

ANDREW MACISAAC

FROM BANGOR TO ELMIRA AND BACK AGAIN:
THE CIVIL WAR CAREER OF
DR. EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

Bangor's Dr. Eugene Francis Sanger holds a dubious claim to fame in the annals of Civil War history. Having joined the Union medical corps largely to advance his own career, the abrasive surgeon moved from post to post, frustrated by lack of discipline among field staff and by lack of recognition from his superiors. In 1864 Sanger became the chief medical officer at the Elmira Prison Camp in New York, a northern counterpart to the infamous Andersonville Prison. Was Sanger responsible for Elmira's unconscionable mortality rate? The historical record is ambiguous. Andrew MacIsaac grew up in Mexico, Maine, and graduated from Assumption College with a B.A. in history in 1991. He is a marketing manager for IBM and lives in Brookline, Massachusetts with his wife, Patricia. Mr. MacIsaac is pursuing a Master's degree at Harvard University and is researching the First Maine Heavy Artillery during the Civil War.

In 1876 the American Civil war had been over for eleven years, yet many of the battles of that war were still being fought. One such battle was over the treatment of prisoners of war by both sides. Beyond the horror and carnage of the battlefield, by all descriptions the suffering of prisoners at the hands of their captors was even more horrific. The dispute over treatment of prisoners during the war took on a national scope when Representatives James G. Blaine of Maine and Benjamin Hill of Georgia made it a key part of the debate over a proposed amnesty



The Elmira Prison Camp before completion of the barracks. The camp opened in May 1864 and by August held ten thousand Confederate prisoners. Later that year a frustrated Dr. Sanger informed the Army Surgeon-General that the hospital averaged 451 patients daily, with another 601 sick in their quarters. *Lanier, ed., PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR, vol. 7, PRISONS AND HOSPITALS (1911).*

bill for former Confederate officials. Each side accused the other of committing atrocities against the prisoners under their care. Although the Union suffered less from material want, Representative Hill argued, their treatment of Confederate prisoners was purposely atrocious. Hill went so far as to single out the prison camp in Elmira, New York, as the site of the greatest atrocities. At least one resident of Bangor, Maine had more than a passing interest in the discussion of the Elmira Prison Camp. His name was Dr. Eugene Francis Sanger, a respected surgeon who had

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

once been the Chief Medical Officer at the Elmira Prison Camp and in 1876 had one of the largest medical practices north of Boston.

Most students of the Civil War are familiar with the tragedy of the Andersonville Prison Camp, yet the story of the atrocities committed in Federal prison camps is relatively unknown. The Elmira Prison Camp has been described as the “Andersonville of the North,” and Eugene Sanger, the first Chief Medical Officer of the Elmira Prison Camp, has been linked to crimes against prisoners at least equal to those of Captain Henry Wirtz, the commander of Andersonville. As described by one historian, no prison pen in the North could come close to the twenty-four-percent mortality rate at Elmira, where 2,963 soldiers succumbed to sickness, exposure, and associated causes.¹

One of the associated causes that many former Confederates pointed to was the medical mistreatment of prisoners at Elmira. No member of the medical staff received greater condemnation than Eugene Sanger. Sanger was described by one former Confederate prisoner “as a club footed little gentleman, with an abnormal head and a snaky look in his eyes.” He was, as the description goes on to note: “simply a brute.”² In order to get a better idea of the controversial nature of Sanger’s career at Elmira, it is important to examine the rest of his military career, his abrasive personality, and the way the war affected him. The controversial nature of Sanger’s service as a doctor in the Union Army is not only evident during his term of service at Elmira, but throughout more than four years of service beginning in 1861. His rough personality, belief in his own personal superiority, and propensity to complain about superiors as well as subordinates did not endear Sanger to people in the Army. These traits, which would cause Sanger to receive a large amount of criticism for his treatment of prisoners at Elmira, also had a negative impact on his military career and forever connected him to one of the most tragic episodes of the Civil War: the inhumanity of Civil War prisons.

Born in October 1829 in Waterville, Maine, Eugene Francis Sanger was the son of a merchant and lumber operator. He



Eugene F. Sanger received his commission as Major and Regimental Surgeon of the 6th Maine on June 21, 1861. He was later described by a former Confederate prisoner as a "club footed little gentleman, with an abnormal head and a snaky look in his eyes." *Courtesy of the author and the Maine State Archives.*

graduated from Dartmouth College in 1849. By 1853 Sanger had completed his preparatory medical studies and began to practice medicine on his own. By the time the Civil War broke out in 1861, Sanger had made his Bangor medical practice into a profitable and successful endeavor. With the clouds of war darkening the nation's horizon, Sanger, always concerned with increasing his own prestige and reputation as a medical man, saw opportunity.

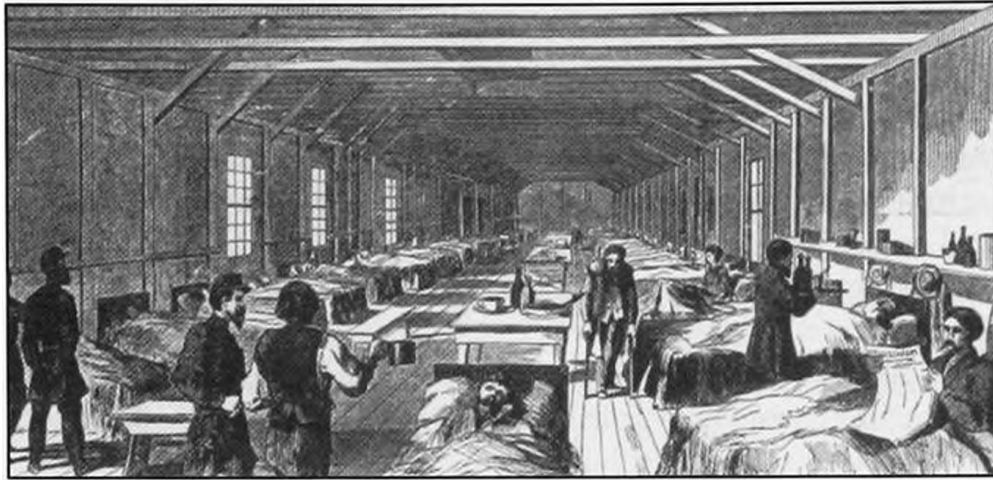
EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

