

### Document 29.9 Samuel Boggs, *Eighteen Months a Prisoner Under the Rebel Flag* (1887)

More than 20 years after the end of the war, prisoners-of-war were still publishing accounts of their Civil War confinement. Samuel Boggs had served as a Union sergeant and was captured and held in several Confederate prisons, including Andersonville, in 1863 and 1864. His self-published pamphlet seeks to prove that the Confederate prosecution of the Civil War, and therefore the Southern cause, was dishonorable. He expresses concern that survivors of the prisons are starting to pass away, and with them the true memory of the prisoner-of-war experience. His account demonstrates just how critical it seemed for Northerners and Southerners to exert control over the memory of the Civil War, even decades after its conclusion.

*Recently, seeing by the statistics of ex-Prisoners' Associations that there are of all those who were released from the Southern prison hells only twenty per cent, now living, and, fully realizing that in a few years more the last one of us will have passed away, — it occurred to me that it is our duty to ourselves and to the memory of those who have been exchanged to another world, that we, as far as possible, each leave a pen picture of at least the mildest part of our prison life. Of course, we know that it will not do to portray those prisons in all their honors lest we destroy the credit of the whole story; hence, we must hold back much of the worst part. People who did not experience what the inmates of those Rebel prisons did cannot believe it possible that such brutality and barbarism could have been practiced in civilization, forgetting that slavery clouded the conscience and calloused the hearts of our cruel keepers, whose notoriety for cruelty as slave-drivers gained their appointments as prison-keepers, where they could satisfy their barbarous appetites on helpless captives who possessed no property value. Cruel men are always cowards, who in time of war seek places where they can revel in cruelty and gore, with but little danger of injury to themselves. The Confederate government, with no regard for its honor, sought out this class of demons as the keepers and guards of its helpless captives, and never in one instance did the chief executive of the Confederacy show any disposition to substitute humane keepers for the demons in charge, though he was fully aware of the true condition of the prisons from the reports of his inspectors and the petitions of many of the best people of the South. I know that the darkest parts of the memory of those terrible prisons will pass into the forgotten when the last survivors' tongues are hushed.... I am well aware that those who endorsed the barbarous treatment of Union prisoners now try to smother the recital of those wrongs....*

*But we point with pride to those sixty thousand graves, and say, these comrades chose the most cruel death rather than dishonor their country by in any way assisting its enemies to destroy it Under the most trying circumstances, naked, starving, and racked with pain and dis-ease, with certain torture and death staring them in the face, did they refuse the oft repeated offers of relief, of enlisting in the Rebel army, or working in their shops. These sixty thousand young men gave up all their bright hopes and prospects of loving homes and pursuits of happiness and submitted to cruel torture and death, believing that their sacrifices and deeds of heroism, would ever be kept fresh in the memory of those who would enjoy the freedom for which this price was paid. But to-day we have many ungrateful people who clamor to suppress the recital of these comrades' suffering, claiming that it will only breed sectional hatred, and that these stories are written and told in a spirit of animosity. To which I will say, I know that the truths written and told of these prison hells are very unwelcome to this class of people; but remember, we do not hold the masses of the people, or soldiers of the South responsible for the brutal murders of our fellow-prisoners, and for all these misguided people, we hold the greatest respect, except for those who admire and applaud those bold bad men who wantonly and premeditatedly did murder their helpless captives. Again we are told that Jeff Davis and his officers did not have the provisions to feed their captives. This excuse was removed by our government offering to furnish food, clothes and medicines, which was refused. We know that they had no excuse for denying us pure air, water, room, and the means of constructing shelter.*

