

Hairston, James Thomas Civil War prisoner ledger

James Thomas Watt Hairston Civil War prison ledger
September 1861 - March 1862

Title Statement

Hairston, James Thomas Civil War prisoner ledgerJames Thomas Watt Hairston Civil War prisoner ledger MSS 16919

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Publication Statement

Publisher: Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library
P.O. Box 400110
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4110
URL: <https://small.library.virginia.edu/>

2025-08-22

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Notes

Reparative Pink Slip: African American prisoners listed on page 259

Profile Description

Creation: This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on 2026-03-05 17:47:08 +0000.

Language Usage: Description is written in: English, Latin script.

Descriptive Rules: Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

MSS 16919

Unit ID

[Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID

/repositories/3/resources/1821

Unit Date

September 1861 - March 1862

Mixed Materials [X006178827]

1 (Flat_Box)

Language

English

Creator

Hairston, James Thomas Watt, 1835-1908

Extent

.9 Cubic Feet 1 custom flat box the ledger is contemporary paneled calf and dark red morocco over boards, gilt spine with raised bands and two black leather labels, marbled endpapers and all marbled edges. custom made box-Preservation. 9 x 11.5 x 1.5 inches

Repository

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

This collection is open for research.

Immediate Source of Acquisition

This collection was a purchase from Between the Covers to the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia Library on 25 July 2025.

Preferred Citation

MSS 16919, James Thomas Watt Hairston Civil War prison ledger, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.

Biographical / Historical

Ligon's Prison, A Confederate prison, was originally a tobacco warehouse in Richmond, Virginia, (25th and Main Street) during the American Civil War. In 1861, it was confiscated and became a prison known by several names, including Liggon's Prison, Prison Depot, and Prison No. 1. It was later converted to a hospital, General Hospital #23, and was sometimes used to treat the sick from nearby Libby Prison.

It held officer prisoners from the Union Army, taking in numbers from the nearby Seven Days Battles (in which nearly 16,000 Union men and officers had been killed, wounded, or captured between June 25 and July 1 alone) and other conflicts of the Union's Peninsular campaign to take Richmond and end the war only a year after it had begun.

In 1862 Libby Prison began taking prisoner officers to relieve the overcrowding at Ligon's Prison. (20th Street and Cary Street)

As the conflict wore on the prison gained an infamous reputation for the overcrowded and harsh conditions. Prisoners suffered high mortality from disease and malnutrition. By 1863, one thousand prisoners were crowded into large open rooms on two floors, with open, barred windows leaving them exposed to weather and temperature extremes. Mortality rates were high in 1863 and 1864, aggravated by Confederate shortages of food and supplies.

Friends of Abraham Lincoln and an assistant of Ambrose Burnside were prisoners there as well as African Americans and free African Americans.

Major James Thomas Watt Hairston, commandant of Libby Prison was born on 25 January 1835 in Old Fort, Patrick, Virginia. He was the son of Hardin Hairston and Sarah "Sally" Stovall Staples. He graduated in 1858 from Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia. He is listed on the 1860 Federal African Americans Slave Schedule as owning 20 slaves.

He was a "Soldier in the Confederate States Army, Captain of Company E, Eleventh Regiment Mississippi Volunteers, Lieutenant Confederate States Regular Cavalry. In October, 1861, he was made commandant of Libby prison, in Richmond, Virginia, holding that position until May, 1862. " Richmond Virginia.

He was also Major, Assistant Adjutant and Inspector General of J.E.B. Stuart Cavalry of the Army of North Virginia, and after the death of General Stuart was transferred to General Beauregard and since the war have been merchandising and attending to farming his plantation, called "Hairston", which was named after and inherited from his father. Situated near Crawford and contained about eight thousand acres of land. He removed to Virginia in 1889, at Beaver Creek where he had a tobacco farm of about four thousand acres.

For more information: "Libby Prison" Wikipedia. Accessed 8/25/25 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libby_Prison <https://www.hairston.org/p114.htm> <https://archivesweb.vmi.edu/record.php?ID=684>

Content Description

This collection contains the ledger from Liggon's Prison, the first Confederate prison for Union prisoners of war, kept by the prison's commander, Lieutenant James Thomas Watt Hairston. Although the ledger contains 272 pages of text, the pages are stamped 1-288 due to skipped numbers.

The book includes a 257-page roster of 3,159 Union POWs confined from September 1861 to March 1862. Each entry gives the prisoner's name, rank, company, and regiment, and their ultimate disposition, such as whether they were exchanged, transferred, released, paroled, or deceased.

Among the prisoners listed in the roster are Irish-American General Michael Corcoran, the Colonel of the 69th New York Regiment and a close confidant of President Abraham Lincoln, and Robert Holloway, a free African-American from Virginia and personal servant to General Ambrose Burnside, who made extraordinary efforts to secure his release.

In addition to the roster, there is a list of nineteen African American prisoners listed on page 259, ten pages of autograph signatures and inscriptions by prominent Union officers and soldiers, including New York Congressman Alfred Ely, captured at the First Battle of Bull Run, on pages 260-269, a poem titled "The Prisoner's Song" by Union Captain Isaac W. Hart, with a comic manuscript seal and motto on page 287, a tribute written in shorthand, by A.J. McCleary, a prisoner captured at the Battle of Leesburg on October 21, 1861, on page 278, a pen and ink sketch of Richmond spymaster Elizabeth Van Lew on page 285. Mounted on the front flyleaf is a salted paper portrait photograph of Hairston, and his inscription is on the front and back flyleaves.

The prison was closed soon after Lieutenant Hairston's departure in March 1862, and the prisoners were transferred to the newly established Libby Prison. After his departure, Lieutenant Hairston served as staff officer to his cousin General J.E.B. Stuart and attained the rank of major in the Confederate army.

After the war, Hairston returned to Mississippi to manage a plantation with Nathan Fellows, who later acquired the ledger and added explanatory notes in pencil. In 1888, Fellows gave the ledger to Boston journalist William H. Jeffrey, who published an in-depth six-column front-page illustrated article about the ledger in the Boston Weekly Globe on December 12, 1888.

Keywords

United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Prisoners and prisons

United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- African Americans

Ledgers (account books)

Liggon's Tobacco Warehouse Prison (Richmond, Va.)