The war brought Sanger the chance to treat actual combat wounds and other medical maladies, such as disease and sickness caused by exposure to army life. Like many civilian doctors, Sanger saw an opportunity to gain practical medical experience, increasing his prestige as a medical practitioner and benefiting him upon his return to private practice. By May 1861 Sanger had begun a concerted effort to gain an appointment as a Regimental Surgeon in one of the quickly forming Maine regiments. Letters of recommendation from his medical colleagues and other respected citizens from Bangor came to the office of Maine Governor Israel Washburn.

On June 21, 1861 Sanger received his commission as Major and Regimental Surgeon of the 6th Maine. With Sanger and John Baker as the assistant surgeon, the 6th was ready to leave Maine to help defend the Union. The working relationship between Sanger and Baker did not last long.

The army's chain of command did not seem to fit well with Sanger's abrasive personality. Sanger quickly became highly critical of events and individuals which he felt could damage his prestige or reputation. Instead of carrying his complaints directly up the chain of command to the field staff of the 6th Maine, Sanger wrote letters to Governor Washburn. Sanger was quick to demand that situations he deemed potentially damaging to his own credibility be promptly resolved.

By July 1861 Baker had run afoul of Sanger, who wrote to the Governor: "I insist upon some action in deference to my assistant Surgeon...if you should inform the President that you had revoked his commission he would be dismissed immediately." Sanger continued, alluding to "the disgrace of a drunken assistant." Sanger closed his letter by demanding an immediate reply from the Governor.³ Baker was not immediately dismissed as Sanger demanded. In August Sanger wrote "I have told Dr. Baker that his fate is in my hands...I think he now lives in healthy fear of committing further gross violations of good manners again." Having reached an impasse with Baker, Sanger turned his attention to the other officers within the 6th Maine. He wrote



Interior of a U. S. Army hospital. Wright, *comp.*, *OFFICIAL PORTFOLIO OF WAR AND THE NATION* (1906).

that Colonel Knowles, the commander, “devotes his entire energies and talent to the regiment but he lacks the system and needs to come up to the army standard of discipline.”⁴

Sanger’s tenuous relationship with other officers of the 6th Maine is evidence of his sensitivity to criticism. Major Frank Pierce had a habit of submitting petitions regarding complaints about the way the regiment was being run. In one, he targeted the Medical Department of the 6th Maine, which invoked a response by Sanger to the Governor: “I whipped him so thoroughly that it completely crushed him.”⁵ While criticizing his fellow officers, Sanger was quick to point out his own achievements as regimental surgeon. In one of his long letters to Governor Washburn, Sanger wrote, “my department must speak for itself...This morning’s report showed not a death in the regiment excepting the one shot and the one drowned...thus three months have passed without a death.”⁶ Sanger was not one to let his accomplishments speak for themselves.

An ambitious nature and a drive for recognition made it hard for Sanger to adjust to the sometimes slow progress of advancement within the Army. Apparently after only a short reprieve Baker reverted to his

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

previous drinking habits and again invoked Sanger's wrath. Sanger wrote to Governor Washburn that "my assistant was drunk for three or four successive days...so much so that he actually laid or fell down." After much prodding from Sanger, Baker was dismissed. According to Sanger, "the last I saw of Baker was Saturday, under a escort of Cavalry with drawn swords."⁷

As time went on Sanger became further frustrated with the subordinate role he was forced to play to other medical officers. In one letter he complained that he did not agree with the medical system of discharges, writing that he "had resisted discharging a man because I felt he would simply get a position in a cavalry regiment...but the pressure against me was great."⁸ Sanger also complained that "we have a new Brigade Surgeon who is in favor of discharging almost everyone who applies and the officers are trying to take advantage of it to get rid of every man that they don't like."⁹ Sanger's complaints showed his disdain for medical opinions that did not agree with his, even if they were the opinions of his superiors.

Sanger's continued frustration with his superiors is reflected in his letters to Governor Washburn complaining about the lack of discipline and considerable inefficiency among the field staff of the 6th Maine. Sanger also expressed frustration over his lack of advancement within the ranks of the Army Medical Corps. He wrote to Governor Washburn stating, "Shall I weary your patience for asking too much if I ask you to write the Secretary of War, that Maine after sending twelve regiments and soon to be sixteen regiments is entitled to at least three Brigade Surgeons and I ask that I be included among those appointed."¹⁰

In April of 1862 Sanger received an appointment as Brigade Surgeon, serving under General John Phelps in the Department of the Gulf. Sanger's first assignment was to improve the conditions of Union soldiers stationed on Ship Island off the coast of Mississippi. Upon arriving on the island, Sanger found many of the troops in worse medical condition than those he had left in Virginia. Typhoid, diphtheria, and other contagious diseases ravaged regiments from both sides, especially regiments

of men drawn from non-urban areas. Sanger wrote to Governor Washburn that “our lumbermen seem to suffer badly from various diseases.”¹¹ Improving the conditions on Ship Island and his subsequent appointment to the directorship of St. James Hospital in New Orleans, after the capture of that city, kept Sanger quite busy – apparently too busy to complain about much.

