

# YANKEE SAILOR IN DIXIELAND JAILS

by

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In dress uniform with gold stripes of a lieutenant on his sleeves, the young naval officer looked as neat and well-groomed and as professional as a graduate of the United States Naval Academy should. Even when commanding a naval battery of Civil War big guns on Morris Island, within sight of Charleston, South Carolina, and of Fort Sumter, George Collier Remey kept his dark hair carefully parted on the right, letting it fall in graceful, but not effeminate, waves over the ears. His boyish cheeks — he was only twenty-two years old — were smoothly shaved. He smiled easily.

He was as trim in duty uniform on August 23, 1863, when his shore guns were sighting on the tower of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Charleston as he had been two years earlier when his ship, *The Hartford*, was ordered home for war duty from a two-year cruise in Oriental waters. Remey was proud that sultry August day of the eleven-inch shells his sailors were firing, one burst after another, at Forts Wagner and Sumter and was looking forward to licking the Confederates as a prelude to a long and distinguished naval career. He little

dreamed that within a period of three weeks he would surrender to the rebels and spend thirteen months in miserable jails.

Until his surrender and capture on September 8, 1863, Remey had been blessed with greater fortune than many Iowa lads who fevered for success, but were prevented by inadequate education, lack of social influence, or no political connections. The son of William Butler Remey and Eliza Smith Howland, who settled in Burlington in May 1837 and became most influential and prosperous, George was born there August 10, 1841. The lad was perfectly content to live the life of a river-town boy—to play marbles in the spring, skinny-dip in the Mississippi on hot summer days, collect sacks of walnuts in the autumn, and slide and skate during winter. He had no particular plans for his future and certainly on a cold and snowy day in March 1855, when he went outside to play, the thought never entered his fourteen-year-old mind that one day he would wear the epaulets of a rear admiral and be recognized as, perhaps, Iowa's most distinguished naval officer.

George recalled vividly that chilly March day when, almost in a matter of minutes, his future was decided. "I was out sliding or coasting on my sled when General Augustus Caesar Dodge came along and asked me if I would like to go to the Naval Academy." A family conference resulted. All agreed that an appointment would be most desirable, so Dodge, enlisting the aid of John P. Cook,



*Lt. George Remey*

Iowa Congressman, immediately went to work and pushed the nomination through. George entered the Academy, did well in his studies and stood high in his class, and was graduated in 1859, on the eve of the Civil War. Rising through grades in orderly succession, he was commissioned commander in 1872. The following year he married Mary Josephine Mason, daughter of Charles Mason, Iowa's first chief justice, who, although cursed as a Copperhead during the war, became after the peace a prominent patent attorney with considerable influence in Washington, D.C. The marriage, it may be said,

