

ESCAPE FROM LIBBY PRISON: FEBRUARY 9, 1864

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Libby Prison. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, reproduction no. LC-DIG-stereo-1s02918. (Cropped for presentation.) [Note flag. Photo believed to be post-April 1865.]

On the morning of February 10, 1864, the Confederate jailers at Richmond's Libby Prison made a startling discovery—109 Union prisoners of war had escaped the previous night. Libby Prison was a converted warehouse where well over a thousand Union officers were confined. The captives escaped through a tunnel dug through a wall in the prison cellar, continued for about fifty feet under an adjacent road, and emerged near a shed in a vacant lot. Two Maine officers were among the escapees—Col. Charles W. Tilden, commanding officer, 16th Maine Infantry, who had been captured at Gettysburg on July 1, 1863, in the vicinity of Oak Ridge and Capt.

George G. Davis, Company F, 4th Maine Infantry, who was also captured at Gettysburg, in the vicinity of Devil's Den, on July 2, 1863.

In the years and decades following the war, numerous accounts of the escape were published, most offered by the escapees themselves, and others presented in “as told by” formats. The accounts had much in common, but some details varied, particularly with respect to who devised and implemented the escape plan. By most accounts, the leader of the escape effort was Col. Thomas E. Rose, 77th Pennsylvania Infantry, who had arrived at Libby Prison on October 1, 1863. Col. Rose was ably assisted by Capt. Andrew G. Hamilton, 12th Kentucky Cavalry. This overview of the story is derived primarily from a narrative, provided by Col. Rose himself, that appeared as a letter “To the editor” in the *National Tribune* (Washington, D.C.), on May 14, 1885.¹



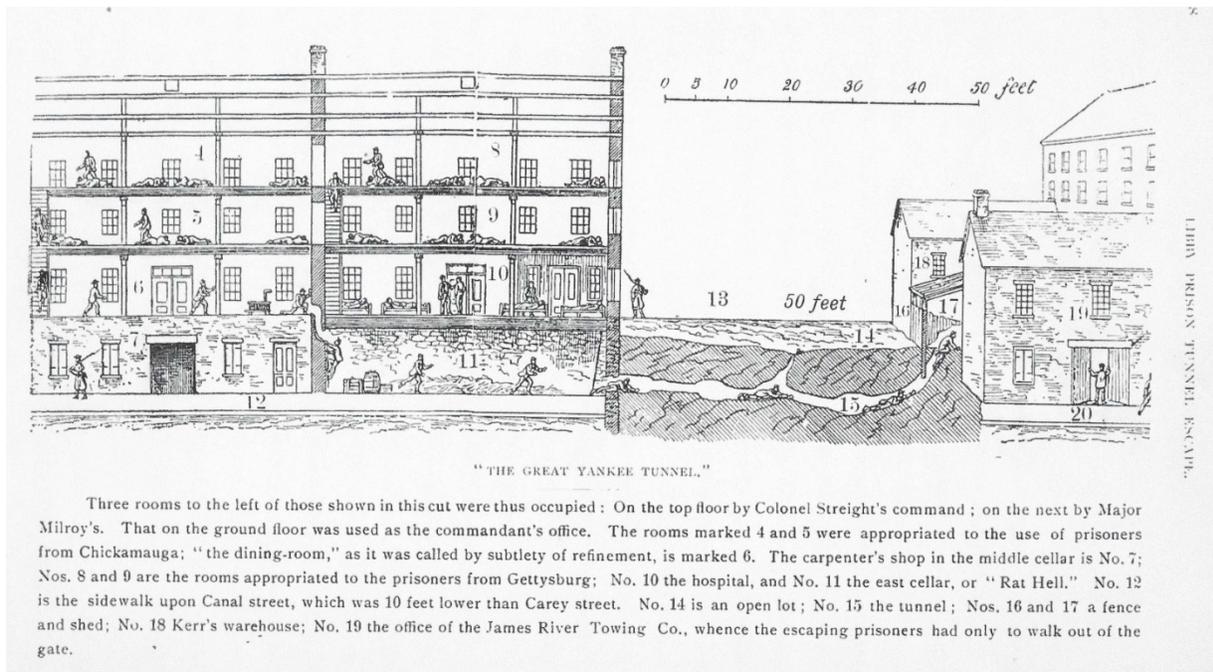
Libby Prison, Richmond, Va. / sketched by W.C. Schwartzburg, Co. A, 24th Wis. Vols. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, reproduction no. LC-DIG-pga-12487.

