

The Two Sides of Camp McClellan

“ . . . Here was located a military Camp during the Civil War, at which were trained more than half of the recruits from Iowa. In 1862 several hundred Sioux Indians were imprisoned here following the Minnesota Massacre.”

--From a plaque in Lindsay Park, Davenport, Iowa. Erected in 1928 by the Hannah Caldwell Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

In August of 1861, only months after the beginning of the Civil War, the Adjutant General of Iowa, N. B. Baker, moved his official offices to Davenport and established Camp McClellan as a training ground for Union Army volunteer soldiers. Lieutenant William Hall was placed in charge of organizing and running the Camp, which was built to the east of the town, on the Bluffs overlooking the Mississippi.

The Barracks were built by J. W. Willard, with lumber sold by French & Davis, a local company of some repute. By August 16, 13 barracks, each with 52 double berths, and enough stalls for over a hundred horses were completed, plus a commissary, granary, guardhouse, and officer's quarters. More barracks were constructed as rapidly as possible for the influx of troops. Such haste was repented later, as men arriving in October found that the older barracks were already leaking, and newer housing was not yet finished. Some companies were forced to sleep on wet floorboards, and several sick men had to be carried to the hospital, where at least they might have dry beds while they recovered.

Lieutenant Colonel Hall arranged for new barracks to be built to military standards, arranged to maximize security and training efficiency. As the *Davenport Democrat* reported, “The troops all appear satisfied with their new quarters, and the grumbling is now confined to those who, under no circumstances, would be satisfied.”¹ This being accomplished, Colonel Hare, of Muscatine, took over for Lieutenant Colonel Hall, on October 11, 1861.

Camp McClellan soon became an established part of the community. The residents of Davenport and Scott County supported the morale of the soldiers with parades, picnics, and other festivities. They also donated supplies to the soldiers, from blankets to bandages.

Of the thousands of volunteer soldiers who passed through Camp McClellan, only 180 remained by April of 1862, awaiting their departure orders. It was assumed that the War would soon be over, and that Camp McClellan would no longer be needed as a training facility. A proposal was made by several Scott County citizens that the Camp be made over as a hospital for wounded soldiers. A few buildings were refitted for use by the Relief Association of Davenport, which was created to assist the many Iowa soldiers wounded in the series of devastating battles that had begun with the Battle of Shiloh. However, it was decided that the primary use of the Camp would be as a military prison for captured Confederate soldiers, and high fences were built around the facility.

Despite these plans, the War dragged on, and by August of 1862, Camp McClellan was once again housing and training volunteer soldiers. There were only 328 recruits, but the Camp, under the sequential commands of Lieutenant Joseph L. Davis and Captain Littler, prepared for thousands more. However, far from the Union and Confederate lines, another civil war was brewing in Minnesota, which would end with a horrifying number of casualties and yet another direction for Camp McClellan.

By late summer of 1862, many Sioux tribes in the Minnesota Territories had become dangerously disillusioned by bad treaties, greedy traders, and the inevitable culture clashes with the settlers who were pouring into the opened country. Several Sioux tribes had been removed to a twenty-mile strip along the Minnesota River south of Lake Traverse, on the border of western Minnesota and northeast South Dakota. These tribes, under the leadership of Little Crow, were only waiting for the right time to reclaim the land for which a beleaguered United States government could not seem to deliver even a small amount of the promised payment.

Little Crow's careful plans were upset when, on August 15, four impatient young braves raided the settlement of Acton (ten miles west of present day Litchfield) killing at least five people, including a woman and a young girl. Instead of suffering the ignominy of having the men tried and punished by the government, Little Crow and the other chiefs chose instead to declare War from a position of relative strength. On the morning of August 16, over 200 Sioux surrounded the Lower Sioux Indian Agency (a few miles south of the present city of Morton) and opened fire.

The United States sent the few soldiers they could spare, but these could not effectively protect the settlers, who abandoned their homes rather than face the Sioux attacks. More soldiers were sent, and after more than a month of vicious carnage perpetrated by both sides, Little Crow and his men were defeated on September 22, 1862. Though Little Crow and others fled to the Dakota territories, over 500 Native Americans were captured and put on trial. Three hundred of these men were court-martialed and sentenced to death, though Abraham Lincoln commuted the sentences to imprisonment for all but 38, who were hanged in February of 1863.

