

**PRISON LIFE IN THE OLD  
CAPITOL  
AND REMINISCENCES  
OF THE CIVIL WAR**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649750214

Prison life in the Old Capitol and reminiscences of the Civil War by James J. Williamson

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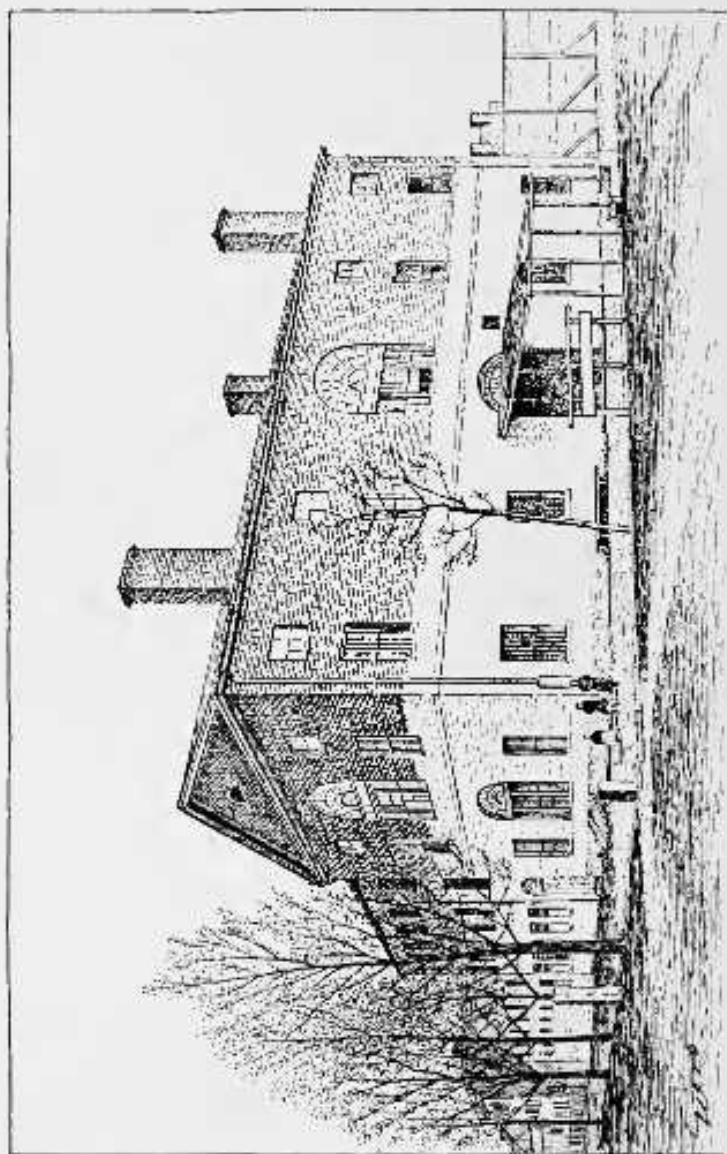
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OLD CAPITOL PRISON, WASHINGTON, D. C.

# PRISON LIFE IN THE OLD CAPITOL

AND

REMINISCENCES OF THE CIVIL WAR

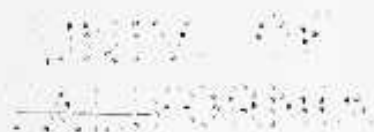
BY

JAMES J. WILLIAMSON

*Author of "Mosby's Rangers"*

*Illustrations by*

B. F. WILLIAMSON



WEST ORANGE, N. J.

1911

## PREFACE

It is not my intention in my prison diary to discuss the constitutional or legal question of arbitrary arrests and imprisonment of non-combatants, but to present to my readers a picture of the daily routine of prison life as I saw it, together with incidents related to me by fellow-prisoners.

Conditions in the Old Capitol differed in many respects from the prison camps. Prisoners in the Old Capitol were mostly civilians, except where soldiers (either prisoners of war or men charged with offenses), were brought in and kept until they could be sent to places designated; or prisoners from other prisons held over until they could be shipped South for exchange.

In the itinerary of our journey from Parole Camp to Upperville I have given little details which to some may seem trivial and unworthy of note, but I give them to show existing conditions in sections of the Confederacy through which we passed.

I do not feel that I am straying from the subject of this narrative of prison experience in appending some facts concerning the treatment of prisoners of war. It is only by laying before the people a frank and faithful statement that we can overcome prejudice and hostile feeling, and bring about that hearty reunion which is earnestly desired by all who have the peace and prosperity of the country at heart.

I have before me a report of a sermon from the *New York Press*, May, 1909, in which a minister of the Gospel (?) residing within the limits of Greater New York speaks of "*the infamous Captain Wirz*"—"a

*murderer."* It is charitable to attribute such language from the lips of a minister to ignorance rather than malice. Yet, while persons are found who entertain and publicly express such sentiments, I cannot be open to the charge of desiring to awaken and perpetuate bitter memories if I seek to place on record the true history of Major Wirz, to refute the falsehoods and misrepresentations which have crept into history and are still believed by some.

When the grave questions which for years agitated our country had reached the crisis, and there remained but the *ultima ratio regum*, they were submitted to the arbitrament of the battlefield. We of the South accepted the result of that contest and laid down our arms in good faith. But when we are asked, like a whipped child, to say we were wrong and are sorry for what we did, and promise to sin no more, it is asking too much. We fought for what we considered our rights, and lost. Yet our men, who fought and lost, and those who died in the struggle, were just as brave and as honest as the men who wore the blue. *They* fought for the Union, *we* fought for our homes, for our wives and our dear ones. For those of our dead who were consigned to death and ignominy we do not ask pity, but only for that justice which was denied them in life—that the blot upon their reputations be effaced and their names stand out clear and stainless.

The little episode in relation to the Fairfax Court House raid will need no apology for its introduction, as I have already had occasion to refer to that affair in my diary.

The illustrations here given are from drawings made by my son, B. F. Williamson.

JAMES J. WILLIAMSON.

*West Orange N. J., April, 1911.*



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