# PRISON TOWN

ROBERT E. EBERLY, JR.

An angel stands in downtown Salisbury, North Carolina. She first appeared at the intersection of West Innes and Church Streets in the Rowan County seat in 1909 with a message of remembrance. Holding high the laurel crown of eternal victory, the angel bears a slain Southern infantryman up toward unseen realms, rising from a pedestal inscribed: "In memory of Rowan's Confederate soldiers that their heroic deeds, sublime self-sacrifice and undying devotion to duty and country may never be forgotten—1861-1865."

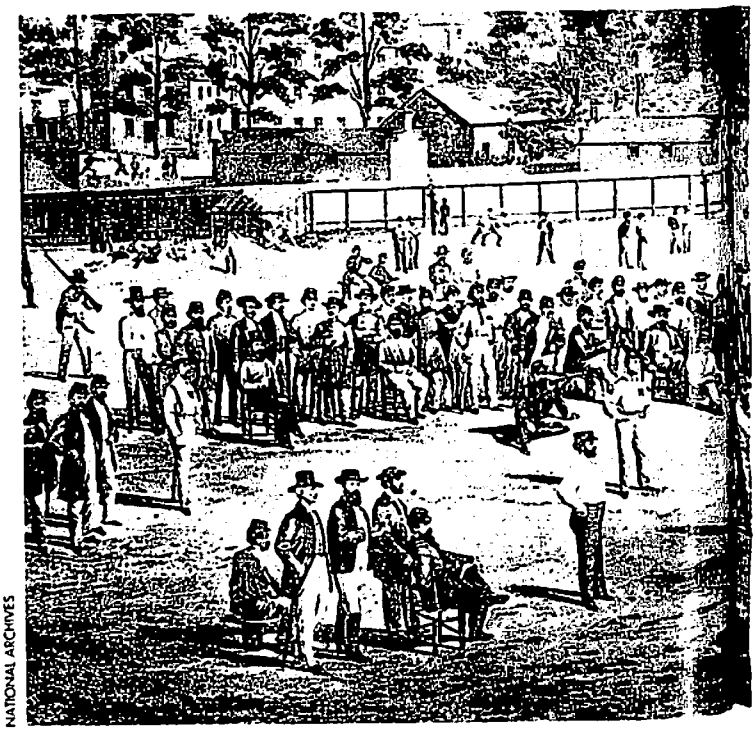
There is another monument to lost soldiers in Salisbury—a small masonry temple erected by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1910, just one year after the angel. A bronze tablet inside the shrine perpetuates the memory of "the patriotic devotion, heroism and self-sacrifice of the officers and soldiers of the Pennsylvania Volunteers who died while confined as prisoners of war in the Confederate military prison at Salisbury, North Carolina, during the war of the rebellion, and were interred among the unknown Union soldiers and sailors in the eighteen trenches at the southeast side of this monument."

Taken together, the two monuments define the dual role that Salisbury played in the Civil War: active supporter of the Confederate war effort, and, tragically, site of misery and death for captured Union soldiers.

Founded in 1755, Salisbury was by 1860 the largest town in western North Carolina, with a population of 2,400. As Southern states began seceding, a sizeable number of Salisbury's residents remained strongly pro-Union, as did many North Carolinians. But on May 20, 1861, the Tar Heel State became the last to secede, taking that course in reaction to President Abraham Lincoln's call on April 15 for 75,000 volunteers to suppress "the rebellion." Governor John W. Ellis, a Salisbury native, had responded indignantly to a request by Lincoln's war secretary, Simon Cameron, for two regiments of North Carolina militia: "Your dispatch is received, and if genuine, which its extraordinary character leads me to doubt, I have to say in reply that I regard the levy of troops made by the Administration for the purpose of subjugating the States of the South as in violation of the Constitution and a gross usurpation of power. I can be no party to this wicked violation of the laws of the country and to this war upon the liberties of a free people. You can get no troops from North Carolina."

It was the Confederacy that would get North Carolina's numerous and well-equipped troops. Salisbury and its surrounding region did their part to support the recruiting drive, and by June 1861, more than 300 Rowan County men had volunteered to fight for the Confederacy. Patriotic spirit was high, but it was not long before the terrible realities of war tempered the euphoria. Colonel Charles F. Fisher, who left Salisbury on July 11 at the head of a column of local recruits, was the first local casualty, killed at the First Battle of Manassas, Virginia, on July 21 while leading the 6th North Carolina Infantry. Fort Fisher at Wilmington was named in his honor.