The following March, the Davenport newspapers received notice that a large number of the captured Sioux would be imprisoned at Camp McClellan, which was far enough away from Minnesota to protect them from lynch mobs, and easily guarded by only two companies of soldiers. On April 21, 1863, two hundred and seventy-seven Sioux men (and one Winnebago), sixteen women and two children were loaded aboard the steamboat *Favorite* at Mankato, Minnesota. The *Favorite* arrived on April 25, and the prisoners were transferred to their quarters without incident.

The *Davenport Democrat* described the Native American prison area a few days later:

“The pen made for their reception is 200 feet square and encloses four buildings, formerly barracks. The bunks are all taken out. Two of these barracks are occupied by the prisoners as sleeping quarters, one is assigned for hospital, and the other is the guard house of the

post. Outside of the fence and four feet from the top is a staging running clear around, on which the sentries walk.

“Major Brown complimented Captain Littler very highly upon his judgment in designing and carrying out his plan, and assured the Captain that had he been consulted he could have suggested nothing better.”²

The prisoners were reported to be satisfied with their quarters, as they had plenty of room. They were given beef and four bushels of corn per day, which ten of the women were assigned to cook. Bread was also distributed, though it was reported that the Sioux did not care much for it.

In December of 1863, Camp McClellan was divided along the western road traveling through it in order to make the Native American prison separate from the training Camp. This ‘new’ Camp was renamed Camp Kearney (though still familiarly called Camp McClellan) and was reconfigured to house the guards and the officers.

Meanwhile, the needs of the Civil War had necessitated a draft, and eligible men were offered large amounts of money, up to \$300 in some cases, to those who would enlist before they were called. The newspapers published glowing reports of the comforts of the training Camp, from the delights of the mess hall to the ‘well-ventilated’ barracks.

In contrast, reports of the prison were dismal, although the poor conditions and hygiene found there were often blamed on their prisoners themselves by the decidedly biased newspapers, who thought it a waste that the murderous ‘devils’ were “clothed, warmed, and fed at Camp McClellan, when they ought to be hung.”³ Approximately thirty did die that year, from age or sickness, or from the cramped and neglected conditions.

In the spring and summer of 1864, overt hostility toward the imprisoned Sioux seemed to have died down, and prisoner labor parties were taken to work in the fields. There was some local protest, but Major Ten Broeck and Captain Judd, who were then in charge of the prison, offered reassurances that each party would be heavily guarded, and that any complaints of prisoner misconduct or of guard neglect would be immediately addressed. Notably, the *Democrat*, usually negative in its assessment of Native American behavior, was quick to remind its readers that there were many Native Americans in the area that weren’t Sioux and had never been imprisoned, cautioning against unreasonable accusations.

In August of 1864, President Lincoln pardoned and freed twenty-seven of the Sioux. That December, a large lodge, which had been captured by the 6th Iowa Calvary in the Dakota Territories, was presented to Camp Kearney by General Baker to be used by Big Eagle, the principle chief of the prisoners, during the winter. Though this was an unusually kind gesture, General Baker did make it clear that he wanted his ‘trophy’ back once the weather turned warm.

On the Camp McClellan side of the fence, the War effort had not been neglected. More men were trained and deployed from the Camp, and the sick and wounded were returning. The Hospital was judged well equipped to handle the casualties. A full pharmacy, clean rooms, and a dietary kitchen said to have been influenced by Iowa Sanitary Agent Annie Wittenmyer’s design were greatly admired by both Davenport citizens and the patients.

After General Robert E. Lee's surrender on April 9, 1865, the celebrations in Davenport were from all accounts extensive, joyous, and not a little out of control, with parades, singing, cheering, and the torching of a Confederate States of America 'coffin' at the corner of Brady and 2nd Streets. Major Miller, then in command of Camp McClellan, was ordered by the War Department to fire one hundred guns and turn out the military in full regalia. As the *Gazette* commented, "There being no cannon here and but little military, he did the best he could."

Not a week later, Camp McClellan made preparations to mourn the death of President Lincoln, holding a special meeting and ceremony in the Hospital so that the wounded could attend. Speeches were made by prominent citizens and clergy, eulogizing Lincoln and swearing swift retribution to his murderers.

