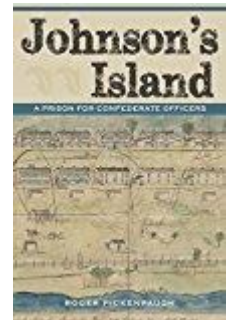


Roger Pickenpaugh. *Johnson's Island: A Prison for Confederate Officers*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2016. 136 pp. \$18.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-60635-284-7.



Reviewed by Lorien Foote (Texas A&M)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Johnson's Island: A Prison for Confederate Officers is Roger Pickenpaugh's latest entry in a list of books he has written covering the history of Civil War prisoners of war. Most of the material here can also be found in his earlier work, *Captives in Gray: The Civil War Prisons of the Union* (2009). Pickenpaugh provides a straightforward and clearly written narrative of Johnson's Island's origins, its growing population after the breakdown of exchange, the social life of prisoners and the exchange economy they developed, the relationship between prisoners and guards, escape attempts, and the rations and health of the prisoners. This book is a good place to start for historians seeking basic information about Johnson's Island, but it offers no analytical interpretations. When his primary sources provide contradictory evidence, Pickenpaugh words his statements carefully to avoid reaching a conclusion, simply letting readers know that there are different perspectives.

Union Quarter-Master General Montgomery Meigs was the only military official on either side

of the conflict who recognized the need to plan for and construct a prison to care for large numbers of prisoners. At his insistence, the secretary of war created the position of commissary-general of prisoners, appointed Lt. Col. William Hoffman to the post in October 1861, and instructed him to select a site for the prison. Hoffman chose Johnson's Island, Ohio, and personally oversaw construction. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton eventually determined that the prison would house only officers. Pickenpaugh examined prisoner diaries, local newspapers, and official Union prison records to reconstruct the story of the prison.

Conditions for prisoners at Johnson's island were the best of any Civil War prison and its mortality rate the lowest. Hoffman's corps of inspectors reported problems with sanitation and medical treatment and the commissary-general issued orders for these to be addressed. Although prisoners suffered intensely from boredom and lack of privacy, their status as officers granted them privileges, such as the ability to purchase newspapers, to bathe in the lake, and to stage performances

with printed programs. A prison economy and class structure developed at Johnson's Island, as at other prisons. Drawing on the insights of Michael P. Gray's *The Business of Captivity: Elmira and Its Civil War Prison* (2001), Pickenpaugh describes the prison "market," a place where prisoners offered services such as tailoring, dentistry, and baking. Many who made jewelry and fans out of material in the prison used contacts with guards or friends who lived in the North to distribute their goods outside the prison. Prisoners at Johnson's Island suffered the most after June 1, 1864, when the War Department reduced rations for prisoners of war by 20 percent to retaliate for the treatment they believed that Union POWs received in the Confederacy. Those officers who had to live on the ration reported that they were hungry; officers who had the financial means to supplement their diet with purchases from the sutler were affected in August when Hoffman decreed that sutlers could no longer sell food.

Pickenpaugh's unwillingness to reach conclusions is exemplified in his discussion of Johnson's Island's low mortality rate. He never tells readers why the prison earned that distinction. His narrative of the medical facilities quotes prisoners and inspectors who praised and who criticized the hospital, and then offers extensive quotes from an 1891 account that he claims is the most "balanced." There is no attempt to sort through the various accounts, to assess their reliability, or to resolve the contradictions. Pickenpaugh remarks that "the extent to which Union officials were culpable for sickness and death in Northern prisons is open to debate" (p. 94). It is disappointing that an author who has written a previous book that covers the entire Union prison system does not stake a position in the debate. The only conclusion on this subject that he reaches is a narrow one: that Hoffman did nothing to prevent scurvy even when inspectors reported the danger.

Readers seeking to understand Civil War prisons in the context of the scholarly questions that

surround them will not find helpful analysis here. There is no insight into the cultural ideals that created a system where officers and enlisted men were treated so differently; no perspective on whether the reasons for the prison's low mortality might shed light on the factors that created such different conditions elsewhere; and despite some fascinating material on the logistics of prisoners' journeys and their multiple interactions with Northern civilians, no interpretation of the military or social significance of this movement. Pickenpaugh has done the history profession a great service by writing several books that give readers the most thorough basic overview of Civil War prisons and their prisoners that we have. He would do a greater one if he told us what he actually thinks about these topics.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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