Sanger’s position at St. James Hospital brought him in direct contact with many southern civilians and supporters of the Confederacy. Sanger wrote that he saw little Union sentiment within the city, and he believed that every man who came in to take an oath to the Union was simply looking for government patronage. According to Sanger only when the Union was finally restored would they consider giving up their bitterness. Sanger did not seem to think that the spirit of the Confederacy would be easily broken, as he observed small Confederate stars and bars flying from private homes rather than the Union flag.¹²

It did not take long for Sanger to find himself in the disfavor of his superior officers, General Phelps and General Benjamin Butler. Sanger’s report to the U.S. Surgeon General’s office regarding the condition of men returning from an expedition upriver towards Vicksburg was graphic in detail and somewhat critical of the officers in charge of the expedition.¹³ The report recounted the horrible condition of the Union soldiers returning from the expedition.

The scenes on board the boats which brought the sick beggar description, the dead and living were locked in one embrace. The collapse was almost perfect, as in cholera – features sunken, skin cold and livid, voice husky, pulse small and quick, stomach irritable and mind torrid. The patients complained of burning in the stomach and exhaustion. They seemed wholly unconcerned whether they lived or died and continually tossed to and fro until death relieved them from their sufferings.¹⁴

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

The report must have raised some eyebrows in Washington. Sanger wrote that when the General heard about the report “he immediately deprived me of my command without hearing or trial.” Butler ordered Sanger to Ft. Philip, a fort with a small garrison of troops. For an ambitious man like Sanger, it was a hard burden to bear: “I shall really have nothing of consequence to do there...I came out with superior rank and now I don’t even occupy as good a position as I did when I left the state fourteen months ago. I have had a long hospital experience and for the United States a long military experience and I believe that I can use my experience to better advantage than looking after the two or three companies where their [sic] is neither fighting [n]or anything requiring more medical care than they have or can easily be procured.”¹⁵

The prospect of being sent to Ft. Philip did not sit well with Sanger. He asked Governor Washburn to intercede on his behalf and to possibly enlist the help of Vice President Hannibal Hamlin. From September 1862 to January 1863, Sanger served in this garrison post, slowly passing the time and considering his fate. Finally, in January 1863, with a large influx of new troops into New Orleans, Sanger was ordered to report as the Medical Director for the Defenses of New Orleans. Sanger’s primary duty was to care for the large number of troops who were suffering from their long confinement aboard transport ships and to attend to their sanitary and medical conditions. Sanger improved the overall condition of the troops, and for his efforts he received a special commendation from the U.S. Surgeon General.¹⁶ By 1863 Sanger began to receive some of the recognition he so desired. He was promoted to Medical Director of the Second Division of the 19th Army Corps, and later appointed to the same position for the Third Division. Even with these promotions, however, Sanger expressed frustration over the course of the war. Reflecting upon how his own views of the war had changed, Sanger wrote “I am getting enough of it. It had charm for a while and is a fine school for experience, but after the excitement and novelty wears out it is not so pleasant to sleep on the ground and be deprived of the company of friends and relatives.”¹⁷

During the summer of 1863 Sanger visited his home in Maine for eleven days. The Northern laissez-faire attitude he witnessed no doubt contributed to his own disillusionment with the war. His experience at home convinced him “that the North was losing interest in the war...and had become so dead to the hardships and suffering of the poor soldiers that the news of another battle was just as necessary to the relish of the morning paper as seduction and murder were three or four years ago.”¹⁸

Sanger also expressed dissatisfaction with one of the biggest changes the war had brought – namely the position of blacks within society. Sanger had seen the arrival of black troops to Louisiana in the summer of 1863, and during some of the expeditions up river he undoubtedly came across recently liberated slaves. Sanger did not communicate his views on the institution of slavery but he commented that “I am convinced that the Army and freedom will eventually kill out the Nigger. It is surprising to see how they die when not cared for. Their indolence, improvidence and exposure to cold will swing the whole of them.” As the war dragged on, the northern and southern soldiers became better acquainted with each other, and Sanger came to the realization that there were pretty good fellows, North and South, and that they were only separated by the “feud and the Nigger.”¹⁹ Sanger’s views on Emancipation or the enlisting of black troops were common among northerners; Sanger’s exposure to the blacks before the war had been limited at best.

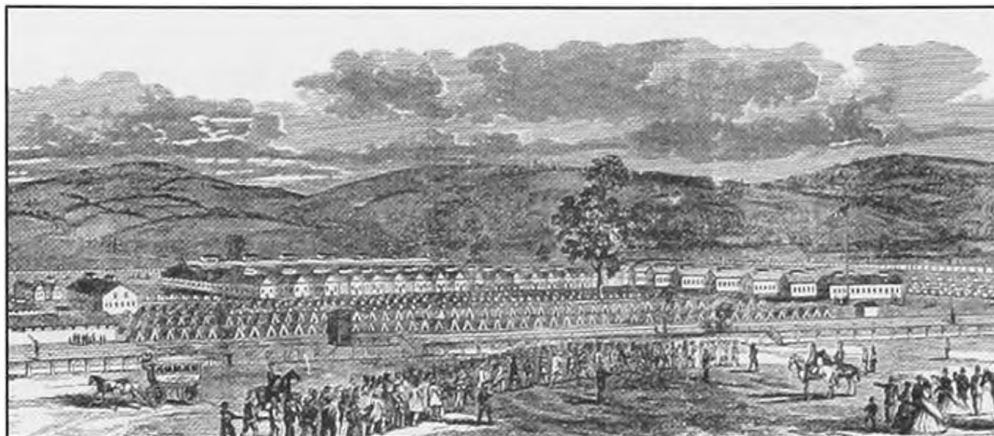
As the war dragged on Sanger found himself tramping through the bayous of Louisiana with the 19th Army Corps, of which he became medical director in January 1864. His desire to leave the disease-ridden swamps and the sufferings it caused the men was evident in his many requests to be appointed to the U.S. Army General Hospital that was being established in Augusta, Maine.²⁰ Sanger became increasingly frustrated with his Army medical career.

