

John A. Wyeth is shown here late in his life in a photo taken in 1914. Photo from Documenting the American South (<http://docsouth.unc.edu>), The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.

CHAPTER 1

“Shots” Are Fired on Camp Morton

More than a quarter of a century after the last Civil War salvo had been fired, Dr. John A. Wyeth, arguably the most famous American physician and medical researcher of his era, dropped a veritable bombshell on the entire state of Indiana and raised eyebrows throughout the nation with his startling article in the April 1891 issue of *Century Monthly Magazine*.

The article created a furor, resulting in letters in magazines and newspapers all across the North. Had he lived 100 years later, Wyeth would have no doubt been a popular guest on CNN, PBS, the Fox Network, and other network television news programs.

Wyeth, who had been a youthful soldier with the Fourth Alabama Cavalry during the American Civil War, had been a prisoner at Camp Morton in Indianapolis from October 1863 until February 1865. The prominent New York physician, who would serve a term as president of the American Medical Association, entitled his lengthy piece in the national periodical, “Cold Cheer at Camp Morton.”

Wyeth’s was a firsthand and often shocking and explicit account of starvation, exposure to extreme cold and heat, beatings by prison guards, and even coldhearted murder of innocent prisoners within the confines of this Northern prison complex.

Citizens of Indianapolis, the state of Indiana, and the magazine’s readership throughout the nation were no doubt greatly disturbed by Wyeth’s compelling story about what he had seen and experienced at Camp Morton.

“I have waited to publish this unhappy experience until a quarter of a century has elapsed since it happened,” he wrote in the article. “The Southern side of prison life has not yet been fully written. My comrades died by the hundreds amid healthful surroundings [in the

Indianapolis community . . . there was] little cause for death had humane and reasonable care of the prisoners been exercised.”¹

“Cold Cheer” painted a bleak and utterly disturbing and appalling picture of a Northern prison that had, until the time of Wyeth’s article, enjoyed a reputation as one of the most humane Northern prisons used to hold Confederate prisoners during the Civil War.

In the final paragraph of “Cold Cheer,” Wyeth quoted official War Department records at that time as showing that 1,762 of 12,082 prisoners who were confined to Camp Morton—or 14.6 percent—perished. The records Wyeth quoted indicated that 11.7 percent of all Confederates in Northern prisons died. Wyeth’s statistics may have even been a little too conservative, since some historians believe that as many as two thousand Confederate soldiers may have actually perished at Camp Morton (some estimates place the total number of Rebels who passed through Camp Morton between 1861 and 1865 at close to fifteen thousand).

Not surprisingly, Wyeth’s charges of callous indifference to human suffering and outright cruelty suffered by the imprisoned Rebels in Indianapolis were met with great indignation by the citizens there—especially the Union military heroes of the community.

