

488

STORIES of New Jersey

Fort Delaware, today the central link in the chain of forts near the mouth of Delaware River, was designed to protect the city of Philadelphia. It was completed in 1859 -- just in time for the Civil War. Pea Patch Island, on which the fort is located, lies about midway in the Delaware River between the Delaware and New Jersey shores.

There is a legend dating back to Colonial times that a ship laden with peas was grounded on a sandbar at this point. The roots grew, accumulating drift and sediment until an island of about 178 acres appeared on the surface of the water. Parts of the island are actually about three feet below water level and a sea wall has been built to keep out the tide.

By 1861 about a thousand prisoners were interned on the swampy little island with its grim granite fort. Some prominent citizens of Salem County and Delaware who had given evidence of their sympathy with the Southern cause were among the first to be confined there. In 1862 the place began to fill with war prisoners, and by the end of 1863 twelve thousand, most of whom were taken at Gettysburg, were crowded together in a place that could accommodate only 4,000 with safety. Rude wooden barracks were constructed to house the mass of wretched men. Barbed wire and alert sentries discouraged them from rash attempts to escape; those who managed to elude the guards and get to the mainland were helped to reach their own lines by means of an underground railway that had been set up in Salem and in southern Delaware.

Fort Delaware was to the South what Andersonville and Libbey were to the North. It was a cesspool of misery and lost hope, dirt, lice, rats and disease. Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who later became famous as a specialist in nervous diseases and a writer of historical romances, was at this time Federal Inspector of Prisons. In a letter written to his sister he describes the conditions of the island. Part of his letter is as follows:

Tomorrow I go to Fort Delaware to inspect that inferno of detained rebels. A thousand ill, twelve thousand on an island that should hold four thousand, the general level three feet below the water mark; twenty deaths a day of dysentery, and the living having more life on them than in them. Occasional lack of water, - and thus a Christian nation treats the captives of its sword . . . The thermometer is ninety. Not that I care. It may go until it requires a balloon to get any higher, and not reach my boiling point. Two weeks ago the rebel officers plotted to take the fort, but were betrayed and carried off to Sandusky.

Unruly prisoners were thrown into the dungeons that were built into the solid masonry of the fort. These dungeons were totally dark and ventilated only by an airshaft too narrow to admit a small man.

The only water supply was the rain that washed off the flat roofs of the fort, drained along gutters and then filtered through sand. When this supply failed, water was brought from Brandywine Creek in Delaware and dumped into cisterns without any attempt at filtering. As a result many of the soldiers fell sick and died, as the cholera epidemic raged.