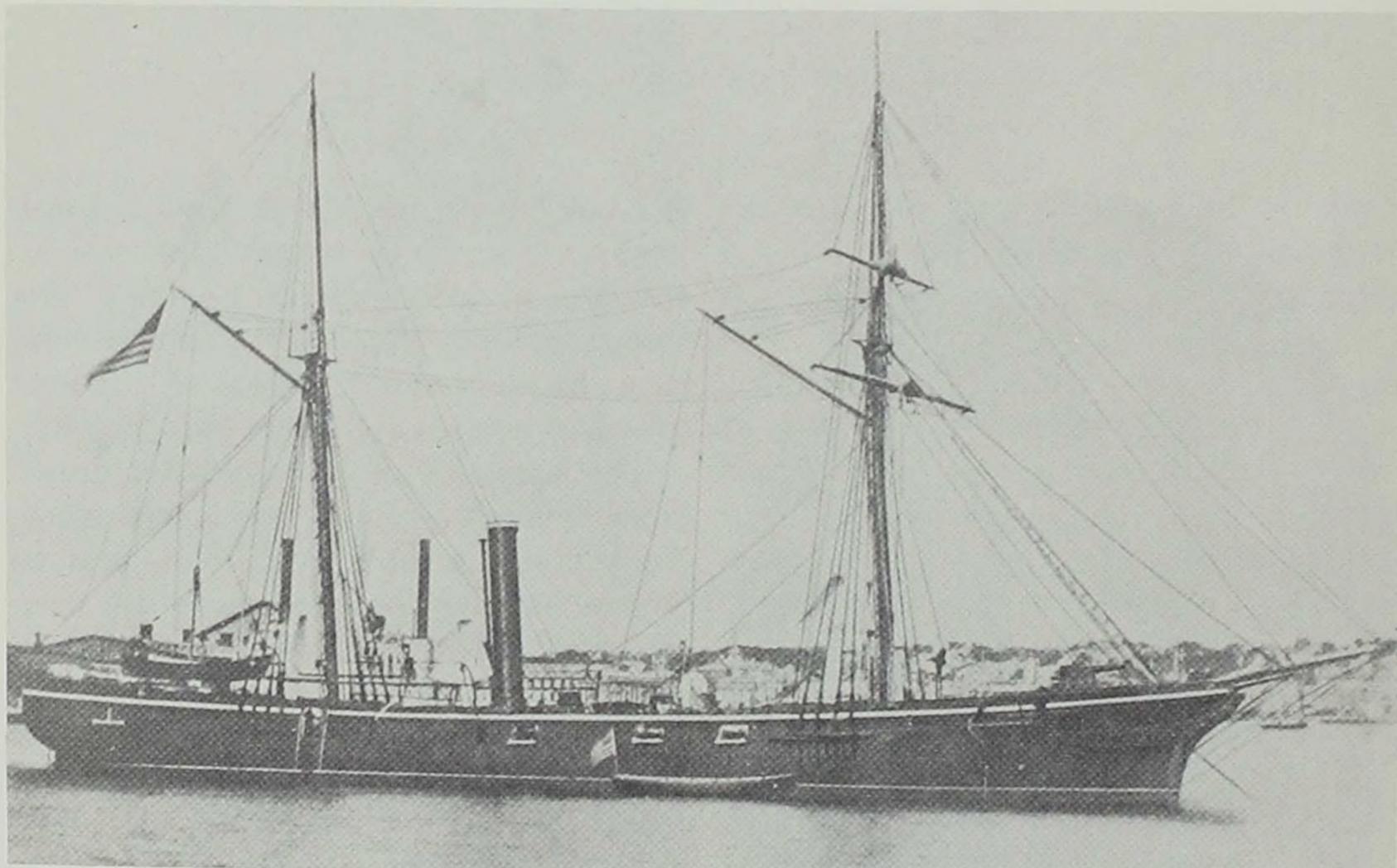
did not hinder, but aided, George's promotions. This by no means implies or infers that, by any standards, George Collier Remey was anything but a first-rate officer. By all accounts, he was an excellent practical seaman and naval administrator.

The narrative of his captivity, drawn from Remey's own account, is well worth the telling, not only because he was an Iowan but also because there are relatively few accounts by naval officers so spiced with vignettes and intimate recollections. Few, if any, officers who rose to flag rank, as did Remey, were confined for as long or in as many Palmetto State jails as was Remey.

It was not Lieutenant Remey's fault that he surrendered in 1863 to the enemy off Charleston harbor. What happened was this. After commanding shore batteries on sandy Morris Island in August 1863, Remey, on orders, relinquished command of his two Parrott rifled guns and two pieces of Whitworth artillery and rejoined the *Canandaigua* from which he had been detached for shore duty. Summoned almost immediately to the *Marblehead*, the flagship, he was told he was to command that very night—September 7—an hastily collected flotilla of small craft, filled with

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This article rests primarily upon the several volumes of Charles Mason Remey, ed., *Life and Letters of Rear Admiral Remey, United States Navy, 1841-1928* (Washington, D.C.: 1939), typescripts in the Burlington (Iowa) Free Public Library; upon similar typescripts, by the same editor and at the same date, namely: *Life and Letters of Mary Josephine Remey, Wife of Rear Admiral George Collier Remey, Daughter of Chief Justice Charles Mason, 1845-1938*; and *Letters of Charles Mason, Chief Justice of Iowa, 1804-1882*, also in the same library. The Delia Rorer Manuscript diaries, in private hands, have been helpful, as have newspapers of the period.



*The flagship "Marblehead" from which Remey was dispatched on his abortive mission.*

sailors and marines, and to land on and take Fort Sumter.