In the Spring of 1864, the 19th Army Corps was part of the Union Army’s ill-fated Red River Campaign. During this cam-

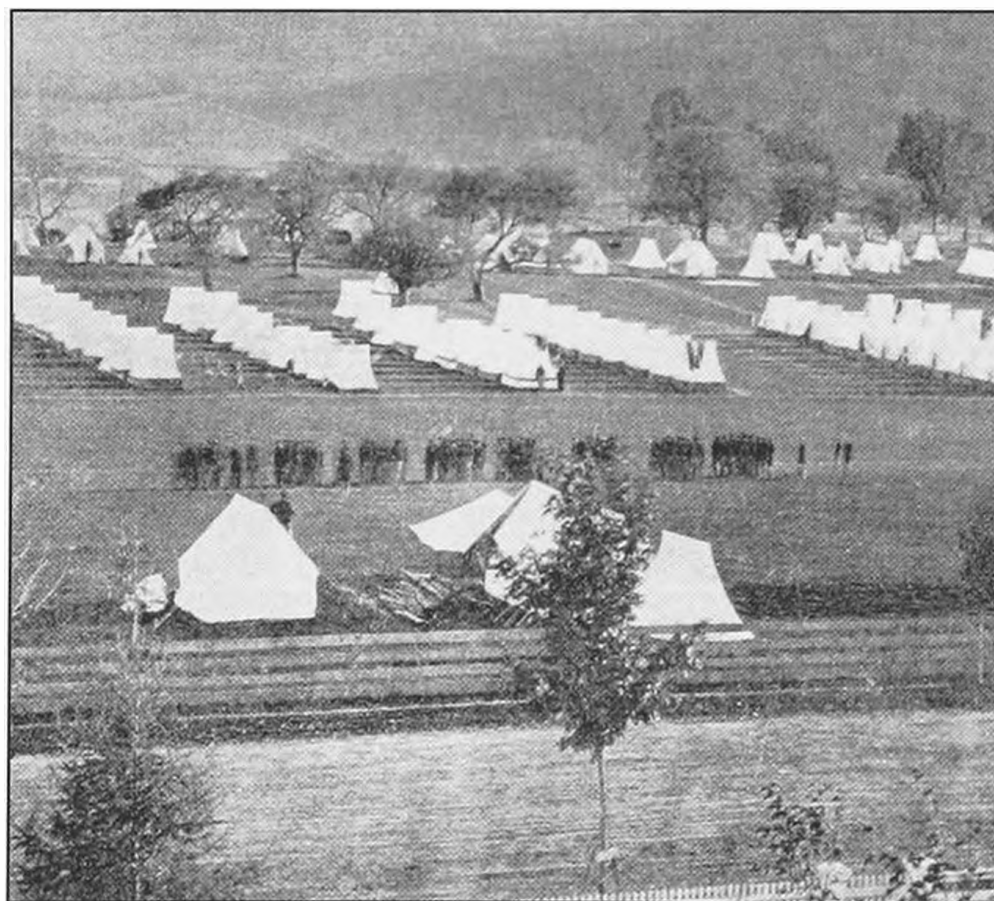
EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

paign Sanger exhibited questionable behavior as a medical officer in the face of Union military setbacks. With the rout of the Calvary and the 13th Corps at the battle of Sabine Cross Roads on April 8th, Sanger was “obliged to abandon the hospital,” leaving two hundred and ten wounded men in the hands of the enemy.²¹ A few days later, after the battle of Pleasant Hill, Sanger tended to the wounded all through the night. On the morning of the 10th, he observed a “little squad of Cavalry drawn up in front of my hospital.” He discovered that the army had retired and the Cavalry was the rear guard. When the squad informed Sanger that they had seen the enemy approaching in the distance, Sanger gave his assistant surgeons some last minute instructions and a meager amount of medical supplies, and flew off in search of the main body of the army.²² In a matter of days Sanger had overseen the abandonment of four hundred and ninety nine wounded Union soldiers and directly contributed to the capture of thirteen Union medical officers. A few days after these incidents Sanger wrote that under a flag of truce he was able to visit the wounded at the abandoned hospital, carrying with him two loads of medical supplies. Sanger explained that “I found them very kindly treated, but suffering from the want of medicines, bedding, and hospital stores, all of which I was able to supply.”²³

Eugene Sanger’s questionable actions in the field during the Red River campaign did not seem to affect his stature within the ranks of the Union Army’s Medical Corps. His surgical skill and successful efforts in improving sanitary conditions made him a desirable candidate for many positions within the medical branch of the service. However he was not offered the post he most desired – Chief Medical Officer of the U.S. Army General Hospital in Augusta. Quite possibly the governor and adjutant general had already been pestered enough and did not want Sanger in their own back yard. In July 1864 Sanger was ordered to report as Chief Medical Officer of the newly established camp for Confederate prisoners of war in Elmira, New York. At Elmira Sanger forever connected himself to the overall horror of the American Civil War.