*We begged and pleaded with tears in our eyes that we be permitted to save our lives by ditching and draining out the swamps in Andersonville, and getting material from the adjoining pine forest to shelter us from sun and rain. To those who say Jeff and his cabinet did not murder their captives, we ask them to discard all testimony of Union soldiers, and take the evidence of Southern people and the Confederate war records. Examine the reports of Confederate surgeons, appointed to inspect the prisons, and you will see where they hasten back to Davis and report to him the horrible condition of the prisons and the useless destruction of life there — see where they recommend the immediate removal of the inhuman keepers, and the appointment of humane keepers in their*

stead. You will see that Davis did nothing of the kind, but he did promote John H. Winder to the command of all the prisons in the South, with full power to torture and murder as he pleased, and, when you have examined all this calmly, if you have one spark of humanity in your soul, you will never express your admiration for that perjured murderer and his traitorous advisers who “dragged eleven millions of people into war, against which their souls revolted.” Occasionally we hear it said that the Southern prisoners were treated as badly in the Northern prisons. (This we never hear from those who were confined in the Northern prisons). The graves under the lonely pines near the sites of those Southern prisons, tell a story that cannot be disputed; there were but few of the Southern prisons where a record was kept of the deaths, and where kept, it was very imperfect; in the North there was a very complete record kept and the deaths all reported. Now the Rebel sympathizers claim that the war records show a greater percent, of deaths in Northern than in Southern prisons, knowing full well that there never was one-fourth of the mortality in the Southern prisons reported. The Confederate records show that they captured 188,145, and that they paroled or exchanged 94,073, leaving a balance of 94,072 to be accounted for; now give them credit for 10,000 who escaped or went into the Rebel army, what became of the remainder, the 84,072? They perished in those prison hells, or were pursued through fen and forest by bloodhounds and demons and their mangled corpses left to the carrion birds. Any of my comrades who were prisoners can bear witness to numbers who escaped and were never afterward heard of. I do not believe that more than one of every fifty who escaped ever reached the friendly shelter of the stars and stripes.

There were more Union soldiers lost their lives by the Southern prisons than were killed in the two thousand two hundred and sixty-one battles of the Rebellion. I am often asked the question: “Why did not our government exchange prisoners or send an army down there and release you?” The answer is: The Rebels demanded an exchange of man for man as far as they would go (except the negroes), and the excess to be paroled, which would release all white prisoners from confinement. Had this been done, Sherman would not have marched through Georgia, nor Grant have taken Richmond for at least one or two years more. For this reason: Out of the ninety-four thousand held by the Rebels, the Union army would not have got over twenty thousand fighting men, while on the other hand the North held two hundred and twenty-seven thousand of the best material of the Southern army, which nearly all to a man regardless of their paroles, would have been put against Grant and Sherman, and to have met and dislodged these old Confederate soldiers from their position of defense, our government would have been compelled to call out at least four hundred thousand fresh troops. This was the best terms the Rebels offered, except, at very near the close of the war they would have exchanged on most any terms; but our troops were releasing us, so the Rebels had to parole us and turn us over to our men. Now, as to sending an army to release us; does it ever occur to the questioner that we were generally kept in the most secure part of the South, and as remote from our army as possible? and that it was about as difficult for our troops to release us as it would have been for the Rebels to have marched to Chicago and freed the Rebel prisoners confined there. I do not find fault with the government for any apparent neglect; but I do think we ought to be remembered as being largely instrumental in bringing the war to a speedy termination.

I have passed over this picture rapidly, giving but a hasty outline of a text, which, were I to write as my memory sees it, I could fill a volume as large as the Bible. My object being to make a cheap pamphlet, I was limited in space, and consequently pruned the description as much as possible; not even mentioning the names of true and noble men who passed through that awful test of patriotism — men who were my constant comrades, and who I have seen endure the most terrible pangs of starvation, their shrunken almost naked frames shivering with cold and wet, and faces pinched with pain and hunger; I have seen them offered food and comfort if they would join the Rebels; but gathering their filthy rags close about their shivering bodies they scornfully replied: “You can do your worst, we will never go back on the old stars and stripes.”

Source: Samuel S. Boggs, *Eighteen Months a Prisoner Under the Rebel Flag* (Lovington: By Author, 1887), 3–4, 59–62.