Iris Shea

The War of 1812 brought great wealth as well as great tragedy to the many Nova Scotians and Americans engaged in privateering. Much has been written about the number of American vessels captured and brought to Halifax. Little has been said, however, about the American privateers and navy personnel manning those vessels, who were also brought to Halifax as Prisoners of War.

Melville Island Prison became "home" to more than 8, 000 Americans between 1812 and 1815, 1, 200 of whom served with the US Army Land Forces. The prison became a place of death for more than 100 American prisoners. A burial ground nearby, now known as Deadman's Island, may contain the remains of those Americans.

No longer an island, nor is there evidence it ever was an island, Deadman's Island is actually a peninsula situated on the shores of the North West Arm in Halifax, Nova Scotia, within a stone's throw of Melville Island. It is on this two acre forested mound called Deadman's Island that a 60 unit condominium development is being proposed.

Between 1803 and 1905, a British Military Prison was located on Melville Island. During the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812, French, Spanish and American Prisoners of War were incarcerated there. Deadman's Island, once known as Target Hill, was described in 1813 by American POW, Benjamin Franklin Palmer, as a burial ground for inmates. No documentation has been found, however, to determine who and how many were buried there. Where they American's?

the Island as it appears today

A pedistrian path around the island

The names of all American POWs who were brought to Halifax between 1812 and 1815, following their capture at sea and the Battle of Beaverdams and the "Canadas", were carefully recorded in great detail by the British Admiralty. Those who required medical attention were taken to the Naval Hospital at Halifax, but the majority were sent to Melville Island.

During the early months of the war, most prisoners were exchanged at Boston or Salem within weeks of their capture, but as the war lengthened, so did the incarceration periods. It was noted in the records that some POWs were captured a second time. Names of those who died, the causes of death, and their place of birth were also recorded. No place of burial, however, was given.

From 1813 to 1815, a young privateersman, Benjamin Franklin Palmer, of Stonington, Connecticut, captured 10 Dec 1813 off Long Island, New York, with the crew of the "Rolla", wrote a daily log of his life as a prisoner of at Bermuda, at Melville Island and, later, at Dartmoor in England. While at Melville Island, his journal entry on 4 Jun 1814 stated "Three of the principal officers of the "Diomede" came in today ... four prisoners carried to Target Hill this morning, a place where they bury the dead. I'm fearful a number of us will visit that place this summer, if not shortly released."

The deaths of two American prisoners, Private Thomas Snully and Samuel Harding, a seaman, were recorded the day before Palmer's journal entry. Were they among the four bodies taken to Target Hill? Smallpox and typhus fever were two common causes of deaths among the prisoners, and immediate disposal of the bodies would have been a consideration. Over the years, erosion has exposed human bones on Deadman's Island and in the waters surrounding it.

The only research, in the attempt to discover if American POWs lie buried on Deadman's Island, is being conducted by Canadian volunteers. Local heritage societies in Halifax are urging their city council to declare the site off limits to any development and, instead, recommend it as a national heritage site.

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