A late afternoon view of the Elmira guards' camp (below). After a questionable career in the ill-fated Red River Campaign, Sanger was transferred to Elmira. Here he would be forever connected to the grim heritage of Civil War prison camps. *Lanier, ed., PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR, vol. 7, PRISONS AND HOSPITALS (1911).*



Most historians would agree that a more unsanitary spot for a prison camp could not have been chosen than Elmira. The Elmira Camp was set up in a thirty-acre portion of a former military staging area and camp, along the banks of the Chemung River. In the midst of the camp was a one-acre lagoon of polluted and stagnant water resulting from the overflow of the river. The pool, called 'Fosters Pond,' had no natural outflow and the saturation of the ground due to its proximity to the river kept the pond from drying up. The pond had been used as a latrine and general garbage dump and, prior to establishing the prison camp, Surgeon Charles T. Alexander, the acting Medical Inspector of the camp prior to Sanger's arrival, had already recognized it as a possible source of disease. In mid-July Alexander recommended that steps be taken to rid the camp of the festering pool.²⁴ When Sanger arrived at Elmira on August 8, the prison population stood around 5,000, and the effects of the summer heat had only intensified the putrid smell of "Fosters Pond." With the progress of the war going against the Confederates, Sanger was forced to make plans to double the camp population capacity.

From his first day, Sanger fought a losing battle against the effects of disease, poor diet, and exposure. His battle against such enemies was greatly hampered by the bureaucratic red tape of the Union's Prison Administration Bureau and by his own inability to embrace the role of subordinate to people he deemed inferior.

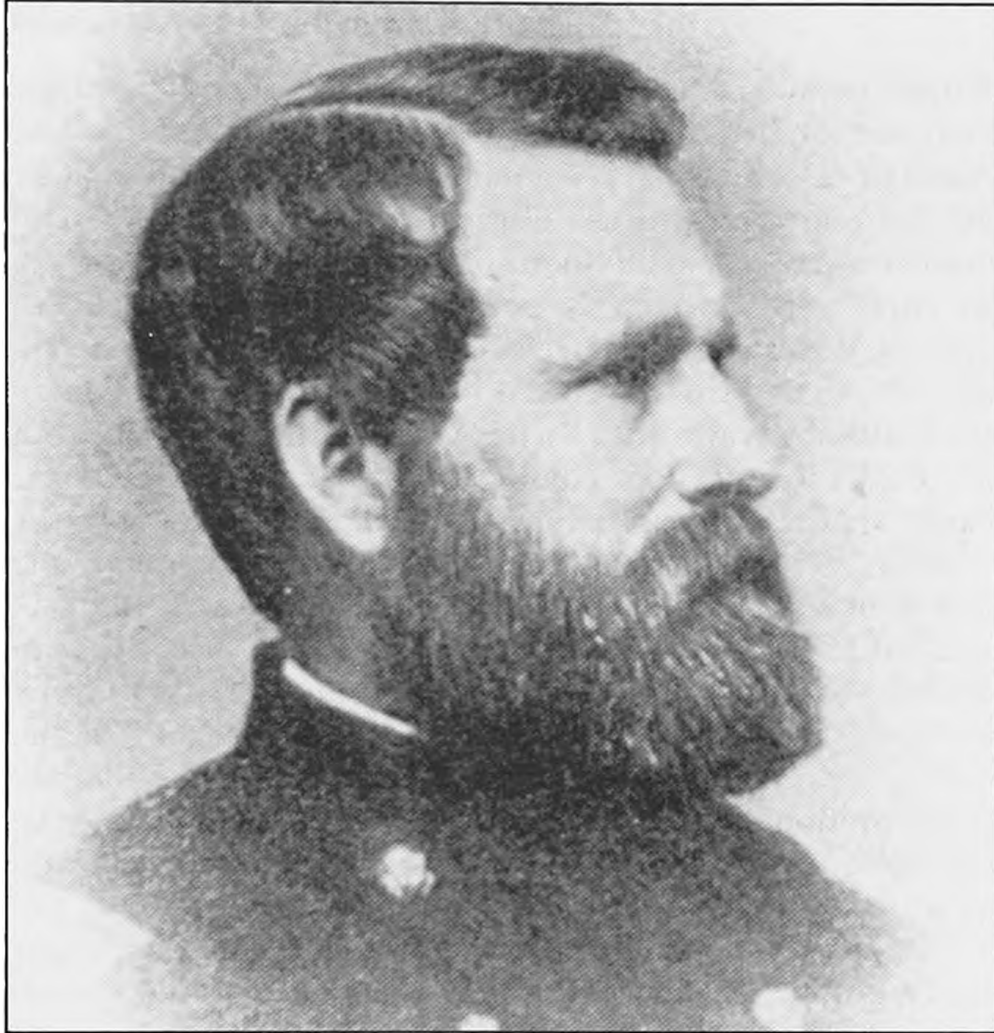
Shortly after his arrival, Sanger was faced with an outbreak of scurvy among the prisoners. In a report dated August 26, 1864, Sanger reported that of the 9,300 prisoners he examined, he had found 793 cases of scurvy. Sanger attributed the epidemic to a lack of sufficient vegetables. He reported that he found no sanitary neglect, except the pond which could not be remedied without authority from Washington. Sanger recommended that the problem be rectified and that the prisoners be given an extra ration of vegetables per week.²⁵