The year was not over before Salisbury began to play its second role in the war effort. It started in November 1861, when the Confederate government acquired a textile manufacturing plant on the outskirts of town. A local newspaper reported: "The Government has bought the old Salisbury Factory, and is now preparing to fit it up for a prison to accommodate some thousands or more of Yankees who are encumbering the tobacco factories of Richmond. Our citizens don't much like the idea of such an accession to



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

For the first half of the war, Salisbury Prison was a tolerable, almost pleasant place to be a prisoner of war. There was room and time for recreation, and the inmates' occasional baseball games became famous.

their population; nevertheless they have assented to their part of the hardships and disagreeables of war...."

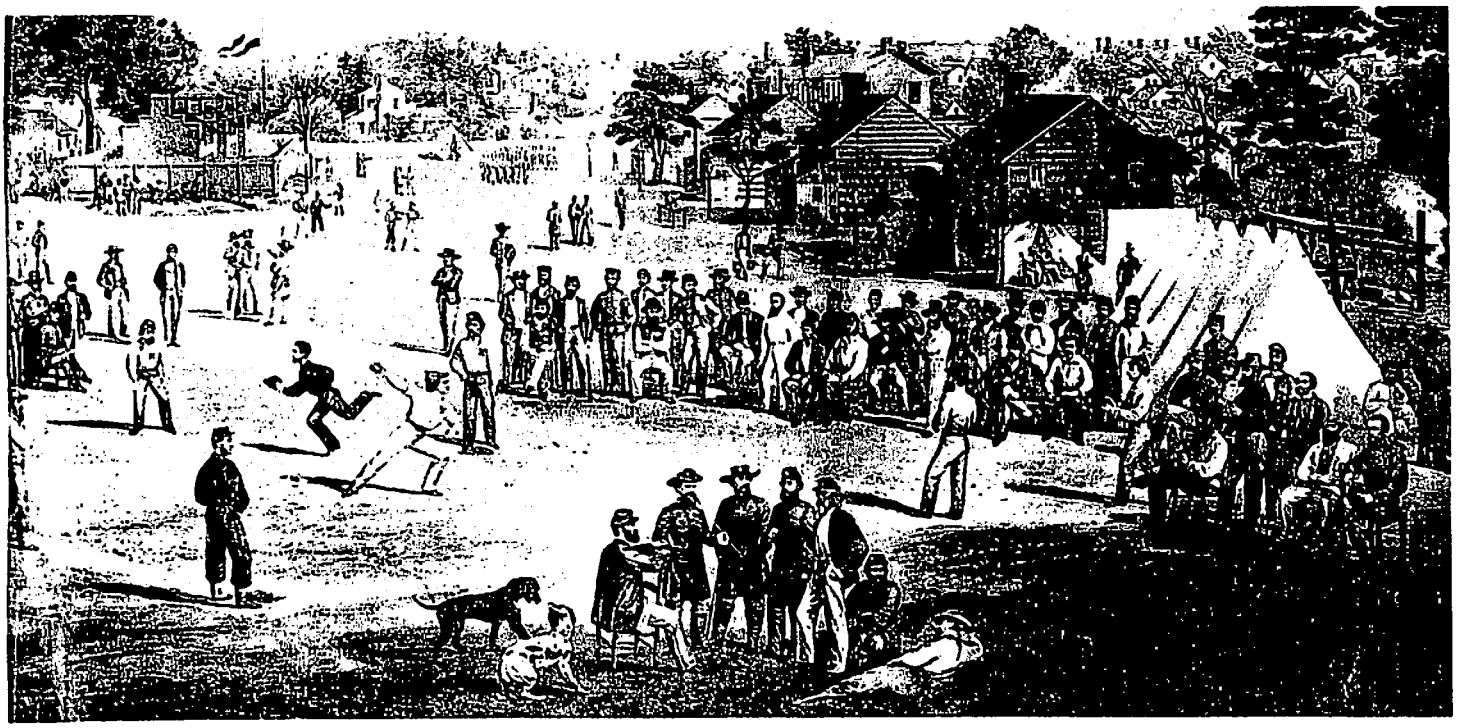
The first inmates arrived at Salisbury Prison the next month. The men, about 120 in number, found an enclosure of about eight acres "surrounded by a tight board fence, eight feet high," as one prisoner later wrote. "The sentinels walked on elevated platforms outside the fence, but were not furnished with sentry-boxes like other prisons. The inside space was not square, being much wider on the north end than on the south. At the northern corners, spaces were left open in the fence, at each of which was a piece of artillery as a defense in case of a...rebellion among the prisoners. At the south end was a large gate, wide enough for the ingress or egress of wagons, which were loaded either with wood or water to come in, or dead 'Yanks' to go out. On the west side was a small door...through which all newcomers came. On the east, nothing but the bare fence crowned with the rusty firelocks, and the no less rusty wearers of the 'Butternut' was visible....

