

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael Horigan. *Elmira: Death Camp of the North.* Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2002. x + 246. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8117-1432-7.



Reviewed by James F. Epperson (Associate Editor, [Mathematical Reviews](#))

Published on H-CivWar (December, 2003)

The noted historian E. B. Long once wrote that “an ‘Andersonville complex’ seems to exist regarding Civil War prisons. It is synonymous with all that was reprehensible in wartime prisons.”[1] In *Elmira: Death Camp of the North* Michael Horigan attempts to remedy this deficiency by giving us an in-depth history of one of the most notorious Northern prisons.

Early in the war, Elmira—a village of about 8,800 citizens in Chemung County, New York, near the Pennsylvania line—was a vital cog in the Federal war effort, first as a state military depot and then as a Federal “draft rendezvous” (one of three in the state of New York). Both designations meant roughly the same thing: the village was a place where regiments formed up and began their training before being sent off to the war. As a result, by June, 1861, six camps of barracks had been constructed around the town.

As early as the late spring of 1862, the Federal Commissary General for Prisoners, the parsimonious Lt. Col. William Hoffman, began to wonder if the Elmira barracks complex could, in part, be put to use as a camp for Confederate prisoners. With the collapse of the prisoner of war cartel in 1863, this became a more urgent need with the opening of the spring campaign in 1864; so in May of that year Hoffman decided to convert one barracks complex at Elmira into a prison camp.

As was the case with almost all Civil War prisons, the conditions at Elmira left a lot to be desired. Despite the protests of post commander Lt. Col. Seth Eastman, that only 4,000 men could be quartered in Barracks No. 3, Hoffman planned on housing as many as 10,000 POWs there. More significantly, the camp opened just after Secretary of War Stanton, in reaction to the condition of some Union soldiers who had been returned from captivity in the south, ordered a 20 percent reduction in the rations made available to Confederate prisoners. In addition, no medical staff was in place until five weeks after the camp went into operation.

The first prisoners arrived at Elmira, from the camp at Point Lookout, Maryland, on July 6, 1864. By the middle of the month, over one thousand men were confined in the former Barracks No. 3. One of the particular tragedies of Elmira was the Shohola train wreck, in which a train carrying a number of Confederates destined for Elmira collided with an eastbound coal train, killing a number of Confederate prisoners as well as some of the Union guards.

Horigan is an Elmira native and he brings to his study an awesome array of local sources, which, together with the usual material from the Official Records and other archives, add detail and color to the narrative. The result is a very fine narrative history of the prison camp.

The author does a good job of placing the story of Elmira within an overall context, detailing the evolution of the site from a state military depot to a prison camp, but without much comparison to other Union camps. In addition he gives substantial background on the men who had the task of administering the camp: the first commander, Lt. Col. Seth Eastman, his successor, Col. Benjamin Tracy, as well as Dr. Eugene Sanger, the controversial medical officer whose reputation is somewhat salvaged by Horigan's assessment of his efforts on behalf of the prisoners. Horigan's knowledge of other aspects of the Civil War prison story is less solid; his description of the exchange and parole process, for example, is very weak. He appears to confuse the notions of "paroled" and "exchanged" prisoners when he says that "released" prisoners "were not to rejoin the military" (p. 17).

From the point of view of presentation, the one element the book definitely lacks is visual aids. While a number of photographs of camp officers and the camp itself are in the book, there is not a single map or diagram of the camp. Although Horigan discusses Elmira's deficient sanitation system, without a diagram of the camp and its topography it is difficult for the reader to understand completely the sanitary problems caused by Foster's Pond, a lagoon off of the Chemung River into which the camp latrines drained. Because the effluent did not empty out of Foster's Pond fast enough, the camp was essentially situated in close proximity to an open sewer, with the inevitable results until a drainage system was put in place. There is not even a map placing Elmira within the 1864 railroad network.

While the author does a good job of detailing the neglect and incompetence which led to the high mortality

rate at Elmira (24.3 percent, more than double the average mortality in Union camps, and only slightly below Andersonville's 29 percent), he oversteps the bounds of this reviewer's credulity by posing as his main thesis that the camp was deliberately set up as a "death camp." While there is no doubt that Secretary of War Stanton was a hard man and not one to be compassionate toward Confederate prisoners, Horigan's claims in this regard are poorly substantiated. Basically he collects a number of undoubted administrative errors and, from the mere existence of these several mistakes, concludes that the maladministration was deliberate, and not the result of simple and tragic incompetence. To the best of this reviewer's knowledge, no one else has suggested that the mortality at Elmira was the result of deliberate policy, except for some speculation about the role of Major Sanger, who is mostly exonerated by Horigan's research.

Horigan's book is a valuable addition to Civil War prison history, although it would have been more valuable if the author had provided some graphics and kept a shorter rein on his speculations.

Note

[1]. E. B. Long, *Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865* (New York: DeCapo Press, 1985), p. 715.

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: James F. Epperson. Review of Horigan, Michael, *Elmira: Death Camp of the North*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8549>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.