

Civil War Violin



One year after Rock Island Arsenal was established, a prison camp was built in 1863 to house Confederate prisoners of war. During the twenty months that the prison was in operation, 12,192 prisoners were confined at the Rock Island Barracks.

Prisoners occupied their time in a variety of ways. There was a prison library, church services, and a debating society. Games would help pass the time, and the prisoners enjoyed marbles and tag. Some prisoners carved rings, buttons, and trinkets from shells taken from the Mississippi River. One prisoner even carved violins by hand to sell to other prisoners, guards, and visitors.

Private H. E. Purdee, 7th Florida Infantry, made this violin which he sold to Mr. E. M. Cralla of Moline, Illinois on August 16, 1864. Glued inside the violin is a note which states, "is manufactured expressly for E. M. Cralla by H. E. Purdee of the 7th Fla. Reg. rebel prisoner of war. Made with a pocket knife in Barracks 33 Rock Island prison Ill. Aug. 16 - 1864".

The museum also owns a letter that mentions the violin. "There is some splendid violins here made with nothing but a pocket knife, so we music & dance & kill time."

Rock Island Prison BK 31 Aug 21st 64

My dear Aunt

I have been thinking I would write to you for some time, I had the pleasure of meeting Jimmie Hibert here a few days ago, he is very well & looks better than I ever saw him, I have had very good health this summer except at present I have had a slight attack of flux for a week but am better now. I heard from home a few days since my little girl was quite sick. The rest of our relations were all well. I have not heard from Ed & John for some time if you know any thing of them please let me hear I suppose uncle Charles is still attending to the lower mill, tell him if he can find time please write to a fellow I would be glad to hear from him any time. Tell Miss Sallie just to keep the dogs off until the hunters come in. You will find my disconnected scrawl very uninteresting as I have nothing to write about & only allowed to write one page. The boys here spend their time making rings breast pins all kinds of trinkets & there is some splendid violins here made with nothing but a pocket knife so we musick dance & kill time. Give my best respects to your parents Sallie & all Sumner's friends Write soon your loving nephew

James B Drake
Prisoner of war
Barrack 31