"The small door on the western side opened into what was termed the 'grove' or 'square,' a large space thinly sprinkled with big trees, (oak) and surrounded on the four sides with buildings and fence. Starting from the fence, on the north was a brick building...turned into a little bakery...and then a row of brick buildings, three in number...the first [two] being used as barracks (afterwards hospitals) and the last the 'dead house.' The south side was formed by a one-story wooden building which was the...No. 1 Hospital; then a three-story brick building which was a barrack for the citizen prisoners, the main factory building, tenanted principally by the Yankee deserters, and the big bakery, from which rations were issued. The fence formed the western side. In the centre of the grove was a covered well.

"There was a row of one-story wooden buildings, four in number, at the northern extremity of the enclosure, which were occupied by the commissioned officers captured from our army. They were divided from us by a 'dead line' (a small trench) and a line of guard posts. All communication between them and us was forbidden. There was a well near the big gate, one some distance in rear of the buildings east of the 'square,' and one behind the Citizens' building which were in use at the time I arrived."

**The Civil War legacy of Salisbury, North Carolina, was shaped by the prison that came to town**

From December 1861 through April 1864, the number of Union prisoners confined at Salisbury Prison at any given time rarely exceeded 1,500. This made for relatively comfortable living conditions, and the prison became known for the leisurely baseball games its prisoners played. The uncrowded conditions were due in large measure to periodic exchanges of prisoners between the warring parties, which assured that no one remained imprisoned for very long. But on April 17, 1864, Union Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant ordered an end to such exchanges. Grant knew that the North, with its enormous advantage in manpower, could fill vacancies created in its armies. The agrarian South, however, was much more sparsely populated than the North, and had already exhausted its supply of potential soldiers. Captured soldiers created unfillable gaps in the Confederate ranks. But the end of exchanges would have a negative impact on Union



prisoners, too—an impact that would be keenly felt at Salisbury Prison.

The capture of large numbers of Union soldiers during Grant's Overland Campaign in Virginia in the spring of 1864 combined with the end of exchanges to produce a massive surge in the number of prisoners arriving at Salisbury Prison. From October 1864 through the end of the year, some 10,000 captives were sent to Salisbury from Libby, Belle Isle, and other Confederate prisons in and around Richmond. The increase in the prison's population quickly led to severe shortages of food, shelter, clothing, and water. Wood for cooking and heating became scarce. Many prisoners were forced to live in holes dug in the ground as winter approached and temperatures dropped. The severe overcrowding, combined with primitive sanitary conditions, also led to widespread sickness. Pneumonia, diarrhea, and typhoid fever inflicted a death rate as high as that experienced at Andersonville Prison in Georgia.

The similarities between Andersonville's horrors and those of Salisbury did not go unnoticed. In an Inspection Report dated December 13, 1864, Brigadier General John H. Winder reported to Confederate Secretary of War James A. Seddon, "The ratio of mortality at Salisbury...exceeds, I think, that at Andersonville." Between October 1864 and February 1865, one in three of Salisbury's prisoners—3,708 men—died of sickness or starvation. This figure becomes especially disturbing when one realizes that, in the entire time the prison operated, 3,963 men died there. Nearly 94 percent of the prison's total deaths occurred in those five months.

