

## United States Parole Throughout the War of 1812

The War of 1812 brought unexpected prisoners of war into the United States and Canada. The United States was not prepared, nor equipped to handle the mass amount of prisoners that were captured on various battlegrounds of the War of 1812. One remedy to solve this problem was the concept of parole. Parole found two different meaning throughout the War of 1812, but both helped with the confinement of prisoners without jeopardising the prisoner's quality of life. The first form of parole was perhaps the least difficult to conduct as well as the most efficient. Through this idea prisoners captured in mass quantities were immediately sent back to their families and homes, taking an oath never again to participate in the war. The second type of parole was granted to ranking officers that were captured during battle. These officers were given the opportunity to live a more lavish captivity then that of the regular soldier. Officers were sent to nearby towns in close proximity to the cantonment holding prisoners of war, in the towns they were housed in private and commercial buildings and treated to many luxuries. The system of parole would not have existed had it not been for the code of honour shown by all soldiers of the time. Honor and respect were sought by and given by all gentlemen of this time, and higher ranking officers were expected to show and receive it at all times.

With the first type of parole, after the conclusion of a battle prisoners would be split up and some were sent home, to honourably never fight in the war again. When soldiers were paroled back to their families it was usually in great numbers and the parolees were militia or volunteers, no soldiers or rank were ever paroled home. William H. Merritt, a Canadian Prisoner shows this as he wrote, "The militia, as usual, were paroled and sent back to their families..."<sup>1</sup> This system was based largely on honour, and each man sent to return home was to give his word never to fight again (see image on next page). Although the majority of the prisoners paroled home were true to their word, some reported back to their regiments once they reached home and continued to fight. They would not tell the truth that they were paroled, for they would not have been allowed to rejoin the ranks, as it was written by James Wilkinson,

*"A military officer is bound to obey, promptly and without hesitation, every order he may receive, which does not affect his honour; but this precious inheritance must never be voluntarily forfeited; nor should any earthly power wrest it from him. It follows, when an officer is made prisoner and released on his parole of honour, not to bear arms against the enemy, that no professional duties can be imposed upon him, while he continues in that condition, and under such circumstances, any military man will justify him for disobedience..."*<sup>2</sup>

As the war continued it became more and more unlikely that a soldier that was paroled home would return to battle, as many were desperate to get away from the front lines, where the bloodshed was horrific.

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 We the undersigned do certify upon our honor as Gentlemen and Officers that we will not bear arms, or act in any Military capacity against the United States during the present War;— neither will we give any Information directly or indirectly, whereby the Enemies of the United States may take advantage.

Given under  
 baronnet  
 Buffalo  
 23<sup>rd</sup> day Dec<sup>r</sup> 1813

Signd/ A. Nellis Capt<sup>n</sup>  
 C. Adams Capt<sup>n</sup>  
 Wm Lyon Capt<sup>n</sup>  
 G. B. Stephenson.

Thos J. Lovin  
 Secy

“We the undersigned do certify upon our honor as Gentlemen and officers that we will not bear arms, or act in any Military capacity against the United States during the present War; neither will we give any information directly or indirectly whereby the enemies of the United States may take advantage.”

The second method of parole was significantly different from the first issued to the militia. The second was intended for ranking officers that were captured and brought to cantonments across the United States. This type of parole consisted of officers arriving at the prisoner of war camp; from there they were given a parole certificate which outlined their rules while on parole. They would then go into the cantonment’s adjacent town or a nearby town to server their paroles. An example of a certification of parole, which was given to Captain Matthew C. Dickson of the Royal Engineers, reads as follows,

“Matthew C. Dickson, a prisoner of war to the United States having given his word of honor that he will not withdraw himself from the bounds prescribed to him without first having obtained permission to that effect from this office; that he will behave decently and with due respect to the laws; that he will not during his continuance at Chillicothe either directly or indirectly carry on a correspondence in writing with any person whomsoever, but through the hands of me, the said agent of such officers as may be appointed to that purpose, in order that they may be read or approved by me or such officers as aforesaid. And the fourth article of the Cartel establish by the respective government of the United States and His Britannic Majesty at Washington on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of May last passed, having authorized me as an agent under the same to prescribe the limits to which his parole shall extend, the hours and other rules to be observed by him with power in case of willful disobedience to commit to close custody in prison the delinquent, I do hereby assign to you the town of Chillicothe and the County of Ross for your



When on parole the officers have a tremendously simple, uneventful and peaceful life. For the most part, reading, physical activity, hunting, dining, and socializing took up the hours of the day. Written below is a formal request for a prisoner on parole to go hunting.