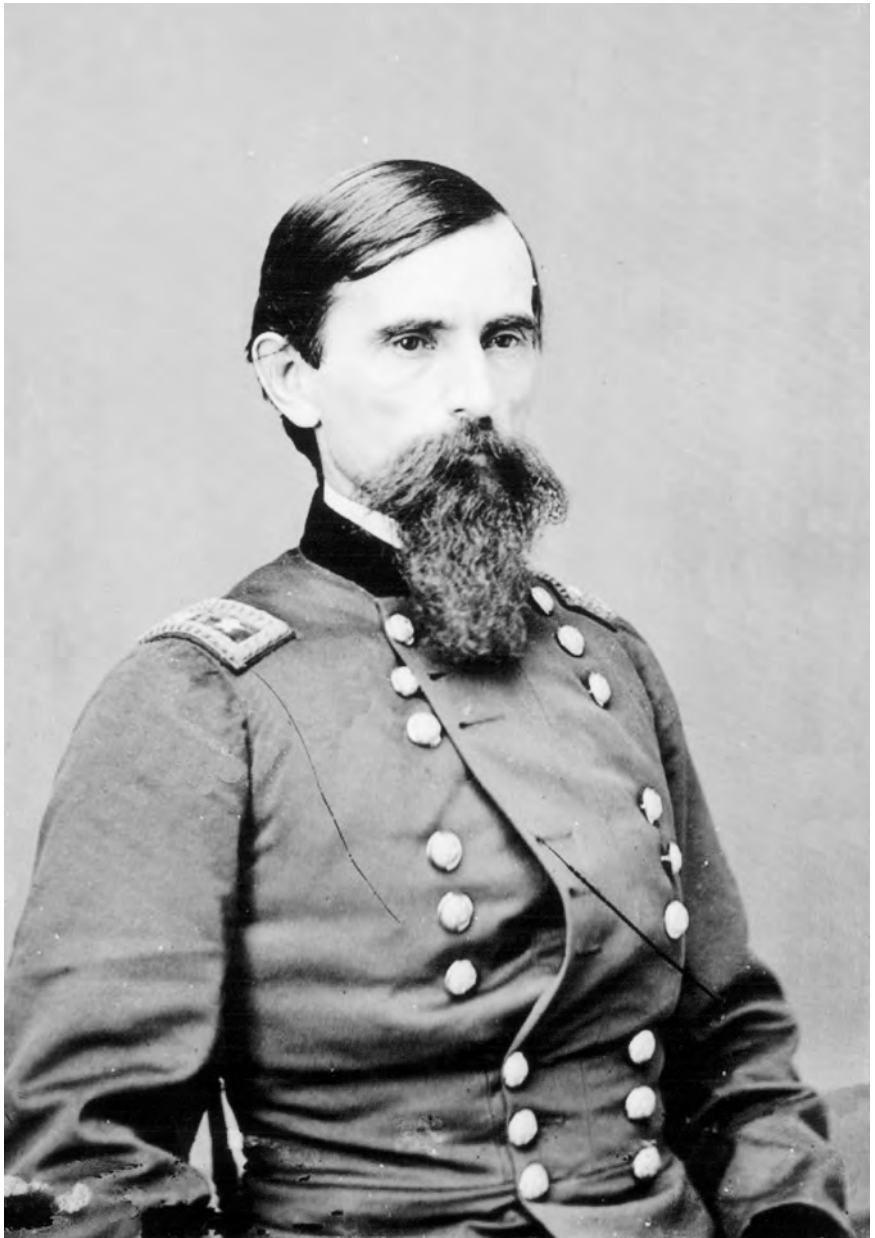
Trying to quickly undo the damage to the Hoosier state’s reputation done by the Wyeth revelations, the Department Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic organized a committee to “investigate the statements made” by Wyeth in his controversial article.

Among the members of this GAR committee was no less than Lew Wallace, a prominent Union military officer during the Civil War who gained international fame as the author of the classic American novel *Ben-Hur*.

This group of distinguished Hoosiers appointed W. R. Holloway, a Civil War-era secretary to Indiana governor Oliver P. Morton (for whom Camp Morton was named), to prepare a “paper” to be submitted to *Century Monthly Magazine* as an official rebuttal to Wyeth’s charges.

Holloway, who still lived in Indianapolis at the time of the Camp Morton controversy, wrote that during the Civil War Morton had assigned him to visit “all of the camps” and to “learn something of their management.”

Holloway contended that, as a part of fulfilling his orders from Morton, he talked with prisoners at Camp Morton “almost daily.” He reported that he “visited their barracks, ate their food, and saw their



Indiana's Lew Wallace played a major role in the Camp Morton controversy and publicly defended the treatment of Confederate soldiers at the prison. Wallace wrote the classic novel Ben-Hur. Photo from the National Archives.

bread baked in a bakery.” Holloway lavishly defended his former boss, a popular Indiana political leader of his time, saying of Morton: “His nature was brave and generous and his heart was as tender as that of a woman.”²

Century Monthly Magazine agreed to publish Holloway’s lengthy response to Wyeth’s assertions and “A Reply to ‘Cold Cheer at Camp Morton’” appeared in its September 1891 issue. The controversy was far from over. In fact, it had only just begun.