With the death rate soaring, mass graves were opened. Eighteen burial trenches, approximately 4 feet deep, 6 feet wide and 60 yards long, were dug outside the prison wall. The prisoners, fearing for their survival, grew restless, and in late November 1864, some attempted an escape. One of them, Sergeant James Eberhart, recounted the effort in his diary: "Thursday, Nov 25—A little warmer today. But very muddy. The mortality of camp is very great. From 40 to 50 a day. How long will we last.... At noon when the Rebel relief came in, our Squad and some next to us jumped on them & took their guns from them. Got 14 guns and a few from the post inside. We tried to get out, but the boys camped near the gate did not know anything about it and came a running towards us instead of securing the gates. So we failed. They opened on us with one cannon. Blank shot first, but the next shots was scrapnel. We had 28 men killed, about 70 odd wounded. Shot some 3 of the Rebels off the fence.... We were ordered to get in our holes and stay there on pain of being shot."

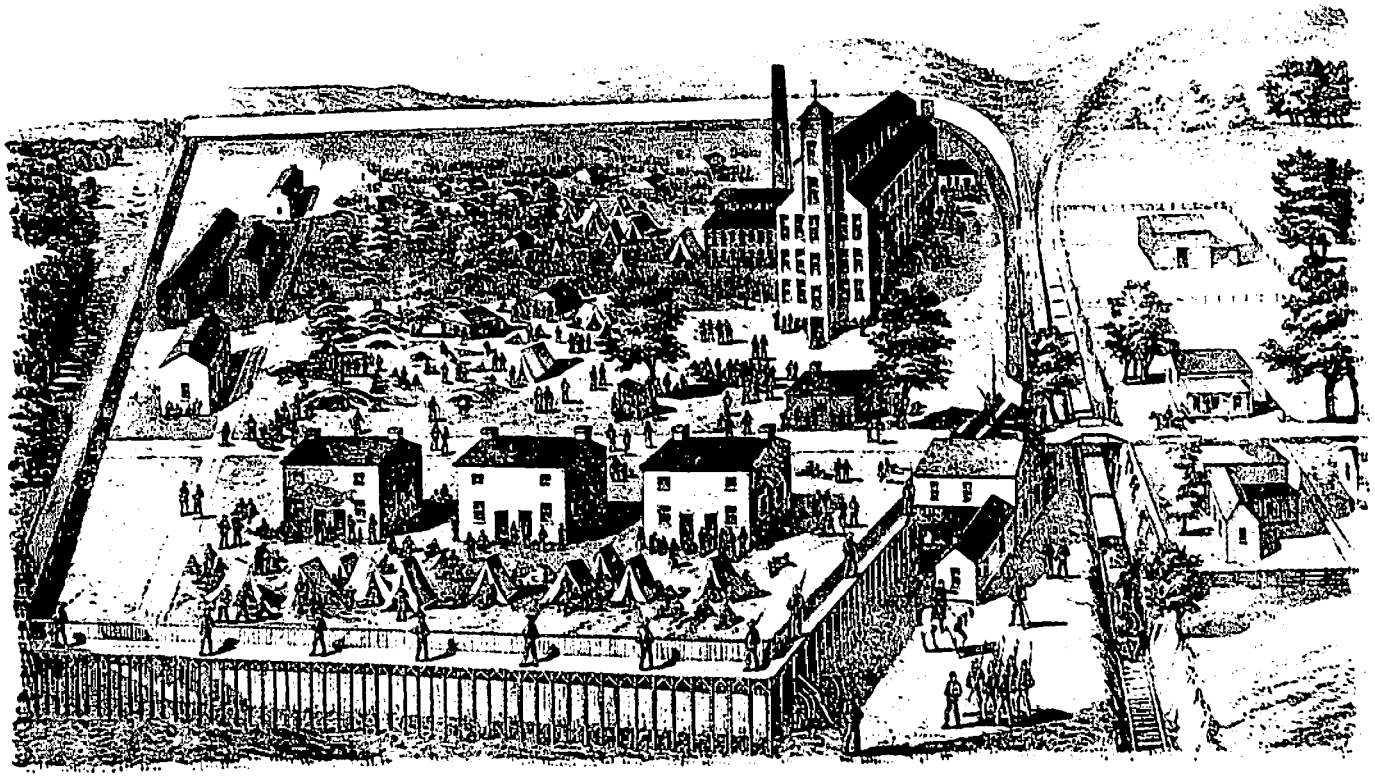
COUTESY OF THE AUTHOR

The people of Salisbury made their share of sacrifices in the war, as a monument downtown attests (above). But starting in 1864, the prison in their midst began to exact an incomparable toll on its prisoners.