After such extremes of emotion, the Camp seemed ready to settle down to receiving and mustering out the returning troops. The War being settled to Davenport's satisfaction, attention was again drawn to the Native American prisoners. "Either these Indians are guilty . . . or they are not. If guilty . . . the [State] penitentiary or gibbets are not any too good for them. If not guilty, let the be released and the great expense they now are to the Government be saved." ⁴ The prisoners, it was implied, had enjoyed a long enough vacation at taxpayer expense.

In late August of 1865, fire destroyed the headquarters of Camp McClellan, but the Camp had all but shut down by that time. The government stores were moved out of Davenport and it was thought that the Camp would be razed, rather than recycled. The Hospital closed permanently on October 5, 1865. The prison remained in operation.

On April 10th, 1866, President Andrew Johnson ordered the release of the remaining 177 prisoners, who were sent to Santee, Nebraska. Many Sioux had died during the three years of their incarceration, but unlike the soldiers who had died at the hospital, no special markers were placed over their graves. Camp McClellan and Camp Kearney were torn down soon after the release of the Sioux, and private homes were eventually built on the site.

On July 25, 1878, a group of scientists from the Davenport Academy of Natural Science opened four graves at the McClellan site and removed several skulls, which were given over to the Academy for study. The Academy eventually became the Putnam Museum of Natural History, which retained the skulls as part of their collections until the enactment of Iowa's burial site protection and reburial laws.

According to an article in the *Democrat*, published the day of the excavation, the scientists had first explored the mound earthworks, located in Davenport Township on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, but after finding nothing, they went to the McClellan site. This seems to indicate that the mounds and the graves are in fairly close proximity. However, no available articles state the specific site, possibly because the location was generally known at that time. Neither the Putnam Museum nor the Davenport Public Library owns any records or maps that shows the exact location.

In 1986, the Putnam transferred the human skeletal remains in its collections, including 23 skulls of “non-Mound aboriginals” of local origin, to the Office of the State Archeologist of Iowa. According to the records of the Putnam, the skulls were to be repatriated to the Dakota tribe at Morton, Minnesota, for burial. This implies that these remains were determined to be from the Sioux prisoners at Camp McClellan.

Today, the Village of East Davenport and the neighborhood of McClellan Heights stand where Camp McClellan once looked down on the Mississippi River. A few plaques and occasional War reenactments are all that is left of the Camp that offered training and comfort to so many Union soldiers.

But in remembering Camp McClellan, one should not ignore the memory of its grim alter ego. In 2005, a Dakota Memorial Ceremony was held on the former site of Camp Kearney by members of the Dakota tribe and relatives of the imprisoned Sioux. The Dakota tribe hopes to someday build a monument to honor the memory of those who suffered in what some call the nation’s first concentration Camp.

¹ “Camp McClellan under a new administration.” *Davenport Democrat*, October 12, 1861, p.1.

² “Indian murderers at Post McClellan.” *Davenport Democrat*, April 27, 1863, p.1.

³ “Indian Guard.” *Davenport Democrat*, December 3, 1863, p.1.

⁴ “Put them where they belong.” *Daily Gazette*, June 23, 1865, p.4.

Sources:

“Camp McClellan under a new administration.” *Davenport Democrat*, October 12, 1861, p.1.

“Indian Guard.” *Davenport Democrat*, December 3, 1863, p.1.

“Indian murderers at Post McClellan.” *Davenport Democrat*, April 27, 1863, p.1.

Geyer, Thomas. “Dakota Indians to honor imprisoned tribesmen.” *Quad-City Times*, April 23, 2005, p. A6.

Holtz, David. “Dakotas gather to honor ancestors.” *Quad-City Times*, April 24, 2005, pp. A4-A8.

“Indian murderers at Post McClellan.” *Davenport Democrat*, April 27, 1863, p.1.

“Put them where they belong.” *Daily Gazette*, June 2, 1865, p.1.

Satterlee, Marion P. *Outbreak and Massacre by the Dakota Indians in Minnesota in 1862*. (Bowie, Md. : Heritage Books) 2001.

Temple, Seth. "Camp McClellan during the Civil War." *Annals of Iowa*, volume 21, number 1, July 1937.

Woolworth, Alan R. *Camera and sketchbook: witnesses to the Sioux uprising of 1862*. (Roseville, Minn.: Prairie Echoes/Park Genealogical Books), c2004.