Privately, Remey "did not think much of the expedition," but he saw the small boats alongside, gasped when he saw they numbered only four, and sent his landing party into them. Other small craft, some as small as skiffs and others as large as dories, were loaded with some five hundred marines and sailors. The assault, as Remey predicted, was a disaster. In the party commanded by Remey, only his boat was able to land. Of the large contingent of sailors and marines, only about 120 were able to beach their craft and scramble ashore. Heavy fire was directed upon the Yankees from Fort Moultrie, splintering landing craft, and the defenders of Fort Sumter rained turpentine balls and hand grenades from the fort's ramparts. Unable to return to

sea because of the destruction of boats and unable to storm the ledge upon which Fort Sumter stood, Remey's forces were pinned down. Nothing remained but to surrender. The attack, acknowledged Remey bitterly, "was a dead failure; there was not the slightest chance of success, but if there had been, it would have been lost by the way the expedition was organized and conducted."

Humiliated, bone weary, and annoyed by the fact that Fort Sumter, even if the offensive had been successful, would have been of little value, Remey took some comfort in the fact that both he and his men were treated kindly by their captors. He tasted gall, however, when the prisoners were carted off in a small steamer to Charleston and marched in file through the stillness of a black midnight to jail. This was not the glory of

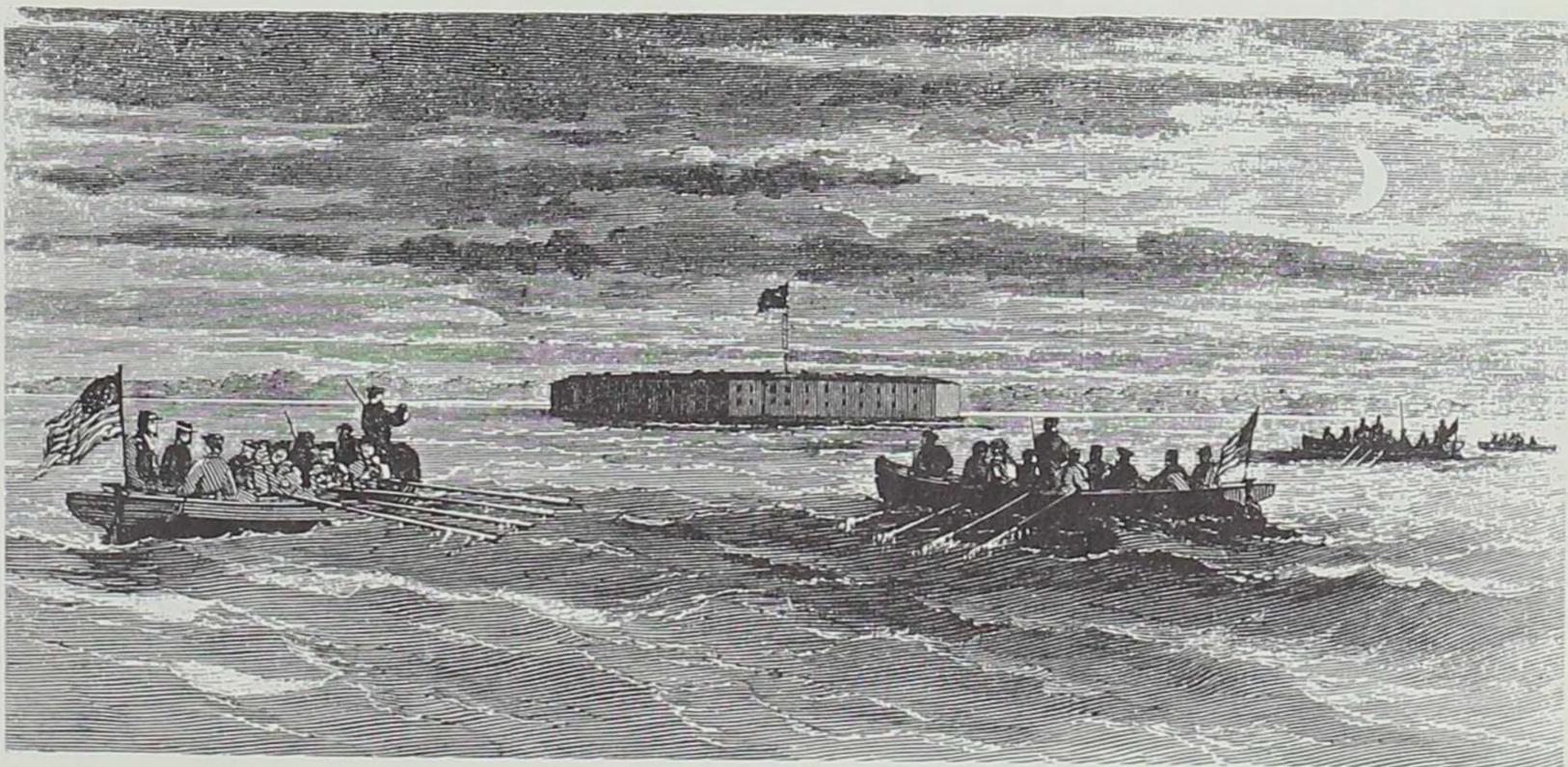
quiet seas nor was it the mighty force of breaking waves which Remey exulted in when he, fresh out of Annapolis, sailed the Pacific. Neither was it the fate he anticipated. His naval career, he feared, was forever over.

