

Point Lookout, Maryland POW Camp

The Union forces had not built a new prison to house Confederate prisoners since 1862 and there was no room for more. Following the Battle at Gettysburg there were thousands of prisoners that needed to be housed. Quartermaster General Meigs ordered Brig. Gen. Daniel H. Rucker, chief quartermaster, to establish a Union prison camp at Point Lookout, Maryland, which would hold 10,000 prisoners.

The camp was established on August 1, 1863, and would grow to be what many considered the largest and worst POW camp in the North. Prior to the Federal Government's leasing of the property in June of 1862, it had been a resort with hotels, boarding houses, cottages and commercial establishments. The site is located at the extreme end of the peninsula, near the lighthouse making it very easy to defend. A 1,400-bed hospital complex was built with 20 buildings arranged in a circle and a large wharf to receive supplies and the wounded soldiers that came in from battlefields.

The Union selected a 40 acre site northeast of the hospital for the POWs. The site was divided into two sections; a 30 acre section for the enlisted prisoners and 10 acres for the officers. The camp itself was sand without any vegetation and only 5 feet above sea level. They built no barracks for the prisoners who were required to live in tents.

Before long, the prison became the most populated and largest Union prison, at one time holding 20,000 prisoners, because it was so close to the battlefields of Gettysburg, Virginia and Maryland. The first prisoners arrived in late July and by the end of the year, the population was more than 9,000 prisoners. By mid-summer 1864, it was over 15,500 prisoners.

The low-level of the camp, frequent flooding, scarcity of fresh water, and lack of adequate fire wood or food all contributed to a very unhealthy climate. Any wells that were dug at that level produce briny water. Rats were a main source of protein and catching them became the prisoner's primary sport. Guards and even the commandant were known to pilfer the rations for their own profit. There was much animosity between the prisoners and the guards, who were mostly black troops. One Confederate who had managed to purchase his freedom from the prison reported that "murder was not only not scrupled at, but opportunities sought for its commission by the guards, who are known to have been offered by the officer of the day as much as \$10 and \$15 apiece for every prisoner they could shoot in the discharge of their duty."

It is estimated over 3,000 prisoners died in just over 22 months. Chronic diarrhea, dysentery and typhoid fever had become epidemic at the camp while smallpox, scurvy, and the itch had become quite common.

At the end of the war there were 22,000 prisoners being held in a facility designed for 10,000. During its period of operation over 52,600 prisoners, some of which were civilians, had passed through the prison. Among the prisoners were four ladies and two babies, one who was black. On any given day it held between 12,600 and 20,000 detainees. There were only 50 successful escape attempts during the life of the camp.

Authors' personal note: My great grandfather [William Thomas "Tom" Brewer](#), CSN, was a landsman on the CSN North Carolina and was captured on April 6, 1865 and held as prisoner at Point Lookout. Fortunately the war was almost over and he was honorably discharged on June 23, 1865. Tom's father's name was Rufus Lanier and not married to his mother Penelope Brewer. Tom was adopted into the Brewer family and given the name.

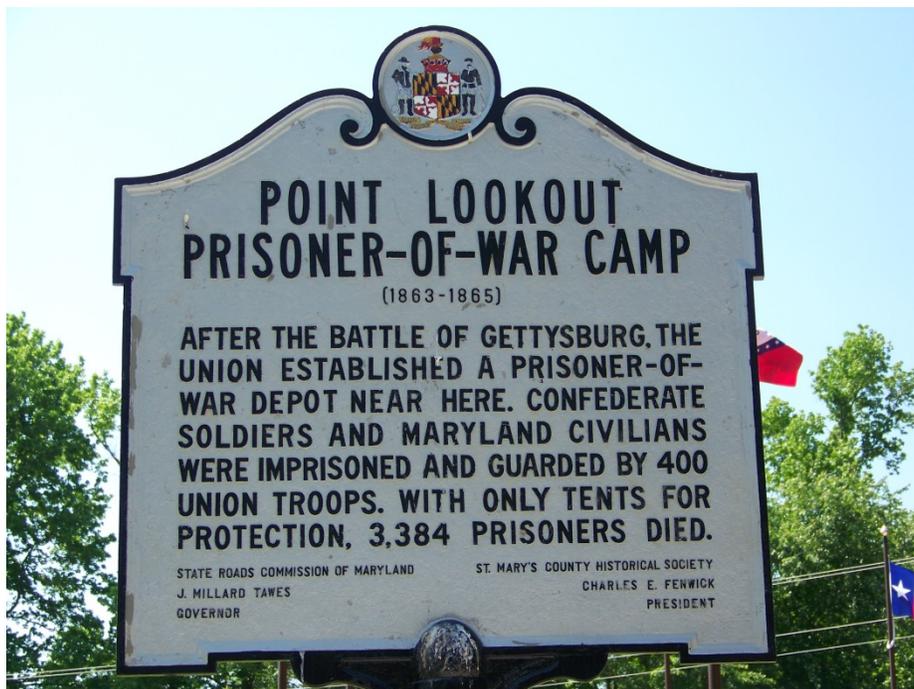


I would hesitate to name the most famous prisoner held in the camp but one of the most famous would be [Sidney Clopton Lanier](#), a famous poet, who was captured on November 2, 1864. There was a small pox epidemic at the time and Sidney had contracted the disease. Tom who had previously had small pox and was immune was called upon to minister to the sick. Were Tom and Sydney related? We feel they might be, but are not 100% sure. Did they meet and get to know each other at the time? We will never know that. The photo of Sidney Lanier at the left is in the Point Lookout Museum.

In the early 1960s I bought my first house in a little community known as Scotland Beach. It was so small our mail address was Tom Todd, Scotland Beach, Maryland. The post office looked exactly like an outhouse, the size of a two-holer, that had been painted white. The Point Lookout Confederate Monument was less than half a mile from my house. At the time I knew nothing of the connection.



Point Lookout Confederate Monument
From Wikipedia



Historical Marker