Those who survived that terrible winter were paroled in late February 1865, under a special exchange provision made for sick prisoners. Nearly 2,900 emaciated men began their long journey home. Eberhart recalled the event in his diary: "Feby 22; Geo Washington birthday. Was called in line and read a parole for us not to try & escape as they were a going to exchange [us]. What glad news.... 2 day to walk 50 miles to Greensboro. Let us out about 12. Walked untill dark and camped in woods. We had plenty of wood and a good fire. Although it was a raining, rested pretty well. Feby 26; Arrived at Greensboro. All hungry. After dark they gave us molasses and corn meal to eat. Slept in wood all night with a good fire. [February] 28; Got on train in afternoon & arrived at Ralegh about 10 pm. Encamped in open field. Nothing to eat. Mch 2nd; All signed a parole and put us on the cars and took us to our lines near the Black River. Came in through the Colored troops. What a joyous deliverance when we once more saw old glory. I never saw it more beautifull. The Colored troops fead us in their camp and then we went to Wilmington...and got all we wanted to eat. Stayed one night and took a steamer for Annapolis Md. 18 March 1865 I am home on furlough. Thanks be [to] mercifull God that brought me home again."

In April 1865, during a raid through North Carolina and Virginia, Major General George Stoneman's Federal cavalry stopped in Salisbury, hoping to free any Union soldiers still confined there. A munitions works and several railroad buildings, together with a large quantity of war materiel, were burned, as was the factory building that had served as the prison's main barracks. Salisbury Prison was no more.

The raiders spared most of the town of Salisbury, however, due in part to the belief that western North Carolina still harbored a significant number of Union sympathizers. Indeed, one month earlier, Union Major General Henry W. Slocum had advised the troops in his Army of Georgia: "It should not be assumed that the inhabitants are enemies to



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

This scene of the prison in 1864 (above) shows nothing of the overcrowding that began late that year. Conditions would worsen until Confederate authorities began comparing the prison with Andersonville. Among those who survived were (right to left) Colonel John I. Nevin and Captains Tilton Reynolds and William W. Strong, all from Pennsylvania.

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our Government, and it is to be hoped that every effort will be made to prevent any wanton destruction of property, or any unkind treatment of citizens."

Salisbury recovered quickly after the war, aided by its location as a center for rail transportation and textile manufacturing. Soon, the site of suffering for thousands of Union prisoners became a sacred place, a place to remind future generations of the sacrifices made there. Salisbury National Cemetery was established in 1865 as a memorial to the Union soldiers who had perished in the prison, and the mass graves were marked. Monuments honoring the dead were erected by the federal government in 1873, by the State of Maine in 1908 and, as noted earlier, by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1910.

The dedication of Pennsylvania's monument became an opportunity for reconciliation between former enemies. North Carolina's Governor William Kitchin welcomed the Pennsylvania delegation to Salisbury, saying: "Pennsylvanians, your monument stands in no enemy's country. It stands in one of Carolina's best cities among your friends, who rejoice that you are displaying the highest sentiment and performing a sacred duty in perpetuating the memory of your heroes, and in proclaiming in sympathetic eloquence their virtuous consecration to the Union."

Referring to the Confederate angel monument, Kitchin remarked, "We know that you approve the monument standing in yonder street erected by the love of our great people in honor of our noble dead in a cause we lost—as we approve this monument erected by the love of a great people to noble dead in a cause you won, both emblematic of civilized man's unconquerable affection and immeasurable regard for those who risk their all for principle and for it yield up their lives, the supremest test of loyalty.

"Monuments," Kitchin concluded, "furnish feeble appreciation of the past but vast inspiration for the future, therefore, let them multiply in the land North and South and thereby improve the citizenship of our wonderful republic." So it was that Salisbury and its monuments came to symbolize not only the sacrifices of both sides in the Civil War, but their reconciliation. **CWT**

*Robert E. Eberly, Jr.'s great-great-uncle, Sergeant Thomas W. Springer, died in Salisbury Prison in November 1864 and is buried in one of the mass graves.*

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