In the same issue, *Century Monthly* allowed Wyeth an opportunity to answer Holloway’s assertions with a “rejoinder.” In this piece, Wyeth called on a number of former prisoners, most of them successful and prominent men, to substantiate his charges against Camp Morton.

Wyeth also obtained statements backing his assertions from citizens of Indianapolis, and even Dr. W. P. Parr, assistant surgeon of the United States Army, authored a lengthy first-person account of what he witnessed at Camp Morton that confirmed many of Wyeth’s claims.

In time, other Confederate veterans came to Wyeth’s defense publicly, including J. K. Womack, who wrote a scathing article in the December 1898 issue of the widely circulated *Confederate Veteran* magazine, calling Camp Morton “that den of misery a little north of Indianapolis.”³

But John Allan Wyeth, M.D., LL.D., may have not even needed others to come to his defense to substantiate his credibility. Wyeth’s reputation was, by any estimation, impeccable and quite secure.

Wyeth joined the Southern cause in the spring of 1862, when he volunteered in Quirk’s Scouts, the advance guard of John Hunt Morgan’s Confederate raiders. Captain Quirk, assessing seventeen-year-old Wyeth as too immature to fight, had refused his enlistment yet allowed him to ride along. A summer of skirmishing helped to mature “Young Johnny,” as he was known to the regiment.

That December, Morgan launched his “Christmas Raid,” in which Morgan and his Kentucky horsemen wreaked such damage on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad that it was rendered essentially inoperable for five straight weeks.

On Christmas afternoon, Quirk and his scouts encountered a formation of Federal cavalry and, without properly assessing the situation, charged upon them only to discover too late that they had plunged into an ambush. Quirk and Wyeth, cut off from the others,



A youthful John A. Wyeth is shown wearing his Confederate uniform. Photo from Documenting the American South (<http://docsouth.unc.edu>), The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.

scrambled for cover and found themselves targets of Yankees firing on them from about forty yards away.

Quirk suffered two head wounds and was bleeding profusely. He ordered Wyeth to run off and find his men, before he, Quirk, was forced to “shoot the damned last one” of the Yankees himself. Wyeth slipped off, made his way to the rear, and soon returned with enough Confederate riders to surround the Federals and force their surrender.

The following year, in October of 1863, after months of skirmishing, scouting, and raiding in central Tennessee, Wyeth—now a bona-fide private in Colonel Russell’s Fourth Alabama Cavalry—was able to survive another difficult situation. At Shelbyville, thrown from his horse, he had to lie among the dead as Union cavalry rode over him.

In the Sequatchie Valley, during a raid on a Federal wagon train, he and two companions found themselves cut off and all but surrounded by Federal troopers. Dropping from their horses, they eluded the Union cavalry and made their escape along a wooded ridge.

Two days later, Wyeth’s good fortune finally ran out. Cresting another ridge, Wyeth and other Confederates found themselves face to face with a company of cavalry. They were taken prisoner and, later in the day, turned over to the Tenth Illinois Infantry.⁴

Soon afterwards, Wyeth was shipped by train to the Union prison at Camp Morton, Indiana, where he was incarcerated for the next sixteen months of his young life. No doubt, Wyeth left Confederate service as a man after having entered the army as a wet-behind-the-ears youth.

At the end of the Civil War, Wyeth went home to the South and earned a medical degree. He went on to found the New York Polyclinic Medical School and Hospital, the pioneer organization during his time for postgraduate medical instruction in America.

Wyeth served as president of the American Medical Association and scholarly works he authored about surgery and anatomy won prizes from the AMA. He also wrote some well-received books on American history, including an account of his experiences during the Civil War.

An obvious question begs to be answered about Dr. Wyeth’s campaign to shine the spotlight of public opinion on the unsavory events at Camp Morton during the Civil War. Why did this distinguished medical scientist wait until more than a quarter-century had passed to drop his bombshell on Indianapolis, the state of Indiana, and the rest of the nation?