The Charleston jail, into which Remey and his party were shoved, was old and dingy and was far less attractive than the city itself, a place of broad avenues, lovely gardens, and handsome mansions. Shuttled into a large room with, Remey said, nothing in it but a stifled atmosphere and a thick layer of dust on the floor, the prisoners hurried to a window to catch a glimpse of one of the South's most cultivated communities. But all they saw was a courtyard. In it stood, stark and bare, a permanent scaffold, a gallows with dangling hangman's noose. They retreated from sight of the loathsome thing to squat on a filthy floor, to sleep on bare boards, and, when irregular meal time came, to scoop with their hands rations of boiled corn meal or thin mush.

A few ounces of meat per prisoner were served only once.

Depression and uncertainty ate into their spirits, and questions gnawed at them. Were they to be there forever? What chance was there for parole? The first query was answered four days later, when on September 13, Remey and his comrades were transferred by rail, a jerky engine pulling jerky cars, from Charleston to Columbia, the state capital. Once again they marched under guard to be lodged in the city jail. There Remey was to remain for more than a year. Situated in the heart of Columbia, the brick, three-story jail, fortified with a stout stone foundation, was believed to be escape proof. Heavy iron rods barred windows and doors. Each interior door was of thick, solid wood.

The prisoners, including Remey, occupied a small room, and "when we lay down on the floor we took up just about all the space." Somehow or other, Lieutenant Commander E. P. Williams, cap-



*Ft. Sumter and Union assault boats during the siege of Charleston in 1863.*

tured with Remey, managed to secure ten dollars in Confederate paper, and with it he purchased, probably by bribing a guard, a scratchy horse blanket, such as cavalrymen used to cushion a saddle. Remey and Williams shared this comfort, sleeping on it when warm weather permitted and under it when the temperature dropped. The blanket was scarcely wide enough to cover one person, let alone two. Remey was rather slender, but Williams was short and thick-set. The result was good-natured competition.