Sanger continued to report on the problems caused by the stagnant pool yet his reports fell on deaf ears. His reports, nine

of them between August 13 and October 17, stated that if the pond was drained and the decaying matter removed, a major source of disease would be eliminated.²⁶ Sanger wrote that he saw “no remedy which will effectively remove the odors and improve the sanitary conditions of the prisoners than passing a current of water through the pond to carry away all the effects, material, and causes of disagreeable odors.”²⁷ Sanger planned to have a ditch dug from the pond to the banks of the Chemung River, allowing gravity to drain the pond. Permission to carry out the project was not forthcoming, and by the end of October Sanger’s frustration was running high. The death rate among the prisoners increased dramatically. Again Sanger ran into trouble with his new superior officer Colonel Benjamin Tracy, who had replaced Lt. Col. Seth Eastman. In a report to U.S. Surgeon General J.K. Barnes, Sanger detailed the rising mortality rate, the unsanitary conditions, and the lack of influence he felt the medical department had in making medical decisions under the administration of Col. Tracy. Sanger warned that “I cannot be held responsible for large medical department...without power, authority or influence.”²⁸

There is no doubt the Elmira was a despicable, and in many cases a deadly experience for the Confederate prisoners. One prisoner summed up his experience at Elmira by writing, “If there ever was a hell on earth Elmira prison was that hell.”²⁹ Another prisoner said “Elmira was nearer Hades than I thought any place could be made by human cruelty.”³⁰ Sanger’s own reports tell of a nine-percent death rate among the entire prison population between August and the end of October and warned of the possibility of the death rate rising. Sanger’s dire warning became reality in only a few short months.³¹

The experience of the Elmira prisoners left many bitter towards those they held most responsible for the atrocious conditions. Sanger’s efforts to improve the conditions at the prison went mostly unnoticed by the prisoners, because, as historian Michael Horigan points out: “The prisoners were in no position to know that Sanger was constantly complaining to his superiors about the quality of life



In September 1864 the administration of Elmira fell to Col. Benjamin F. Tracy of New York, upon whom Sanger affixed the blame for rising mortality rates and unsanitary conditions. Offended by his subordinate role in the camp, Sanger wrote: "I cannot be held responsible for large medical department ... without power, authority or influence." *Lanier, ed., PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR, vol. 7, PRISONS AND HOSPITALS (1911).*

at the camp."³² What the prisoners were in a position to see was the quality and type of medical care given them by the medical staff. No other medical officer at Elmira received more direct condemnation for his treatment of prisoners than Eugene Sanger.

Sanger's role at Elmira has caused a considerable historical debate. Prisoner-of-war A.M. Keiley, who described Sanger as a

club footed little brute, with a snaky look in his eyes, wrote that if Sanger “had not avoided a court martial by resigning his position, it is likely that even a military commission would have found it impossible to screen his brutality to the sick.”³³

Clay W. Holmes, in his account of the Elmira Camp published in 1912, singled out Eugene Sanger for criticism: “There was something wrong with Sanger.” Holmes’s research brought him in touch with former Elmira prisoners and staff who gave evidence of Sanger’s own sense of superiority and his personal excesses. Holmes stated that Sanger’s indulgence in the “medicine,” the alcohol which the government furnished for sick prisoners, was a primary cause for many of the terrible conditions at Elmira.³⁴

The most damning charge against Sanger is found in James I. Robertson’s article, “The Scourge of Elmira.” Robertson notes that James Huffman, a member 10th Virginia Regiment, “insisted to his death that he had heard Sanger boast: ‘I have killed more Rebs than any soldiers at the front.’”³⁵ In his manuscript published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1939, however, Huffman wrote that “one doctor there said he killed more Rebs than any soldier at the front.” There is no mention of Sanger being that doctor.³⁶ Robertson also believed that Sanger’s reason for “mistreating and neglecting ill Confederates” was one of “retaliation for the sufferings of Federal soldiers in Southern prisons.”³⁷ Holmes believed it was due to the fact that Sanger was offended by his subordination to Col. Tracy, a man whom Sanger considered inferior to himself. Holmes wrote that Sanger worked at a cross purpose with his commanding officer, in order to ruin Col. Tracy’s attempts to improve the conditions of the camp.³⁸ James Mundy, in his regimental history of the 6th Maine, makes the preliminary evaluation that had the North not won the Civil War, Sanger might have been found guilty of committing atrocities against prisoners of war.³⁹

Is this opinion of Eugene Sanger justified? Michael Horigan does not seem to think so. He believes that the attempts by Sanger to improve conditions of the prison camp, as reported in the official records, do not match up with

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

descriptions of Sanger as a brutish fiend. Horigan asks: "Are these the actions of a man who has no interest in the well being of the prisoners?"⁴⁰

There are, however, some questionable, if not controversial, aspects that should be examined. One aspect that Horigan notes is the clash of personalities between Sanger and Col. Tracy, who became the Military Commander of the camp on September 20, 1864. By November 1st, Sanger was complaining about the lack of influence he had with his new commander. Sanger complained that when sick prisoners were sent from Elmira, he was not advised or consulted. He further complained that camp inspectors were taking liberties in making medical decisions. Instead of strictly concerning himself with improving the condition of the prisoners, Sanger complained bitterly about the lack of influence the medical staff held. Col. Tracy, on his part, questioned "the competency and efficiency" of the medical staff at Elmira.⁴¹ He called for a "rigid investigation" into the causes of the high mortality rate and wrote that such an investigation, "conducted by competent men," would do much to uncover the "cause and remedy the evil."⁴²

Colonel William Hoffman, the Commissary-General of Prisoners and Tracy's superior, was enraged by the condition of prisoners transferred from Elmira. He wrote to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton that both the commanding officer and the medical officers at Elmira "neglected the ordinary promptings of humanity in the performance of their duties toward sick men, thus showing themselves to be wholly unfit for the positions they occupy." He also recommended that they be ordered to some other service.⁴³ No action was taken against either Sanger or Tracy. As this clash of personalities intensified, the prisoners' condition deteriorated. Fosters Pond remained a source pestilence, scurvy ran rampant, and by early December a smallpox outbreak was evident.