According to Col. Rose's letter to the editor, planning for an escape tunnel began shortly after his arrival. It was clear from the beginning that if they were going to tunnel out, the only viable exit was through the “eastern cellar” because “it was the only place where we

could conceal the dirt, and where we could work without interruption for several hours at a time.” The first problem was getting into the eastern cellar from the upper floors without detection. Several options were considered, but it was finally decided to cut a hole behind the stoves in the dining room.

We went to the chimney, between the dining-room and hospital, close to the dining-room door, where the rebel sentinel stood. . . . A hole was then cut in the back wall just far enough not to make an opening into the hospital; then straight down through the wall to below the hospital floor, and just wide enough not to make an opening into the carpenter shop; then straight out under the hospital floor into the cellar, making a hole through the entire wall—somewhat in [the] form of the letter S—from the dining-room into the cellar, large enough to admit the passage of a man. The material was so cut that after the hole was completed it could be replaced and removed at will, and not a vestige of the work [could] be seen when the material was replaced and the soot [previously gathered from the stoves] thrown back.²

Col. Rose’s narrative was unequivocal in praising Cpt. Hamilton for executing that phase of the project, which provided clandestine access to the eastern cellar by way of a rope and, later, rope ladder.



The diagram and caption shown above was published in the *Story of the famous Tunnel Escape from Libby Prison* ("As Told by Maj. A. G. Hamilton, one of the projectors"). It is one of several similar diagrams that appeared in newspaper accounts and other publications. One similar example appeared in *Col. Rose's Story of the Famous Tunnel Escape from Libby Prison*. Neither of these booklets cite an author or publisher. Both texts are available through the Internet Archive, at <https://archive.org/details/storyoffamoustun00hami/mode/2up> and <https://archive.org/details/colrosesstoryoff00rose>, respectively.

Before tunneling could begin two immediate problems had to be overcome; cutting a hole through the building foundation and situating the hole where the soil was sufficiently compacted to sustain a tunnel. After some trial and error, they realized success and tunneling could begin, but only with more workers.

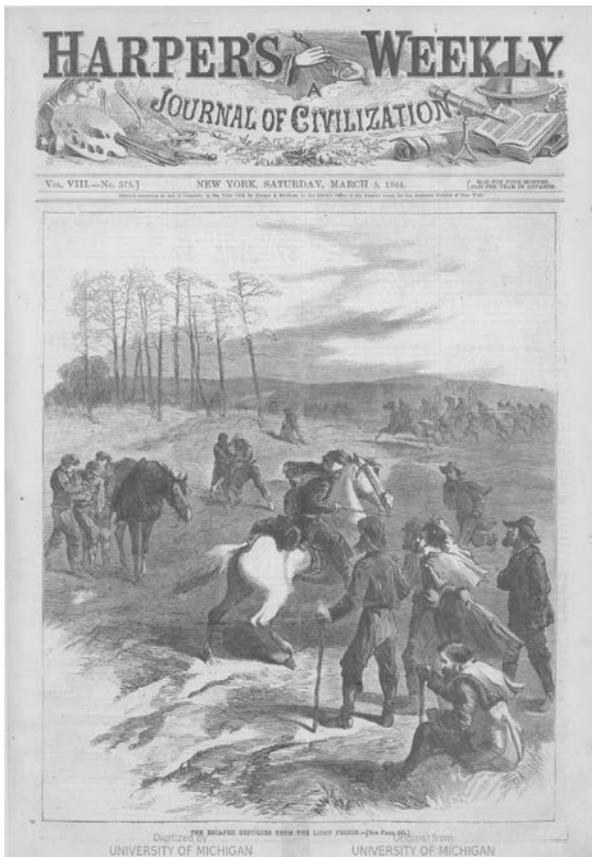
Col. Rose recruited fifteen prisoners, organized into three, four-man work crews (which included Rose and Hamilton), presumably with three alternates "in case of sickness or accident." Crew members were assigned a task: "one to dig, one to fan fresh air into the tunnel, one to draw the dirt back and deposit it [in the cellar], and one to stand guard near