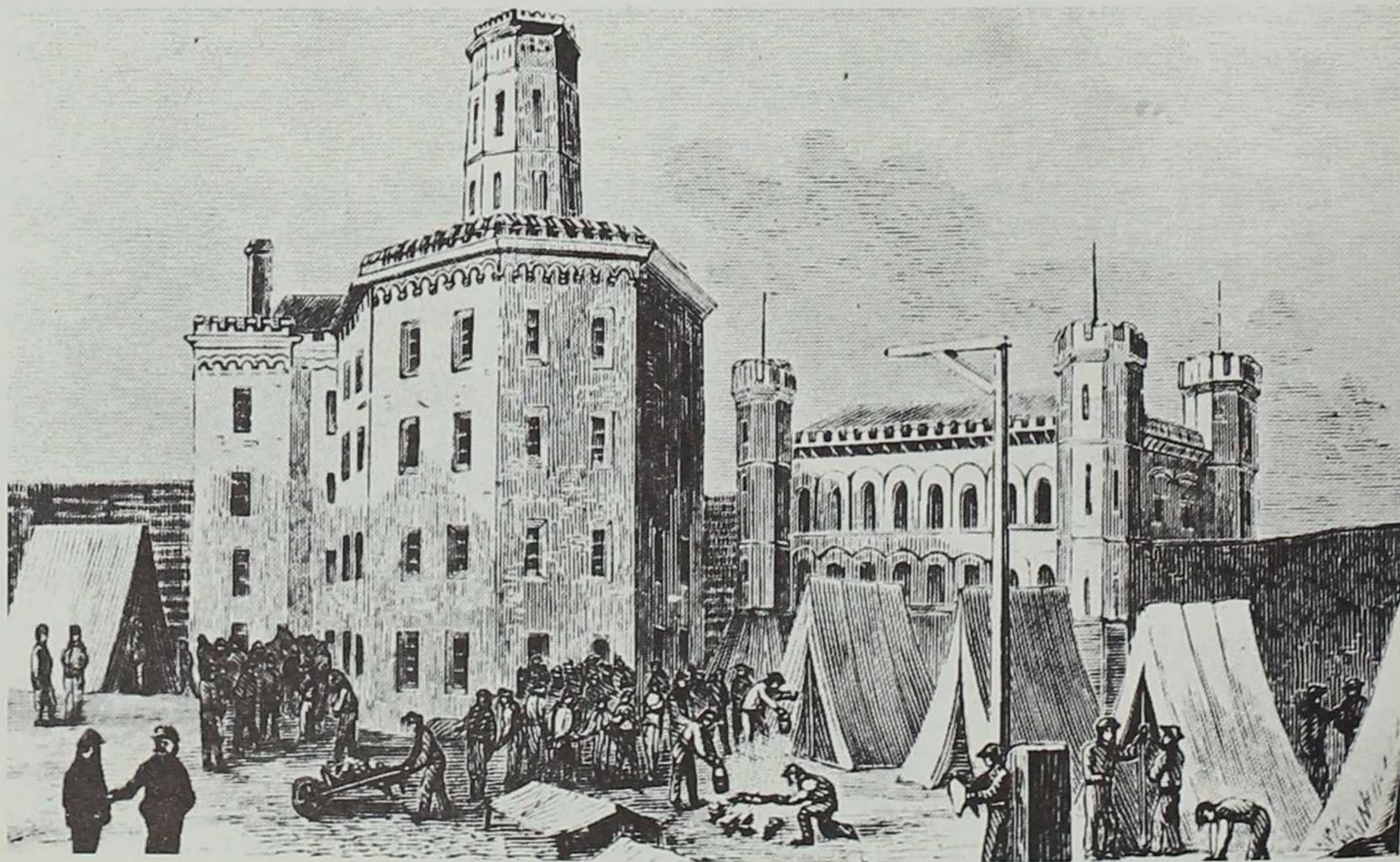
"Remey," said Williams, "you always wait until I get asleep, and then you take the blanket and roll over. You get more than your share!"

"Well," replied Remey, "I have to struggle with a man of your size."

