



# Camp Douglas 1861-1865

## Chicago's Link to the American Civil War



Camp Douglas was built during the American Civil War. You may have already studied the American Civil War, which began in 1861. The southern states and the northern states were divided over slavery. People in the southern states wanted slavery to continue and to even spread as the country grew. Many people in the northern states were Abolitionists, people who wanted to end slavery.

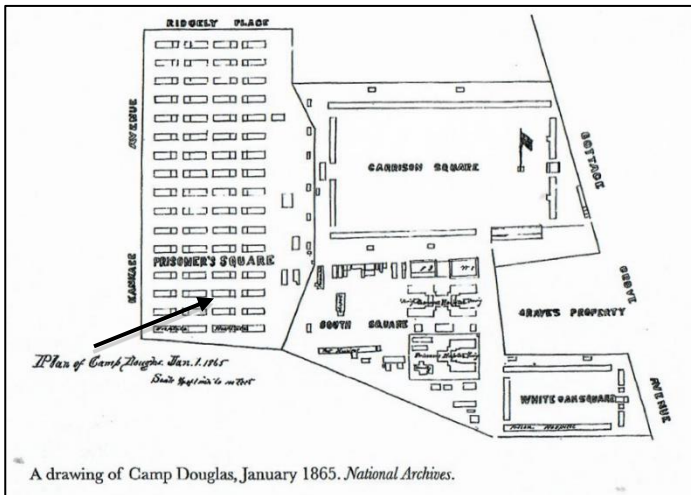
The states could not agree on a solution to their conflict. The southern states decided to secede from the United States and form their own country. They called the entity the Confederate States of America, or the Confederacy. Jefferson Davis was the President of the Confederacy. The northern states, called the Union, remained loyal to the Federal Government and stayed in the United States of America. Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States. He wanted the southern states to stay in the Union. The Confederacy and the Union went to war. President Lincoln also wanted to end slavery. He issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the document that freed the enslaved people.

At the start of the war, Camp Douglas was built in Chicago in what is now Bronzeville as a place to train Union soldiers. It was named for United States Senator Stephen Douglas whose home was southeast of the camp. About 40,000 Union soldiers, including many African Americans, entered the Union army, were trained at Camp Douglas, and sent off to fight in the war.

Once the fighting started, soldiers on both sides of the conflict were captured in battles that took place. Both the Confederacy and the Union needed places to hold prisoners-of-war. Camp Douglas became a place to keep Confederate prisoners. From February 1862, until July 1865, Camp Douglas housed some 30,000 Confederate prisoners—as many as 12,000 at one time. Neither the Union nor the Confederacy was prepared to manage POWs.

The site chosen for the camp made sense in that it was close to the Illinois Central Railroad which provided easy access to transportation to and from the camp. However, the site proved to be a bad choice because it was built only a few hundred yards from Lake Michigan on swampy, sandy soil. During even a moderate rainfall, it became too wet and muddy to be easily walked on. It was bitterly cold and windy during the winter.

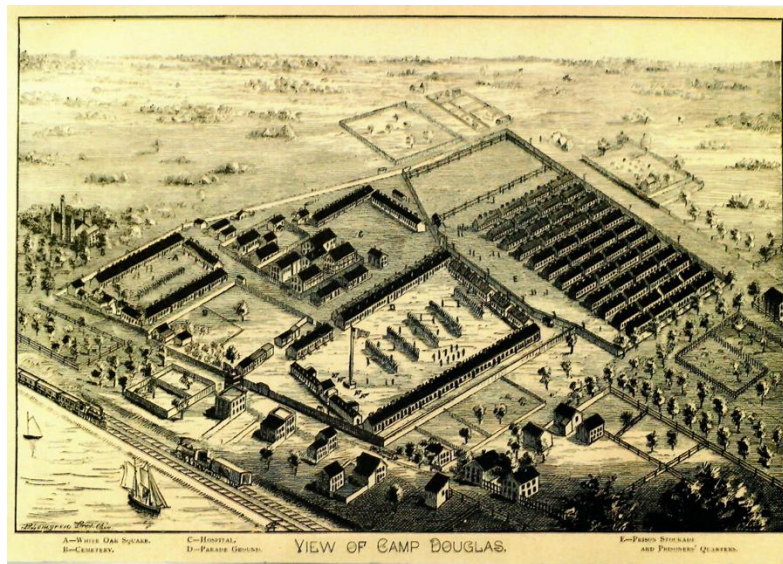
The boundaries of Camp Douglas were 31<sup>st</sup> Street on the north, 33<sup>rd</sup> Place on the south, Cottage Grove on the east, and Giles Avenue on the west. (The drawing is from 1865. Some street names were changed.)



The arrow on the map points to Prisoners Square. In Prisoners Square, for example, prisoners were housed in one-story barracks, ninety by twenty-four feet, mounted on four-foot posts. This made it harder for prisoners to tunnel out. Each barrack had a kitchen and contained benches, wood stoves (later converted to coal-burning) for heat, and three-tiered bunks for up to almost 200 men. The latrines were out back.

The camp was surrounded by a 12-foot-high stockade fence with guard stations every fifty feet. Inside the fence was a smaller wooden barrier that marked the “dead line.” Prisoners could be shot if they crossed it.

The camp was built on sixty acres of land and consisted of over two-hundred buildings. There were four squares: Garrison Square, White Oak Square, Prisoners Square, and South Square. Garrison



Square contained the camp’s headquarters and barracks for officers and men permanently assigned to the camp as guards.

Life in the camp for the prisoners was dull and monotonous. They were awakened by reveille at sunrise. Breakfast was followed by roll call with prisoners assembling in front of their barracks. During the day, they could be assigned to a detail which meant they might be, for example, working as laborers.

Those not on detail, generally loafed, whittled or made things like whistles and smoking pipes. Many of these items were traded. At sunset, the drums beat retreat and the prisoners went back to the barracks where they could read, write letters home, play cards, or talk until lights out at nine o’clock.

When the camp was built, funding for a sewer was not approved. Crowded and unsanitary conditions led to exposure to a variety of diseases, many of which Southern soldiers had never been exposed to before, including smallpox, measles, pneumonia and dysentery.

Generally, the prisoners were treated humanely and received little harsh treatment. If necessary, there were punishments such as “riding the rail,” or dragging a ball and chain around the camp. A few dangerous prisoners were confined to a small dungeon on a diet of bread and water.



The diet for soldiers in the Confederate Army consisted mainly of pork and corn. Rations at Camp Douglas were mostly poor-quality beef and bread with some cornmeal. This dietary change made the adjustment to prison life even more difficult. Medical care was inadequate, and, in some cases, primitive. Prisoners also suffered from idleness, homesickness, and low spirits. The death toll of Confederate soldiers at Camp Douglas was more than 4,000.

After four long and terrible years, the Civil War ended with Confederate forces surrendering to Union forces in April 1865. The prisoners at Camp Douglas were released, and the camp was torn down in December 1865. Other than artifacts from archeological digs on the former site of the camp, there are no physical remains of the camp. The historical marker on Martin Luther King Drive in Chicago marks what was once the location of Camp Douglas.

