



# A short history of the Rock Island prison barracks

*Otis Bryan England*

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Civil War prisons were dismal places at best and the notorious Confederate prison camp at Andersonville, Georgia, produced incredible suffering and a war crimes trial for its commandant. After the war, and especially from the 1920s on, defenders of the Confederacy pointed to the Rock Island Barracks in Illinois as an "Andersonville of the North" where prisoners were starved and brutalized by guards under the command of Colonel Adolphus J. Johnson. "A Short History of the Rock Island Prison Barracks" provides a concise account of the establishment of the Rock Island Barracks as a camp for Confederate prisoners of war, the harsh conditions that typified such camps on both sides, and attempts at escape. It also demonstrates that certain Northern newspapers exaggerated the difficult conditions in the Barracks for political and sensation-seeking reasons and contemporary and later Southerners pounce upon such reports to dispel criticism of conditions at Andersonville. The author concludes that Rock Island Barracks "Among a bad lot...despite its shortcomings, was one of the best," yet "the camp induced suffering to a degree that makes modern society flinch, despite our memories of more recent camps that were infinitely worse."

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