Dr. Sanger blamed the high death rate on the incapacitated condition of many prisoners upon their arrival at Elmira, having been transferred from other overcrowded prison camps like Point Lookout. Some prisoners were in such poor physical

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

condition that they did not survive the trip to Elmira. Sanger also noted that many of the incoming prisoners were from home guard or reserve units and were not used to the harsh conditions of life in the field. According to Sanger, these men were more susceptible to sickness and disease.

While these factors no doubt played a significant role in the high mortality rate at Elmira, they do not explain why Sanger received so much personal condemnation. The most controversial evidence of his role in the high mortality rate, something that Col. Tracy seemed to be hinting at, comes directly from Sanger's own pen. On two separate occasions he exhibited his frustration with his position at Elmira and made particular reference to the high mortality rate at Elmira. Sanger wrote to Maine Adjutant General Hodsdon to request an appointment to the U.S. General Hospital in Augusta, and he bragged about his position at Elmira:

I now have charge of 10,000 Rebels, a very worthy occupation for a patriot, peculiarly adapted to elevate oneself in his own estimation, but I think I have done my duty having relieved 386 of them of all earthly sorrow in one month – Sickness prevails to a fearful extent. Sent off 1200 last week and prescribe for over 100 daily now – Have interred 29 in a day.⁴⁴

While there is no direct evidence that Sanger killed 386 prisoners, his choice of words seem to indicate that he was fairly unconcerned with the high mortality rate. It appears that Sanger somehow believed that he was fulfilling the duties of his position by relegating Confederate prisoners to a desperate, if not inhumane, condition. In another letter he stated, "I have served in every medical capacity and butchered by the carload and find myself no nearer heaven or so completely overwhelmed with honors that I could not take a quiet little place on this terrestrial sphere and pass a very comfortable and cozy winter."⁴⁵ This letter is evidence that Sanger's primary concern while at Elmira was not improving the condition of the prisoners, but rather the furthering of his own military career. While Horigan argues that

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

Sanger's nine official reports on the conditions of Elmira are evidence of his efforts to improve prison conditions, the nature of these two letters show that the only condition Sanger was truly interested in was his own.

In a letter dated September 16, 1864, Sanger expressed his desire to leave Elmira because of what he describes as the "obnoxious" atmosphere that left him almost unfit to perform his duties. Sanger stated that he was predisposed to asthma, and since arriving at Elmira, his asthma had returned with "unusual violence." He further stated if kept at Elmira much longer he would have to give up his position. If Sanger was suffering from conditions at Elmira then no doubt the prisoners suffered as well. Sanger's letters exhibit only a concern with his own health, failing to note how the conditions effected the prisoners.⁴⁶

Although Sanger himself had complained about conditions at Elmira he remained sensitive to any other criticism of the camp. When one young Confederate prisoner wrote a letter complaining about conditions at the camp Sanger countered that he had given the young rebel every advantage. The soldier described "the black hole of Calcutta paradise, compared to Elmira." Sanger wrote "I intercepted the letter and read it to him" and, according to Sanger, the young rebel had to hang his head in shame because he knew his description of Elmira was not true.⁴⁷

When Col. Tracy arrived it became apparent that Sanger would not enjoy the power and influence he once had held under Lt. Col. Eastman. Sanger became increasingly concerned with getting away from what he considered an oppressive situation. His superior attitude about his own abilities predisposed him against Col. Tracy's military approach to running the camp, which had Sanger reporting to a junior military officer. Sanger complained that "so far as garrison duties are concerned, I do not object to reporting to a junior military officer, but in the administrative duties of a large hospital department the surgeon in charge must have direct communications with the commander, who is the only authorized executive officer."⁴⁸

Sanger went on to list the delays he encountered in having

his requests for provisions and improvements in sanitary conditions acted upon. In a follow-up inspection ordered by the Surgeon General, Dr. William J. Solan reported that Sanger's complaints "were not exaggerated"; they were the result of the bureaucracy of the prison administration system, rather than a deliberate attempt to discredit the medical department.⁴⁹

Whatever the case, Sanger was not only frustrated over his lack of influence in the medical affairs of the camp under the command of Col. Tracy, but was also frustrated over the lack of progress in his own military career. He complained to the Maine Adjutant General that "in the army a doctor is a doctor, he gets no higher. He sees corporals and sergeants running up to Brigadier Generals while the Surgeon continues along in the same old rank year after year without additional emoluments or rewards." To Sanger the attraction of a military medical career was losing its luster.⁵⁰

Sanger's clash with Col. Tracy and his inability to take a secondary role in running the medical operations of the camp undoubtedly contributed to his hasty exodus from Elmira in late December 1864. With the prospects of a harsh winter, the evidence of an impending smallpox outbreak, and the myriad of unresolved unsanitary conditions, including Fosters Pond, Sanger left the Elmira Camp before its deadliest period. His less than compassionate attitude towards the condition of prisoners and his overriding concern about his own career, however, made him an integral part of the tragic legacy of the Elmira Camp.

