



Otto Boetticher, an artist, was serving as a captain in the Sixty-Eighth New York Volunteer Regiment of Infantry when he was captured by Confederate soldiers in 1862.

He was sent to a military prison in Salisbury, North Carolina—then part of the Confederate States of America—where he created this drawing. It was reproduced, as a lithograph, after he was released from prison.

What does this drawing depict? Other Union prisoners, playing baseball at the prison camp. This was at a time, relatively early in the war, before the Salisbury prison camp became overcrowded (and characterized by atrocious conditions).

The Reynold House Museum of American Art also has a copy of this lithograph. Its [curators tell us the story](#) behind this important image of baseball during the U.S. Civil War:

In August 1861, painter and lithographer Otto Boetticher mustered in as a captain in the Sixty-Eighth New York Volunteer Regiment of Infantry. His military experience as an officer in the Prussian army before his immigration to America might explain the rank conferred on him in his new unit.

Just seven months later, he was captured by Confederate forces and sent to the military prison in Salisbury, North Carolina. One may assume that he passed time during his incarceration sketching and drawing, but only one image from this period was reproduced in lithographic form after his release: this unusual depiction of prisoners of war playing baseball. The inscription on the print notes that the artist drew the scene from nature, or as he observed it personally.

Historians have documented extensively the popularity of baseball during the Civil War. In fact, it was the movement of soldiers from New York and New England, where the sport had spread rapidly in the 1850s, into other parts of the country that was in part responsible for its rise in popularity. To exercise and combat boredom, soldiers played baseball in camp, on the edges of battlefields, and even in prison camps.

Baseball historian George B. Kirsch notes that the camp at Salisbury was known for the frequency of its games. In an 1862 diary entry, Salisbury prisoner Dr. Charles Carroll Gray recorded that the Fourth of July was “celebrated with music, reading of the Declaration of Independence, and sack and foot races in the afternoon, and also a baseball game.” Other prisoners at Salisbury detailed the rivalries between different teams in the camp.

Boetticher’s print shows a wide view of the prison yard. The game takes place in the center of the composition. The batter stands at right. In the middle, the pitcher is frozen in his wind-up, while a runner behind him attempts to steal second base.

Groups of officers and soldiers are arranged around them watching the game. Their expressions are grave but engaged.

Boetticher makes an effort to depict different physical types and distinctive details of hair, features, and clothing. Some are formally attired in their uniforms, while others sport a more casual style of dress. Around the game, other prisoners rest, converse, read newspapers, or play jacks; some perform labors such as feeding hogs, carrying benches and buckets, or tending fires.

Several high-ranking men in the right foreground stand apart and show little interest in the game; these may be an attempt at portraiture. The tents and buildings of the prison camp are visible in the background, as is the fence that runs the perimeter of the yard.

The main prison building, an abandoned cotton factory identifiable by a domed cupola, is visible in the distance at left. In the middle distance, troops march in formation. The flag of the Confederacy flies over the camp.

Despite the bleak realities of imprisonment, there is a sense of ease and contentment in the image, conveyed in part by pleasures of the game, the glowing sky and sunlight, and the well-ordered composition.

The birds flying free overhead perhaps hint at Boetticher’s hopes for liberation.

The artist did not have long to wait, as he was exchanged for a Confederate soldier on September 30, 1862. This practice of prisoner exchange early in the war helped to keep prison populations down in both Union and Confederate prisons and may help to explain the comfortable conditions the artist depicted in his lithograph.

Unfortunately, those conditions would not last throughout the war’s duration. By 1864, the population in the camp at Salisbury had swelled from 5,000 to 10,000. Overcrowding and reduced rations led to disease and death; the true number of prisoners who died at Salisbury may never be known.

Today, the site is a national cemetery, and northern states such as Maine and Pennsylvania have erected monuments on the grounds to commemorate their war dead.

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Credits:

Otto Boetticher drawing, turned into a lithograph by Sarony, Major & Knapp during 1863. Online via the Library of Congress. Public Domain.

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