Wyeth answered that question succinctly in his "Cold Cheer" article. He said that he believed an unfairness existed in the postwar nation's perception of how Union prisoners were treated versus the treatment of Confederate prisoners. And as is the case with many veterans of armed conflict and imprisonment during wartime, Wyeth probably also needed the passage of twenty-five years to make his memories of Camp Morton less painful and traumatic to remember and recount.

Many Confederate veterans in the years and decades following the Great Conflict felt they had suffered severe humiliation at the hands of the Union government and military. They had not only been soundly defeated, but their homeland had been pillaged in the process.

While many in the Northern states believed that the Civil War was fought primarily over the moral issue of the institution of slavery, most Southern veterans saw it otherwise. They believed that they fought in the many bloody battles of the war for "States' Rights" and to protect their homes and families from invading Union armies. The Confederate soldier believed that his cause was a noble one and he was willing to kill and, if necessary, die for it.

The Confederate Nation's reputation had been greatly damaged by stories of horrific treatment of Union prisoners in makeshift Southern prisons like the infamous Andersonville facility. Wyeth simply believed it was time to tell the other side of the story.

In Wyeth's "Rejoinder" in *Century Monthly Magazine*, Texas congressman and ex-Rebel C. B. Kilgore undoubtedly spoke for thousands of Confederate veterans when he said:

Controversies which tend to engender bad feelings are much to be deplored, but exact justice should be done to both sides. Every ugly phase of the Southern prisons has been frequently made public. They were bad enough in all conscience, and neither side can scarcely justify the treatment given to prisoners of war.⁵

The Camp Morton controversy had been long forgotten by most citizens in Indianapolis and Indiana when a military base in Johnson County in central Indiana played "host" to prisoners captured during a time of war. In this case, the relatively small number of prisoners were Germans and Italians captured by U.S. forces during World War II.

Just prior to World War II, two Indianapolis schoolteachers and

historians, Hattie Lou Winslow and Joseph R. H. Moore, undertook the ambitious project of documenting the entire history of Camp Morton. *Camp Morton 1861-1865* was published by the Indiana Historical Society in 1940.

In the book's foreword, Christopher B. Coleman, the society's secretary, made mention of the Camp Morton controversy when he wrote, "At various times there has been controversy over the treatment and condition of the prisoners kept at Camp Morton. The authors have attempted to give a fair and objective treatment of the subject and to provide an honest picture of the life of the camp."⁶

But the authors of *Camp Morton*, a generally well researched and well written historical document, devoted only a half-page to the Camp Morton controversy. Perhaps during those heady days of pre-World War II patriotism and nationalism, the authors judged that criticism of the behavior of Indiana military and civic leaders during the Civil War might not be well received. Perhaps they also did not want to offend and embarrass the living sons and daughters of those same leaders.

Hattie Lou Winslow and Joseph R. H. Moore researched their book primarily by studying newspapers published in Indianapolis during the Civil War era. When it came to documenting the severe hardship and abuse suffered by the Confederate soldiers at Camp Morton, the local newspapers were mostly silent.

The authors wrote, "The Indianapolis newspapers contain very little information about what was going on at Camp Morton at this time, aside from one or two mentions of abnormally cold weather and mentions of the arrival and departures of prisoners. Outsiders were rigidly excluded from the Camp."⁷

So while certainly not ignoring the problems and resulting controversy associated with Camp Morton, the authors did not explore those issues in any real depth. The book was basically a scholarly undertaking to record the history of the camp for future generations—no more, no less.

Since *Camp Morton 1861-1865*, this author can find no national document of consequence about the Camp Morton controversy (though a few Web sites devoted to the camp and its history make mention of it).

The Camp Morton controversy has, for the most part, remained forgotten and ignored by the public and historians for well over a century.

Century Monthly Magazine's editors cancelled a proposed sequel to "Cold Cheer," but Dr. Wyeth refused to back down, taking every additional opportunity to, as one historian has said, "make public the grim accounts and chilling statistics the North didn't care to hear."

Wrote old Dr. Wyeth: "Facts are cold and unanswerable. And dead men *do* tell tales."