE. Six Hundred Gallant Confederate Officers on Morris Island, S. C., in Reach of Confederate Guns..” In *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 365 - 378. Vol. XXV. Richmond, VA, 1897.

Wash, notes the apparently common delay in release after Confederate surrender, stating that most were not released until mid-June, like George.<sup>12</sup>

One of the more interesting things in Wash's letters was his descriptions of the activities that the inmates participated in to past the time. Inmates at camps such as Point Lookout and Fort Delaware produced their own newspaper, a Prison Times, where activities and services were advertised. These past times included musical and Christian groups, engravings, washings, and poetry. As stated in the times, men wanted to fight against isolation or cliques in prison in order to remain self-aware about their situation as inmates. The Times also included grapevine news, which was not reliable, but valued as a topic of conversation.<sup>13</sup> Wash's games, gymnastics, and ring for Mollie are just three more examples of this creation of a prison life.

After men's release from Union prison, they strove to return to everyday life. For Wash, this meant spending the rest of his life with Mollie and becoming a reverend.

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<sup>12</sup> "POINT LOOKOUT. Address before Pickett Camp Confederate Veterans, October 10, 1890." In Southern Historical Society Papers, 114-120. Vol. XVIII. Richmond, VA, 1890.

<sup>13</sup> "How our Soldier Boys at Fort Delaware Amused themselves while in confinement as Prisoners of War—The Publication of the "Prison Times." In Southern Historical Society Papers, 35-47. Vol. XIX. Richmond, VA, 1891.