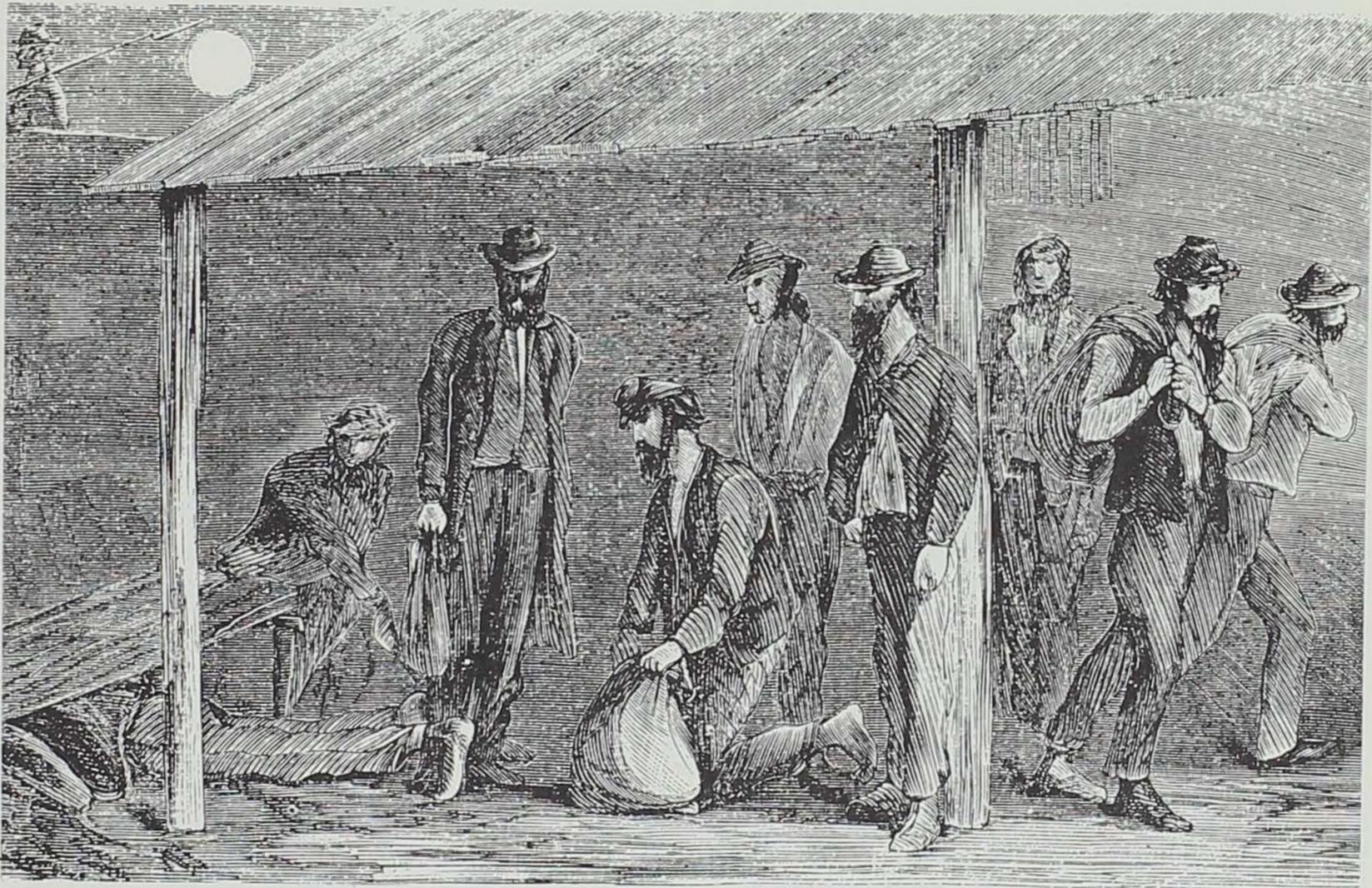
Luckily, rivalry for the blanket ceased upon the arrival from northern Union

states of blankets, woolen shirts, and an army cap. These, during following months, were supplemented by clothing and food. One barrel contained, greatly to the delight of the prisoners, a dozen cans marked "clams." When opened, the containers were filled not with "quahogs," but whiskey. The Confederates, snickered Remey, knew nothing about the alcohol, for if they had, "they would have absorbed it all themselves." With clothing, nondescript as it was, from home and with a prudent husbanding and rationing of food and whiskey, Remey was more than able to make out with his daily ration of about a quarter pound of bacon and slight portions of beef. The bacon, he complained, was often so musty as to be almost unfit to put into the mouth.

After meager morning rations, cooked by the prisoners in an open shed in the



*The Charleston Jail, scene of Remey's first incarceration. Note the gallows in the courtyard.*



*Tunneling for freedom under the eye of the guards.*

jail yard, and after washing with water from a hydrant close by a crudely erected privy, Remey exercised, traded prison gossip, sought to pry news from surly guards, and, as do all war prisoners, dreamed of his release. A second exercise period came in the middle of the afternoon. After that the men were confined until the next morning. Now and again their boredom was brightened by visits from "Aunt Maggie" and "Aunt Rose," two black women, who brought small gifts and plenty of chatter. Not even the cheerful conversation of these women was sufficient always to brighten lagging spirits or lift the gloom of one poor fellow "who used to sit on the floor and pull out his beard a hair at a time until his face looked like a pin-feathered chicken."

