Latrines contain treasure trove of Civil War history

Dave Bush has spent much of his career digging in latrines (also called ‘privies’). Bush is an archaeologist and full professor of anthropology at Heidelberg University in Tiffin, Ohio. He has found archaeological gold in the privies of the Civil War prison camp at Johnson’s Island. Bush began exploring the site, just offshore of Marblehead, in 1988.

He still is digging into the island’s history.

“I think I have skipped one summer,” said Bush, whose efforts have added to our knowledge of the only Union Army prison built specifically to house Confederate officers.

Information he has unearthed on Johnson’s Island is the basis of the new Hayes Museum exhibit titled Privy to History: Civil War Prison Life Unearthed. The exhibit is on display from May 1, 2014 through January 4, 2015. It is made possible thanks to funding from the Sidney Frohman Foundation and Friends & Descendants of Johnson’s Island Civil War Prison.

Privy to History provides a personal look at the history of Johnson’s Island Civil War Prison. Objects uncovered at the site are combined with letters and diary entries written by both prisoners and guards.

“I tried to put into the exhibit information on prison life – good and bad,” said Bush. “I hope people get a sense of how prison life changed and that it was unpleasant no matter when you were there because you were imprisoned.”

The exhibit is set up as a timeline, beginning with the Union Army’s decision to build a prison to house Confederate officers and selection of the 300-acre Johnson’s Island in Sandusky Bay. During the prison’s operation (1862-1865), its population went from a low of 205 prisoners to a high of 3,231. The number of prisoners held at the site, as well as changes in their treatment mirrored events in the Civil War.

As the Union Army’s victory neared, the number of prisoners increased and Johnson’s Island prison was adapted to house both enlisted men and officers. When people in the North learned of the South’s horrible treatment of Union prisoners, Johnson’s Island prisoners felt their anger. Daily meals decreased, as did the variety and quantity of food. Prisoners no longer could receive packages from home or purchase additional food and clothing. We know about these changes not only from letters written by prisoners, but also from objects recovered at the prison site.

Privies served as trash cans. Early in the prison’s existence Bush found the bones of whole turkeys discarded in them. By war’s end, the only bones were those of rats. Poor nutrition and lack of protection from the elements led to more prisoners becoming sick or died. Bush confirmed these facts through the contents of the latrines.

“We chose the exhibit title ‘Privy to History’ because working in the latrines has been a big plus … in the types and quantity of materials we have found,” he said.

“And, we can chronologically place everything we find.”

He went on to explain that prison records detail when and where new buildings and privies were built. As a result when he unearths an object at a specific location, he can date when it was lost or discarded.

Bush credits the late Charles E. Frohman for laying the foundation of the Civil War history of Johnson’s Island. Frohman wrote the book “Rebels on Lake Erie,” published in 1965 and widely viewed as the most complete history of the prison.

“What we wanted to show (in the exhibit) was how our understanding of the history of Johnson’s Island has increased since 1965. And, to exhibit a lot of the things we have found at the site that have contributed to advancing that understanding,” Bush said.
How to begin an archaeological excavation

To properly excavate a latrine, one half of it is dug at a time. This permits searchers to gain information on how the latrine was filled in without removing everything all at once. Each half is dug out in layers that are less than 4 inches deep. This allows for photographing, mapping, and recording any objects found in that layer. This is called creating a “depositional history” of the latrine and it provides insights into the lives and treatment of prisoners over a period of time.

When the latrine for Blockade #8 first was exposed (top at right), there was evidence of tunnels on the western side - the side that was only 10 feet from the stockade. Johnson’s Island prisoners continuously occupied themselves with digging tunnels to gain their freedom. At first, the Union Army installed a series of wooden pilings behind the latrines to prevent escapes. That did not solve the problem, so in 1864 a deep ditch was dug between the latrines and the prison fence, making any tunneling activity visible to the guards.

To learn more about Johnson’s Island Prison and the work being done by Dr. David R. Bush, visit http://johnsons-island.org.

Evidence of tunnels is seen on the right side of the above photo. In the photo at right, a table knife used to dig the adjacent tunnel is exposed during excavation. Tunnels were dug through hard clay just above bedrock and would keep their shape for a time. Most were small in diameter so only small, slender men could pass through.

These are examples of the types of objects found in the latrines of Johnson’s Island Civil War Prison. They include: a chess piece, a cameo, a gold watch, a hard-rubber ring with gold inlay (made at the island by a prisoner), and a selection of glass bottles. Items like the bottles were thrown away, while others likely accidently fell in the latrines.
While imprisoned there, Joseph M. Kern drew this detailed watercolor of the Johnson's Island prison. It is signed and dated (Oct. 7, 1863). Among the items shown are two rows of 'blockades' (where prisoners lived), six privies (labeled as 'sinks'), and the stockade (fence) around the prison. Kern also included daily activities and significant events on the map.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

- Read the letter at left and examine the above map. Count all the privies. Remember privies were called ‘sinks’ back then.
- What do you think John Stockdale meant by the “Old Flag” in his letter at left? Keep in mind the Confederates broke away from the Union and tried to form their own country, even making their own flag. They no longer were part of the United States.
- Prisoners kept busy with a variety of activities. Make a list of what they did based on this letter and map. Then make a list of activities you would do if you were a prisoner.
- Prisoners had little choice of what they could drink. In Stockdale’s letter what was served instead of coffee?
- John Stockdale refers to performing “morning ablutions?” What do you think he meant by that? Find the word *ablutions* in the dictionary to see how close you came.
- In John’s letter he writes that prisoners ate the same three things at every meal every day - boiled beef, baker’s bread, and coffee. Do you think you could eat the same thing every day for two years like John did? What effects might that have on your body?
- The escape ladder at left was made by prisoners on Johnson’s Island. What types of materials would you use to make this ladder? Remember, the prisoners only had access to wood, clothes, dishes, shoes, and hard rubber.
The incredible Mr. Smith

One of the most amazing stories to come out of Johnson’s Island Civil War Prison is that of Lt. Robert M. Smith, Co. E, 61st Tennessee Volunteer Infantry. Smith (right) was a prisoner on the island from June 5, 1863-Feb. 24, 1865.

