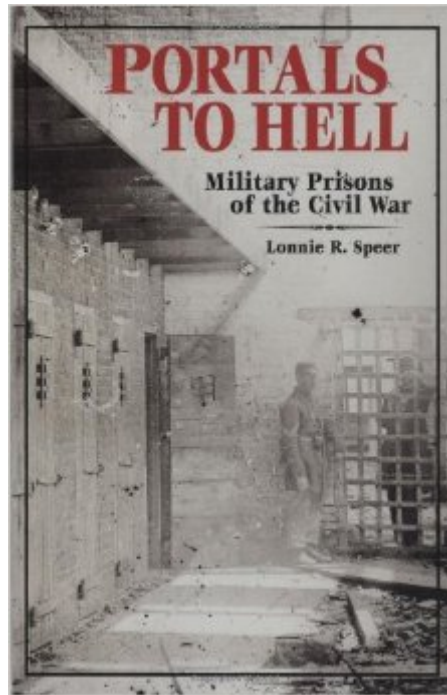


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# Portals To Hell



## Synopsis

Civil War. The first comprehensive study of all major prisons, both North and South, this chronicle analyzes the many complexities of the relationships among prisoners, guards, commandants, and government leaders.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A college professor once told us that history is 80% fiction and is a function of the agenda of either the writer or his sources. Is that the case here? I found the book very interesting but in the areas I am familiar with, far from reality. For example, I live near Fort Delaware and it is not in the middle of Delaware Bay. It is in the middle of the Delaware River. You would not need to be an expert swimmer to reach either the Pennsylvania or New Jersey shore as suggested in the book. An escapee would not have to "float for hours on the waves using the lights of Delaware City" to guide him. He could have easily floated in the gentle current the nine tenths of a mile to shore. He also used questionable sources. He uses an old tale from a former prisoner about a guard who took a hundred or more prisoners to a remote area and made them strip. Until the Corps of Engineers began to dump the sludge dredged from the shipping channel on the north end of the island after the war, the island was only about seventy acres and had buildings everywhere. Even though he says the prison is on an island, he has a prisoner at the end of the war being forced to walk fourteen miles to the nearest town to get a train because the evil guards wouldn't help him. The nearest town is again Delaware City and it is nine tenths of a mile across the river. It was a southern city and the gracious people would have been happy to help. The author also places Ft. Mifflin, south of Phila, in

the middle of the river. It is not. At the time it had a narrow channel between it and the mainland which is now gone. Of the thousands of prisoners at Ft. Delaware, his sources appear to only be those who had something to gain by their more colorful stories. They were selling books. I found so many inconsistencies in the areas I was familiar with that I was very skeptical about the remainder. After reading a subsequent review, I thought that I would clarify a few points. I did not go into everything originally to keep the review to one point. Read all history with care. The book, however, is accurate in showing that Ft. Delaware was a miserable place to be. In the summer, it is a hot, humid, terrible place. In the winter, with the winds whipping up from the bay, life would again be intolerable. This book is an anthology of all the civil war prison camps. As such, there are both time and space constraints. All history is a story and must be read with some skepticism. I thought the reviewers before me were far too enthusiastic about this book's accuracy. This particular book, based upon other books and research, does lean more to the sensational. Some of the primary sources did have axes to grind, particularly Mr. Rivenbark. Besides writing a book, Rivenbark lectured after the war. His stories got more "interesting" as time passed. This book is not balanced but it was interesting and a basic start for further reading on a particular prison.

This book took on the monumental task of looking at every Civil War prison. Unfortunately, it fell victim to that very attempt. By trying to do too much, it failed to show the true context in which these prisons existed. While even the best of these camps were terrible places, they were terrible for everyone. The guards lived in the same filth and a good number of them also died. This book tends to label someone and then move on. The book, *Unlikely Allies*, by Dale Fetzer goes into much more detail about Ft. Delaware and shows the commander to have been a much more complex character. *Elmira, Deathcamp of the North* shows the intrinsic horror of the camps that is not shown in this more slanted approach. Things were bad enough without taking them out of context. The smallpox epidemic that killed nearly one quarter of those who died at Ft. Delaware, ravaged the entire mid Atlantic region. The prisoners, however, had no place to run. The epidemic stopped when the commander had the prisoners and guards vaccinated. The food was terrible but so was the food the troops had in the field. Thumb screws were a nasty, but typical, military punishment. I am sure there were atrocities and some of them are in the book but this book does use primary sources for some acts where only one soldier seems to have ever reported the event. It was worth reading and the pictures are good but it throws truth, myth, legend and downright fabrication together as if it were the gospel. Read with care.

Americans are pleased to think of our Civil War ancestors as gallant, chivalrous warriors, magnanimous to those defeated in battle. The sorry record of the treatment of prisoners, North and South, calls for a more somber perspective. Yes, traditional American unpreparedness and incompetence were more operant than malevolence. Yes, inadequate distribution systems and supply shortages caused much misery. And yes, infectious diseases, poorly understood at the time, took a heavy toll on every stratum of society, even reaching into the White House. But those circumstances don't account for the 56,000 men, mostly young, who died in captivity. The sad fact is that many were starved, neglected, and abused to death. How, where, and why are explained in this well researched and skillfully written work, tracing the actual operations of POW camps on both sides. Drawing on official documents, newspapers, letters, diaries, and manuscripts, Speer has constructed a highly readable, comprehensive history of this little-known subject, which will be of enduring value to libraries, military history collections, and Civil War students, and should serve as a corrective to those inclined to take an overly romantic view of the War. (The "score" rating is an unfortunately ineradicable feature of the page. This reviewer does not "score" books.)

A well written and well organized study of Civil War prisons, North and South. The layman will enjoy the ease of prose and scholars will appreciate the authors meticulous documentation. A major strength of the book comes from the many firsthand accounts from prisoners and keepers. It is a good read from cover to cover plus the organization allows easy reference to specific prisons and time periods. It contains 32 pages of excellent pictures of the camps and men.

This is a 400-page, small-type book, not something you'll read in an evening. But no matter where you geographical interest in the Civil War was, and the prisons that those areas involved, you'll find a wealth of enlightening and relevant data. And be aware that a lot of really frightening s\*\*t happened. Like any passionate, Mr. Speer has painstakingly cited and footnoted everything - a section that takes 57 pages in itself! If you're researching the major and minor details of the subject of Civil War prisons, let Mr. Speer lead you. And if you want to know, in documented format, how hellish the Civil War was.

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