Episode 168: Point Lookout

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Two days after Christmas 1863, President Abraham Lincoln was accompanied by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton on a visit to the prisoner of war camp at Point Lookout, Maryland. The camp, officially named Camp Hoffman but generally referred to as Point Lookout, was about eighty miles southeast of Washington and located on a peninsula jutting into the Chesapeake Bay.

Point Lookout prison camp was constructed in a hurry during the summer of 1863. The thousands of Confederate prisoners taken at Gettysburg in July were far too many for existing Union prisoner of war facilities. Point Lookout was on the far southern end of St. Mary's county and was fairly isolated and easily protected. Escape would be very difficult.

Before the war, the area had been home to a lighthouse and hotels and other enterprises meant to lure visitors to the scenic beauty of the location. In June 1862, the U.S. government had leased the area and constructed a large hospital and a wharf to unload wounded soldiers.

After Gettysburg, a 40-acre site north of the hospital was surrounded by a 15-foot high fence and divided into two sections to separate enlisted prisoners from officers. Prisoners would be housed in tents. The estimated capacity of the camp was 10,000 but by the end of the war more than 20,000 suffering Confederates would be cramped into the space.

Guards were able to stand on a catwalk constructed on the inside of the perimeter fence. The ironclad U.S.S. *Roanoke* sat just offshore to discourage any rescue attempts. The many tents were arranged in nine parallel "streets" and they provided little protection from the summer heat or the biting winds coming in off the bay in the winter. Food was scarce and hunting and eating

the many rats in the camp became a popular pastime for the prisoners. Because the camp was just above sea level, flooding was common. It was a thoroughly miserable existence.

Adding to the misery was the animosity and tension between the inmates and the guards. By early 1864, the original guard units from New Hampshire had been replaced by the 36th U.S. Colored Infantry regiment and other African-American troops. Several Confederates claimed in their memoirs that the guards were known to shoot the prisoners with little or no provocation.

The crowding and lack of good fresh water supplies led to rampant disease in the camp. It did not take long for dysentery, typhoid and scurvy to permeate the prisoner population. Despite the proximity of the hospital, many of the sick prisoners were left to die in their tents. By the end of the war, it is estimated that approximately 4,000 prisoners died in the camp. Many are buried in a common grave at the Confederate cemetery that remains at Point Lookout.

During the course of the last two years of the war, over 50,000 prisoners were processed at Point Lookout. Many of these were only on site for a short while before being transferred to prison camps farther north. Those that remained and survived were released beginning in late April 1865. The prisoners were released in a combination of alphabetical order and in reverse order of when their home state had seceded from the Union.

While many prisoner of war camps on both sides were horrible, Point Lookout was apparently one of the worst. There is no record of Lincoln's thoughts during his December 1863 visit, but a small earthen fort that was built on the peninsula to protect from Confederate attack was named in Lincoln's honor. Parts of the fort can still be seen in the state park that exists on the site today.