

Hartsook Prison

Although no Civil War battle ever took place in Fayette County, some of the bloodiest atrocities of the war happened in this county. As was reported in earlier articles, most of the people of Fayette County opposed the war. Those who felt the strongest about not fighting against “the flag of our fathers” lived in the northern part of the county and refused to volunteer for the Confederate army.

Even the passage of the Conscription Act of 1862 by the Alabama State Legislature that initially required all able-bodied men between the age of 18 and 35 to enlist in the Confederacy failed to force them into service. At the insistence of A. J. Gamble, Probate Judge of Walker County and Captain W. A. “Bill” Musgrove and S.H. Darden of Fayette County, the state legislature passed an act authorizing John C. Kirkland of Fayette County to, “raise a company of persons exempt from service and men over the age of conscription, whose duty it shall be to arrest deserters and others prowling in said county”. The group was named the Fayette County Home Guard.

The Home Guard built a Confederate prison close to the northern boundary of the county about five miles south of Winfield in which to confine those arrested. The structure was named Hartsook Prison in honor of John D. Hartsook, a man of considerable prominence and a leader in the Fayette County Home Guard. The prison was located about 100 yards off the west side of current Highway 43 in a large grove of oak trees.

Wes Thompson in his book *The Free State of Winston* described the prison as consisting of one large room constructed of huge oak, hand-hewn logs expertly notched at each end to fit closely together leaving only narrow cracks between each log. The walls were eight feet high with thick oak planks running perpendicular from floor to ceiling. The walls were secured against attempts to saw or chop through them by being driven full of square cut nails on both interior and exterior sides. The floor and ceiling were also made of thick hewn logs. Atop the structure, thick oak planks arranged in a steep pitch formed the roof. The building had a single door and window. The window was a small square and was criss-crossed with horizontal and perpendicular, strong, iron bars. It served as the only light and ventilation. One meal a day of poorly cooked rations was served through a small slit below the window bars.

The prison had no tables, chairs or beds. Men slept on the rough floors using the body of another for their pillows. The only toilet facility consisted of a small square hole cut two feet off the floor that slanted downward from the inside to the outside to be used as a privy slot.

The prison was usually filled with young men who had refused to join the Confederates. Each morning the prisoners were taken outside and brought before the Provost-Marshal for questioning about other Federal sympathizers and deserters. They were usually offered leniency if they joined the Confederacy or threatened with hanging if they refused.

Many of the young men who wanted to remain neutral or sided with the Union would hide from the hated Home Guard in the woods and hills of north Fayette, Marion or Walker counties. Historical writings state that as many as three hundred at a time were hiding in the wilderness of northwest Alabama. Occasionally, old men and even entire families were thrown into Hartsook Prison to intimidate them into telling the location of these hideouts.

Feelings ran high on both sides. As the war continued, bitterness grew, cruelties and atrocities multiplied until life was no longer safe on either side. Robberies and pillaging became the order of the day. Dozens of people were hanged. Others were tied to trees and shot through the head.

Some the families who the suffered the most were the Tuckers, Hallmarks, McCalebs, Fowlers, Files, Studdards and Whiteheads. Relatives of many of these families served on opposite sides of the war.

Most men in this area who wanted to fight for the Union joined the 1st Alabama Calvary-USA Volunteers. According to those combined service records, George Washington Hallmark along with his brothers, Thomas Frank, and James Madison joined the 1st Alabama Calvary-USA Volunteers together in 1862. The fourth brother, John, who was only 15 when the war began joined the unit in 1863, but deserted 3 months later and was the only brother to make it back home.

The fifth Hallmark brother refused to join with either side and hid out in the northwest Alabama woods for most of the war. The Home Guard came to the Hallmark homeplace beat their father, George, to death when he refused to tell them where the youngest son was hiding. When their sister ran to her father's aid, she was shot and killed.

Henry Tucker of the Glen Allen area enlisted in the 1st Alabama Calvary for one year. His grandfather had fought in the War of 1812 and his great-grandfather was a Revolutionary War soldier. After his military duty was completed, he returned home to wait out the war, although he was considering re-enlisting in the Union Army. Little did he know the Home Guard or "Dog-Calvary Rangers" as they began to be called (they used dogs to hunt down men) were out to get any traitor they could find.

The Home Guard, led by Stoke Roberts, rode up to Henry's house. His wife, Callie, hid Henry in the meat box in the kitchen. The men stormed the house searching and ransacking until Henry was finally discovered. They tied him from neck to waist, threw him across a horse and rode off. Henry was found four days later, hanging upside down by his heels from a tree. He had been tortured and mutilated. His eyes had been plucked out. His tongue had been cut out and he had been skinned like a hog.

There are far too many reports than can be retold here of hangings, shootings, houses and possessions being burned, fields of cotton burned and families' stores and supplies of food being destroyed. These atrocities occurred to Fayette County families whose loyalties lay with both the armies of the North and the South. However, P.D Hall of Marion County who was a soldier in the 1st Alabama Calvary suggested that Alabama unionist who fought in the war "made a greater sacrifice for the Union than the men of the North."

Hartsook Prison is said to have been torn down shortly after the war. There reportedly remains at the site today a scattering of stones from the original foundation. With personal passions still high after the war, perhaps the prison was too grim a reminder to those trying to put the war behind them and regain some semblance of peace in their lives.