Smith did the seemingly impossible - he handmade a camera while in prison and used it to take photographs of his fellow prisoners. He used a pocket knife to whittle the camera box out of a wooden plank. His army spyglass (a small telescope) provided the lens, which he then placed into a small can. Smith cut a hole in the front of the camera box for the lens. By sliding the handheld lens back and forth within the hole he could focus the camera. Photographs were produced using small silver plates and chemicals from the prison hospital, that at the time were used as medicines.

It was illegal for Smith to take photographs. He faced harsh punishment if discovered. However, prisoners were very anxious to let their loved ones back home know they were alive and well. They were willing to pay any price for a photograph that would prove that point. Smith made a lot of money taking his photographs. The extra cash would have made it possible for him to buy extra food and clothing for himself.

Smith also was a gifted jewelry maker. His work was sought after by prisoners not able to make such items. Most prisoners sold jewelry home as gifts for family and friends.

Today, some of Smith’s jewelry (right) and a number of his photographs survive. His camera does not.

An episode of the TV show History Detectives devoted to Smith, recreated the camera and proved that he could indeed make such a device with materials available at the prison. You can see the episode when you visit the Hayes Museum to see the Privy to History: Civil War Prison Life Unearthed exhibit.

Prison life = a fight to survive

Although some prisoners had good first impressions of Johnson’s Island prison because of its location near Lake Erie, their opinions soon changed. Winters along the lake were cold, especially in the wooden blockades where prisoners stayed. Drainage on the island was bad. When it rained water was slow to drain away and latrines made by blasting into the island’s rock surface filled up quickly and often overflowed. These conditions led to a lot of sickness. Many prisoners died.

Even those who stayed healthy struggled. They worried about their families, felt guilty because they were not able to fight for a cause they believed in, and were bored. As prisoners, everything they did was limited and controlled.

Most Confederate officers came from a background of wealth. They could read and write, knew arts and music, and had a variety of skills. To fight off the depression and hopelessness caused by being imprisoned, they created ways to keep their minds and bodies busy. The prisoners at Johnson’s Island created a lending library, baseball team, and theatrical performance group. Some men started businesses. One made a sketch of the men in his blockade sitting down to dinner (titled “Our Mess”) and another made a camera to take photographs. These men sold their services and creations to other prisoners to earn money to send home to their families or to buy extra food and clothing for themselves. Cpt. John H. Gray of Virginia, who was imprisoned on Johnson’s Island from April 9-Sept. 1, 1862, left a written record of how prisoners spent their time.

July 28, 1862

Ring making rules the hour. Among over a thousand prisoners, more than half have employed most of their time making rings out of gutta percha (hard rubber) buttons. Many of the rings made are plain, others have gold, silver or pieces of shell inlaid. Some of them are very neat, ingenious and tasty. Besides rings they make breast pins (brooches), watch chain ornaments and other such things. I have seen also several sets of chess men cut out of wood, with great pains and patience and very well done. In all this work the knife is the principal tool. But mastery of the workmen are provided with files and little chisels and small saws - the latter are generally made by themselves out of caseknife. A smaller number, but still reckoned by hundreds pass their time in card playing, with some little chess, draughts (checkers) and backgammon playing. Of the small remainder some few - perhaps a dozen in all pursue trades, such as shoe making, and repairing and tailoring; others read and the rest do nothing. Not one in ten in all the prisoners ever reads; and it is not for want of books, for there are some in the prison and the demand for them is so small they any one who wishes to read can always get a book.

The Union perspective: the Commander and the Guard

March 3, 1862
General M.C. Meigs

General ... In view of the large number of prisoners that must be provided for immediately I suggest that as many more buildings be erected within the enclosure as the nature of the ground will admit of; the buildings to be of the same plan, slightly enlarged as those already up but much less expensive. They need only be prepared for summer use, and even for winter they may be made very comfortable at considerable less cost than those we have. If prisoners must be confined in an open camp my impression is that they can best be kept on the island by simply extending the west fence across to the water on the north side of the island and establishing a camp for prisoners on one side of the fence and for the guard on the other side.

W. Hoffman, Commissary General of Prisoners

January 17, 1863 - diary entry
waked up by a man coming in & saying that Ike had run into the woods crazy. He was found in two hours. Was excused from duty by the Dr. Very cold at night. froze hard. did not storm.

January 11, 1863
Dear Sister Francis,
We came back to the island on Christmas ... We have not very many prisoners here, near about 80 were brought here today making in all about 250 or 280. Many died while we were on the break. ...

January 17, 1863 - diary entry
Arose early. Went on guard. Was sick all night. Was no 1. It was the coldest night So far this winter. a rebel died. finished writing home. No more [news].