

Governors Island in the New York City litany of isles that served the Union during the Civil War as prison camps for captured Confederates. Its Castle Williams and Fort Jay (aka Fort Columbus) housed rebel POWs -- troops and commissioned officers, respectively -- often for relatively brief periods of time prior to shipment elsewhere either for continued captivity or for prisoner exchange.

Also held there were Union deserters and political prisoners. The island's other Civil War roles included: a base for recruiters and a rendezvous point for recruits, a garrison, a court for military trials, a place of execution, and a School of Practice for U.S.A. Field Musicians.

Harper's Weekly May 4, 1861 featured on page 285 two Governors Island illustrations: recruits dilling and troops parading before embarkation.

The May 4, 1861 issue of Harper's Weekly reported:

Every day from 25 to 50 men arrive at Governor's Island from the various recruiting offices in New York and elsewhere, and are immediately drilled in squads, until they are fit to be formed into companies and drafted into regiments. Every afternoon the troops are marched out upon the grassy slope to the rear of the southeastern battery, and are drilled in every conceivable movement for the space of about one hour. . . A staff of officers usually occupy the rising ground.

Before the departure of the late expedition for Charleston not less than seven or eight hundred men, with arms and knapsacks complete, were rallied in line behind the grove of trees ornamenting the southeastern battery. After going through various evolutions, part of the troops were separated and marched past the officers' houses to the water's edge. . .

The weekly's July 4, 1863, issue featured a front page illustrated report about the execution of two Confederates as spies but the story of one of them tracks back to Governors Island more than two years earlier. William Orton Williams (aka Lawrence Orton) had been a close aide to General Winfield Scott. When the rebellion of the Southern states began, the junior officer -- a cousin of Gen. Robert E. Lee's wife -- made clear his sympathies with the Confederate cause. Since Orton had detailed knowledge of Gen. Scott's various military contingency plans, he was confined to Governors Island for some months until that "insider information" no longer had strategic or tactical relevance.

Released, Orton enlisted on the secessionists' side and eventually took on -- with his cousin Walter Gibson Peter -- an intelligence gathering mission behind enemy lines. Indeed, it put them inside the enemy's camp at Franklin, Tenn. masquerading as Union officers. When their disguise was detected June 8, 1863, they were arrested, tried by "drumhead court-martial," and executed early the next morning.

According to the 1939 Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York:

During the Civil War, 1,500 Rebel prisoners were held in Castle Williams, and a great number of troops were stationed on the island -- the records mentioning seven regiments as being on duty at one time. In 1863 draft-rioters unsuccessfully tried to storm the island while the troops were guarding the Subtreasury in Wall Street



Camp and Years

Union 1861-1865

Area

New York City, New York

Governors Island's civilians -- standing armed, ready and resolute with clubs, axes and some rifles that had not been taken by troops to deal with the draft rioters in Lower Manhattan -- were chiefly responsible for causing boats loaded rioters intent of raiding the arsenal to turn around and call off the "invasion."

Earlier in 1863 even the island's prisoners saw war action of sorts. Longshoremen whose wages had been cut drastically despite wartime inflation struck the docks. The federal government attempted to mediate a settlement between strikers and shipowners but was unsuccessful.

With shipment of ammunitions and other supplies needed at the battlefronts being held up by the work stoppage, 150 Governors Island inmates -- mostly Army deserters -- and 65 walking wounded who had been convalescing on Bedloe's Island were pressed into service loading the Army transports as a detachment of Army regulars stood guard with fixed bayonets and hundreds of Metropolitan Police patrolled the docks.