the rebel sentinel and give the danger signal” if the need arose. The three work crews worked in rotating shifts, one night on, two nights off.

Optimism for quick success evaporated as the project devolved into the stuff of nightmares. According to Col. Rose:

The men were totally unused to the circumstances. The profound darkness of the place caused some of them to become bewildered when they attempted to move about, and as absolute silence had to be observed, they could not find their way to places where they were needed, or even find their way out of the cellar, and, what was worse, as the cellar was very large and no one must speak above a whisper, it was a matter of great difficulty to find them. I sometimes had to feel all over the cellar to gather up the men that were lost. The indescribably bad odor and impure atmosphere of the cellar made some of them sick. The uncomfortable positions in which they had to work amid crawling rats—the cellar was called rat — l — [rat hell] was unendurable to some.³

Facing these difficulties, the initial work crews were disbanded and Rose and Hamilton continued the work on their own. After “many nights” passed, work crews were reassembled utilizing former crew members and new recruits. They continued to work in rotating shifts but, to increase efficiency, each of the men was assigned a single, recurring task. The reorganized work crews finished the tunnel in 17 nights, at which time “the escape of the prisoners was easily made.” Col. Rose ended his letter to the editor by asserting that he was the “leader in the whole affair.”⁴



“The Escaped Refugees from the Libby Prison.” *Harper’s Weekly* 8, no. 375 (March 5, 1864): 145. Courtesy of HathiTrust <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015021733780&view=1up&seq=143>.

Of the 109 POWs who crawled out of the tunnel by a shed in a vacant lot across from the prison, 59 made it back to Union lines, 48 were recaptured, and 2 drowned. In an unfortunate turn of fate, Col. Rose was recaptured. According to a 1907 obituary, Rose “succeeded in getting out of Richmond, and followed the York River Railroad to the Chickahominy, which he forded, but was recaptured by a band of Confederates disguised in Federal uniforms, and returned to Libby prison. He was exchanged for a Confederate colonel on July 2, 1864, and afterward brevetted a brigadier general for his bravery.”⁵

The escape made headlines in the North and South. The escape and response even made the cover story of the March 5, 1864, edition of *Harper’s Weekly*. Initial accounts filled the newspapers. The names and regiments of the escapees who found their way back to Union lines and reports of those who were recaptured, appeared in print regularly. When the escape

became known, Union General Benjamin Butler sent out cavalry patrols, and a gunboat was dispatched up the James and Chickahominy Rivers, to aid the POWs as they could.⁶

Confederate authorities were understandably chagrined. After determining that the escape had not been facilitated by the prison guards, prison authorities investigated further, found and destroyed the tunnel. Cavalry detachments were sent out to “scour the surrounding country in pursuit of them [the escaped POWs].” One Richmond newspaper provided a rather detailed description of the tunnel and gave grudging recognition of the POWs efforts, writing that:

It is not known how long the operatives in this stupendous undertaking have been engaged; but, when the limited facilities which they possessed is taken into consideration, there can be no doubt that months have elapsed since the work was first begun. The whole thing was skillfully managed and bears the impress of master minds and indomitable perseverance. . . . Probably one more night might have emptied the prison of the whole number [confined] therein.”⁷



“Tilden, Charles W.,” [Civil War Era Soldiers’ Portraits, Identifier 11068] Digital Maine Repository, accessed January 20, 2021, https://digitalmaine.com/arc_civilwarportraits/421/.