Jail fever attacked Remey also. Although quick in movement, he was deliberate in making decisions, and he early made up his mind not to permit cell life to result in nervous and hasty reactions or conduct. Pacing his room or yanking out whiskers would get him nowhere. He concentrated upon winning the favor of guards, some of whom, he discovered, held "strong" Union sentiments, and "their sympathy not infrequently assumed a practical form such as assisting us to communicate secretly with Union residents in the city." Apparently pro-Union jailors carried stories to Remey of escape efforts by prisoners in other jails and at Libby Prison.

Stimulated by such tales, Remey, about March 1, 1864, laid plans to dig a twenty-two-foot tunnel from the jail to an adja-



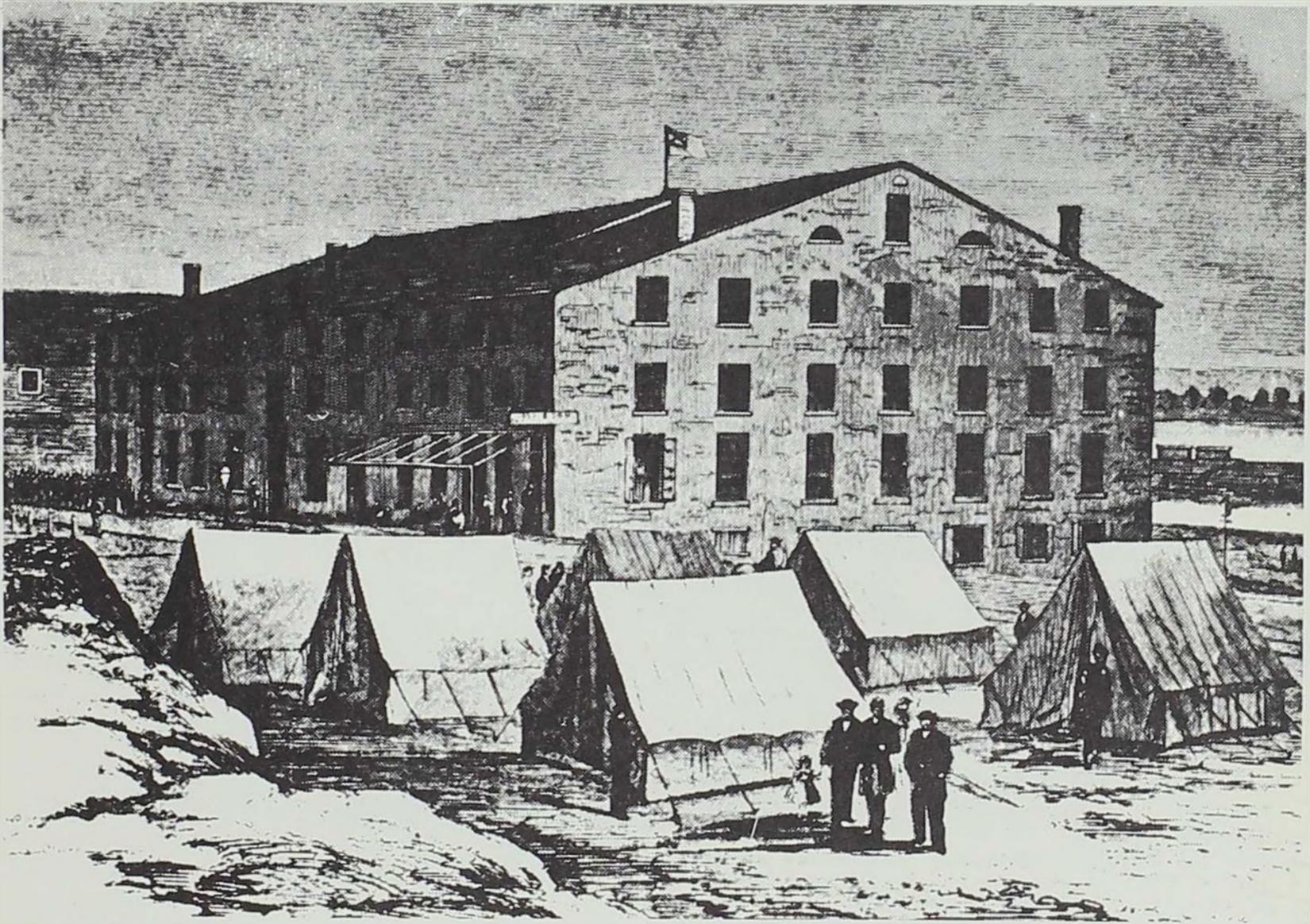
*Remey's wife, Mary Josephine.*

cent frame building. He was assisted by Lieutenant Commander Williams, Ensign B. H. Porter, and Acting Ensign George Anderson. All had been together for months, and each trusted the other. From ten o'clock in the evening until four in the morning, night after night, the four laboriously dug. The tunnel lengthened foot by foot until suddenly, for some unknown reason, Williams and Porter were shackled in irons and moved to another room. Digging continued. The project neared completion about the first of April, but only at the cost of calloused hands,

aching backs, cramped muscles, and constant apprehension of discovery. Yellow clay, the diggers learned, when mixed with dark loam and pebbles, is hard to cut through and heavy to handle. "It is a wonder we were not discovered," Remey wrote. He spoke prematurely. Suddenly, without saying a word or even admitting they knew of the escape plans, Confederates moved Remey and his partners from their first-floor room to a second floor area barred by heavy iron grating.

For the first time, Remey expressed hopelessness, and, rather querulously complained that he "got awfully tired" of jail life. "We played cards, and had something to read. Our lights were not very good, but we got a good deal of reading matter for daytime." His thoughts were of Iowa, of Burlington, of the river and its steamboats, and of home groceries redolent of spices and fat sausage and yellow cheese under glass. He relived the details of his cruise on the Pacific and talked of his classmates at the Naval Academy.

Fortunately for both his health and state of mind, conditions improved during June 1864, when Federal naval authorities managed, under a flag of truce, to negotiate the transfer of gold coins for the prisoners' use. Remey's share was about a hundred dollars. One gold dollar, he explained, could be exchanged for fifteen or twenty Confederate dollars. "We bought sparingly of articles of necessity in the clothing and food line," Remey said. His largest purchase was a pair of trousers of Confederate gray,



