

Camp Oglethorpe: Macon's Unknown Civil War Prisoner of War Camp, 1862-1864

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Review

Angela M. Riotto

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Hoy, Stephen and William Smith. *Camp Oglethorpe: Macon's Unknown Civil War Prisoner of War Camp, 1862-1864*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2019 \$35.00 ISBN 9780881466911

Located along the Ocmulgee River, Macon, Georgia, is known for its International Cherry Blossom Festival, the Ocmulgee National Monument, Mercer University, among other historic and cultural sites. Yet, as Stephen Hoy and William Smith argue in *Camp Oglethorpe: Macon's Unknown Civil War Prisoner of War Camp, 1862-1864*, Macon is not known for having been the site of a prisoner of war (POW) camp during the American Civil War. Both long-time residents of Macon, Hoy and Smith recognized that they were living within minutes of an important site that had long since faded from public memory. Taking advantage of their location and the hundreds of accounts written by Union POWs, the authors resolved to bring Camp Oglethorpe out of the shadow of Andersonville and other more infamous Civil War prisons to present this clearly-written and well-researched study of Macon's "unknown prisoner of war camp."

Realizing that the local community and the wider American public have largely forgotten Camp Oglethorpe, the authors trace its entire history, beginning with the camp's antebellum origins. Hoy and Smith explain that during the early 1800s, Macon was the home of several volunteer militia regiments organized to defend the area against the Native American population. Needing a parade ground and drilling site for these ever-increasing militia units, the state of Georgia established the camp in December 1843. By mid-1844, the land was ready for its first military exercise and the grounds were officially named Camp Oglethorpe for the founder of the Georgia colony—General James Oglethorpe. In the first section, Hoy and Smith demonstrate that the local community prided themselves on the parade grounds and their "handsomely uniformed and equipped" militia units (14). Here, through the analysis of local newspapers, the authors provide an illuminating glimpse into antebellum Macon.

The authors then turn their attention to the city of Macon and Camp Oglethorpe's importance to the Confederate war effort. In the early months of the war, the camp transitioned

from a parade ground to a staging ground for departing companies and for those units not yet called into action. The authors note that the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862 brought war closer to the city in the form of wounded and captured soldiers. Easily accessible by rail and considered out of reach of invading Union forces, Macon soon became the site of several military hospitals and holding facilities for captured U.S. troops. Camp Oglethorpe once again changed purposes and transitioned from a training ground to a military prison. As in earlier chapters, the authors rely on newspapers to uncover the local community's opinion of the new prison. Focusing on newspapers and excerpts from Union POWs' accounts, the authors show how happenings within the prison started to affect Macon. The city's inhabitants, once proud of the Confederate soldiers there, began to struggle with the idea of having a standing garrison and enemy captives near their homes. It seems that even early in its existence, the local citizens were not entirely thrilled about the prison. Yet, this conclusion is one made by the reader and not stated outright by the authors.

The subsequent chapters discuss life within the prison after its re-opening after the collapse of the Dix-Hill Cartel in May 1864. Although initially closed in October 1862, it re-opened exclusively for Union officers, as POW camps throughout the South began to overflow after the end of the exchange. To uncover what life was like for a typical Union POW, the authors rely on accounts written during, and, largely, after the war. Not surprisingly, these accounts include tales of escape (or at least attempts), abuse at the hands of the guards, and overall suffering throughout the camp. For those familiar with POW narratives, the stories (and their authors) are quickly recognizable. For instance, many of the book's subjects were confined in other Confederate prisons and their accounts discuss more than just their time at Macon. Many of their testimonies can be found in other historical analyses of Civil War prisons and POWs. This is not necessarily a weakness of the book, but those familiar with the topic may not find these inclusions particularly groundbreaking. The reviewer, nevertheless, applauds the authors for their research—as the source locations range from the National Prisoner of War Museum in Andersonville, Georgia to the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Other readers are sure to appreciate the wealth of POW accounts included in the book.

To provide a detailed account of the prison using POW narratives, however, the authors occasionally deviate from Camp Oglethorpe. The authors also discuss prison life at Castle Morgan, Belle Isle, Charleston, or, more often than not, Andersonville (officially known as

Camp Sumter). While many readers may not be bothered by these asides, for someone interested merely in Camp Oglethorpe, these digressions may be considered awkward and irritating.

After detailing prison life, the authors conclude their work with a brief discussion of its postwar existence. They argue that many inhabitants of Macon wanted to put the war behind them, and Camp Oglethorpe with it. Here, the reviewer was hoping for an in-depth discussion of how memories of the camp made the local community uncomfortable, and they consciously rejected its memory in favor of hopes for the future. While they declare that “the discomfort of Camp Oglethorpe’s association with Andersonville promoted the city to treat the property as if haunted, as if tainted with memories that were unmentionable,” they do not discuss how or why the city chose to sterilize history (146). The reviewer finds this disappointing, but understands that the authors were merely trying to unearth this “unknown” prison, not offer an in-depth memory study of the camp. Similarly, the authors’ lack of analysis of POW narratives also disappoints the reviewer. Hoy and Smith seem to accept these accounts as fact. They include sensationalized tales of escapes and abuse alongside excerpts from the *Official Records* without any discussion of their potential biases. Yet again the reviewer acknowledges that this was not the authors’ purpose and applauds their research. Hoy and Smith aimed to bring Camp Oglethorpe out of the shadows of history and with this book, Camp Oglethorpe has been restored to the history of the American Civil War.

Angela M. Riotto received her Ph.D. in American History at the University of Akron in May 2018. Focusing on American Civil War prisoners of war and their narratives, she traces the ways in which both Union and Confederate ex-prisoners of war discussed their prison experiences between 1862 and 1930. She currently works as a historian on the Films Team at Army University Press at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.