Many of the escapees encountered allies as they found their way back to Union lines. Several personal narratives credited enslaved African Americans and Union sympathizers with guiding, concealing, and sustaining them. Both the Maine officers who managed to escape on the night of February 9 succeeded in reaching Union lines. Dispatches from Fortress Monroe indicated that George G. Davis made it back on or about February 16, 1864. After a leave of absence and recruiting service in Maine, Davis was “discharged on Surgeon’s certificate of disability.”⁸



“Davis, George,” [Civil War Era Soldiers’ Portraits, Identifier 1686b] Digital Maine Repository, accessed January 20, 2021, https://digitalmaine.com/arc_civilwarportraits/198/.

Charles W. Tilden completed his trek at Williamsburg, Virginia, on or about February 22, a date that was celebrated in the Tilden family for the rest of his long life. Tilden apparently did not actively participate in the tunneling activities, “but was one of about 200 who were bound by a solemn oath to keep secret the operations.” The 16th Maine monthly return for March 1864 indicated that Col. Tilden had returned to his regiment.⁹

1. “Fighting Them Over: What our veterans have to say about their old campaigns” [“Libby Tunnel”], *National Tribune*, Washington, D.C., May 14, 1885.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. This summary of the passage from the ground floor of the building to the cellar, and the tunnel excavation, including the quoted segments, is drawn from Col. Rose’s lengthy letter to the editor cited in footnote 1.

5. “Led in Libby Escape,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 1907.

6. “The Escape from Libby Prison.” *Harper’s Weekly* 8, no. 375 (March 5, 1864): 145, 151. Courtesy of HathiTrust

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015021733780&view=1up&seq=143>. “Benj. F. Butler, Major-General Commanding to Hon. E. M. Stanton, Secretary of War,” February 14, 1864, United States, War Dept., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* [Series 1, Vol. 33, Ch. 45] (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891), 560, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924077699811&view=1up&seq=578>.

7. "Local Matters," *Richmond Dispatch*, February 11, 1864.

8. "Telegraphic to the Whig & Courier" ["Fortress Monroe, 16th"], *Bangor Whig and Courier* (Bangor, Maine), February 17, 1864. "Maine, State Archive Collections, 1718-1957," data base with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:939X-T7D5-C?cc=1877829&wc=9Y8P-L2W%3A174548501%2C174548502%2C174749001> : 20 May 2014), Maine > Military Records-Civil War > 4th Infantry and single muster-out rolls page 1604-1614

> image 6 of 23; State Archives, Augusta.

9. "Telegraphic News" ["Escaped Union Prisoners"], *Evening Star* (Washington D.C.), February 23, 1864. "Escape from Libby Prison," *Boston Globe*, February 18, 1914. "Maine, State Archive Collections, 1718-1957," data base with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:939N-8SQ7-5?cc=1877829&wc=9Y8P-1XK%3A174548501%2C174548502%2C174973801> : 20 May 2014), Maine > Military Records-Civil War > 16th Infantry and monthly returns Mar 1864-Nov 1864 page 4592-4602 > image 3 of 25; State Archives, Augusta. A more detailed account of Col. Charles W. Tilden's Civil War service

appeared in an article written by Brian Swartz, "Enemy Prison could not contain Castine's 'Harry Houdini'," *Bangor Daily News*, February 18, 2014,

<https://bangordailynews.com/2014/02/18/news/enemy-prison-could-not-contain-castines-harry-houdini/>.

Note: The newspaper references for this article (except the *Bangor Daily News*, February 18, 2014) were accessed through Newspapers.com, an online subscription service.