*Capt. Key's Friday morning*  
*Dear Sir*  
*I should consider it*  
*as an extraordinary favour if you will*  
*give Lieut Davis and myself per-*  
*mission to go seven miles, on Monday*  
*and Tuesday next, to Capt Key's*  
*farm in Lewis house, to kill Turkey's*  
*and Deer, we will be under his*  
*charge, should you wish it, requesting*  
*the favour of an answer per*  
*Beaver and believe me*  
*Your Most Obedient Servant*  
*Francis Purves*  
*W. Williams*  
*Marshall*  
*Lieut P. Army*

Ross County Historical Society

**Prisoner of War's Request to Go Hunting.**  
"Permission given"

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An excerpt from William H. Merritt's journal describes what an officer might do on a typical day while on parole.

*"...rose in the morning between 8 and 9 o'clock, read till breakfast, played a rubber of billiards, wrote until 12 o'clock, read till 2 o'clock, walked about until 4*

*o'clock, dined at 4, say an hour, strolled about until 7 o'clock, in the evening played whist, read until 11 o'clock, get to bed at 12."*<sup>6</sup>

As seen in the excerpt, rules were not strictly followed by the officers. The most disregarded rule was curfew, there were seldom times that the officers were in their quarters on time. Other rules that were disregarded were boundaries, as there are reports of officers wanting to go further they would dislodge the boundary marker and move it to where they pleased. The officers were used to a life of diversity with changing scenery, wartime excitement and interaction. Although their time on parole may seem to be civilized and quite comfortable, many officers were unsatisfied complaining about the confinement and the mind numbing boredom. This led too many officers getting into mischief while on parole. Below is an account of the towns' folk writing to the Deputy Marshal about prisoner conduct.

*Petition by the Inhabitants of Cheshire Requesting  
the Punishment of British Prisoners:*

*Cheshire, July 8, 1814.*

*Sir, — We, the subscribers, inhabitants of the town of Cheshire, supposing that you have the power to control or remove the British prisoners now located in Cheshire, think proper to state that they have conducted themselves in such a manner as to render their longer stay in this place highly improper. To pass over as trivial, numberless instances of disorderly and shameful conduct of which they have been guilty... Although the British officers may have fared sumptuously on the fat of the land during their residence here, but when, from their repeated and flagrant violations of law and order, the lives and property of the community are jeopardized, it becomes our duty to state that their society is insupportable, and that they cannot remain here. We wish you would inform us of your determination by letter as soon as may be, and we would adjure you that a compliance with our request as soon as may comport with your convenience will much oblige the community at large and your very Humble Servants.*

*To Thos. Melville, Jr., U. S. Sup. Ins.*<sup>7</sup>

Another account by merchant John Hunt whom was offering home and board to a paroled officer writes, February 2, 1812, in frustration,

*"It is a fact there is not a week but the paroles of the prisoners are broken... the parole orders every prisoner at his quarters at nine o'clock. It is formal, but no attention is paid to the hour. The deputy marshal since the new arrangement has never visited my house. Things are not*

*conducted by no means right... rest assured there is bad management, and very bad.*<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps reasoning behind “bad management” was the respect offered between officers of war. It was often that paroled officers would socialise and be in the company of the officers keeping them confined to a town. It is likely that the American officers did not check-up on paroled officers very often for the simple reason of friendship and a high degree of respect between both parties. Although this mutual respect and trust was broken countless times, as reported.

The two types of parole used by the United States during the War of 1812 were effective in containing the enemy in a time where the United States did not have the knowledge or infrastructure to contain large amounts of people. Paroling masses of captured militia and volunteers home, along with sending officers into towns, made room for enlisted soldiers to be held in confinement in prisoner of war cantonments. Although there were several escapes, mishaps and predicaments throughout the process of holding prisoners, it was generally executed with precision for a new concept in United States warfare.

**Prepared by David F. Hemmings and Josh Lichty for the Niagara Historical Society, 2012.  
This Niagara Historical Society project is funded in part by the Government of Canada’s New Horizons for Seniors program.**

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Merritt, *Journal of Events Principally on the Detroit and Niagara Frontiers, During the War of 1812* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Historical Society Publishing, 1863), 17.

<sup>2</sup> James Wilkinson *Memoirs of my Own Times*, Vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Abraham Small Printing, 1816). 482.

<sup>3</sup> *Chillicothe Daily Gazette*, 18 April 1894, in “Raw Recruits and Bullish Prisoners: Ohio’s Capital in the War of 1812” by Patricia F. Medert, (Jackson Publishing Co., Ohio: 1992). 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Certificate of Parole, Captain Henry Nelles – 10 August 1814*, (Archives of Ontario, Robert Nelles Family Fonds), F 542, box MU 2192.

<sup>5</sup> Medert, *Raw Recruits*, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Merritt, *Journal of Events*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> E. M. Raynor & E. L. Petittclerc, *History of the Town of Cheshire, Berkshire County, Mass* (New York: Clark W. Bryan & Co., 1885), 204-205.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia F. Medert, *Raw Recruits and Bullish Prisoners: Ohio’s Capitol in the War of 1812* (Jackson, Ohio: Jackson Publishing Co., 1992). 123.