*Libby Prison.*

for his own britches were worn thin. Even with money in hand jail life continued to be "monotonous and intolerable."

By September 1864, the rumor spread, although Remey took little stock in it, that paroles were being arranged. The possibility of release was debated endlessly. Suddenly, almost without warning, Remey's group was marched out of jail and toward a railway station. The date was October 12. "The streets and the houses and everything looked so strange," he wrote, after being within walls so long. Their destination was Richmond, Virginia. A boxcar carried them into the city on a

night so cold that guards permitted the prisoners, when the train halted on a side track, to climb out and warm themselves by a little fire they kindled.

From Richmond, where a provost marshal registered them, Remey's men, disappointed and disgusted, were moved to Libby Prison, where, after two or three days, paroles were signed. Finally, the exchange took place, not at Libby Prison, but at Cox's Landing, a point on the James River. Shortly after November 15, Remey, now thoroughly exhausted and irascible, was ordered to Annapolis, although the Naval Academy itself had



*Cox's Landing, frequently a point for the exchange of prisoners.*

been moved for the duration of the war to Newport, Rhode Island. En route by train, Remey complained that he had no means and no money. He climbed aboard looking like a tramp. "I had on," he wrote, "a pair of gray Confederate trousers, well worn, and the remains of a Navy uniform coat, with a private's cap."

Outfitted properly by an Annapolis friend, Remey received leave to return to his Burlington home to celebrate Christmas with his family. His mother thought he was not very "stout" and that he still suffered from imprisonment. Yet Lieutenant Remey was soon well enough and gay enough to attend merry parties given in his honor. Mrs. John H. Gear, wife of

Iowa's governor and one of Burlington's most charming hostesses, honored Remey with a gala evening, "the most splendid party I have ever attended in Burlington." That was Remey's mother's opinion, who added, "Everything was superb. She did not invite a single Copperhead."

Many years later, in 1900, when his uniform was heavy with gold stripes and his cap was encrusted with the "ham and eggs" of a rear admiral and at a time he was commander-in-chief of the Asiatic station, Remey jocularly spoke of his months in Dixieland jails as the "longest sea voyage on land with the least nautical miles sailed" ever made. □