Contrary to some historical accounts, Sanger was not dismissed from the medical service after he left Elmira.⁵¹ In fact, he had requested a transfer from Elmira as early as September. Sanger's first appointment after Elmira was as Medical Director of the District of Michigan, headquartered in Detroit. He spent a much more comfortable winter in Detroit than did his former charges at Elmira, who were ravaged by smallpox and a very harsh winter. In April 1865 Sanger was assigned to the District of Tennessee as Medical Inspector and Director. By June, with the war over, Sanger was ready to end his Army career. "The war is about played out and

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

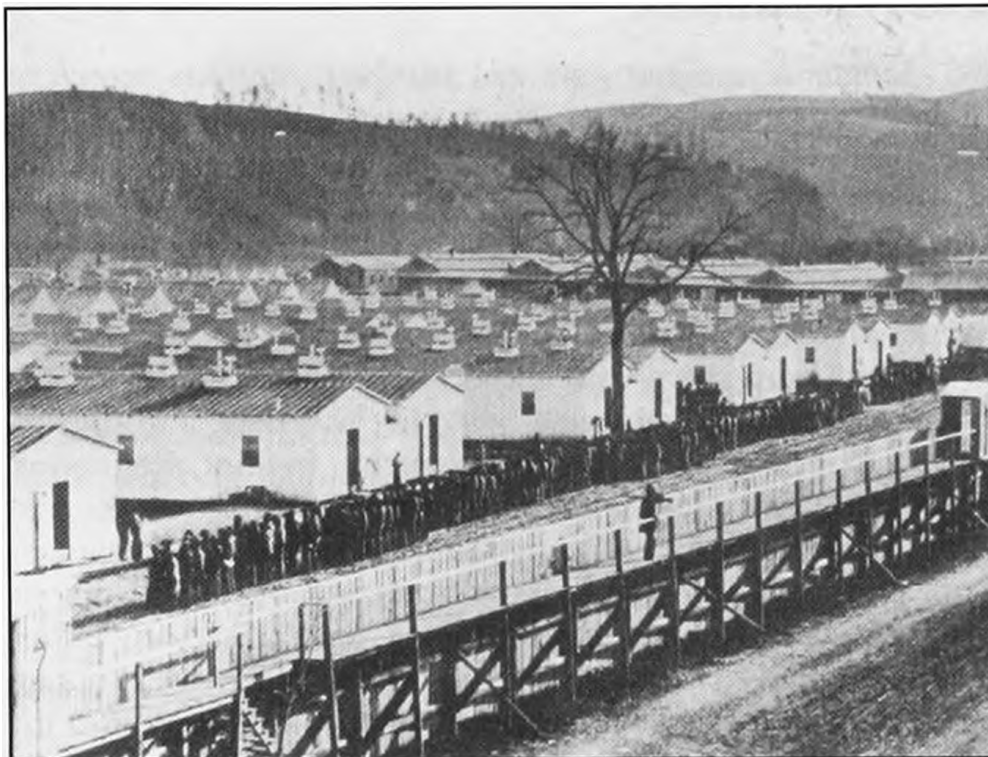
I want to see home at the earliest moment," wrote Sanger in letter to General Hodsdon.⁵² On August 9, 1865, Sanger received the brevet rank of Lt. Colonel and was mustered out of service ten days later, ending more than four years of service as a U.S. Army Surgeon. While his active medical career with the Army was over, he would find that he could not be separated from the controversy surrounding the Elmira prison camp.

Sanger returned to Bangor and resumed his medical practice. He was named Surgeon General for the State of Maine during the administration of Governor Joshua Chamberlain and became the regimental Surgeon for the Second Regiment of the Maine State Militia. His skills at bone excision, developed during the war, brought him wide recognition.⁵³ He was elected president of the Maine Medical Association where he lectured extensively on medical malpractice suits, an area where Sanger had experience.

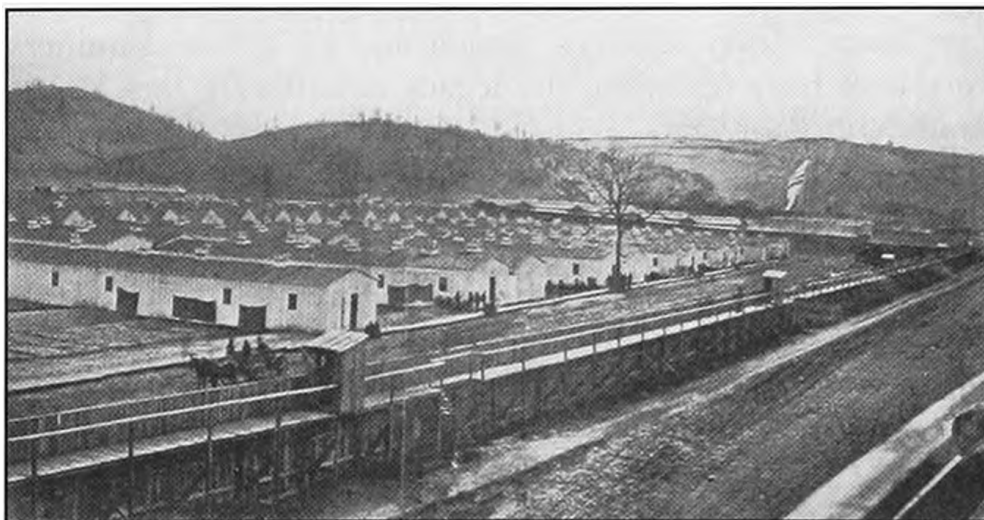
In at least two cases Sanger was motivated enough to have his elaborate defense against two such suits published in pamphlet form to protect his credibility. Sanger's arrogance and his belief in his own intellectual superiority is evidence in one such defense:

It takes years of study and experience to make a good and efficient surgeon and the surgeon can not afford to be hampered with a trial before a non professional jury, every time he undertakes a doubtful operation. He can not afford to be pounced upon and despoiled of his hard earned reputation and competence by a class of pettifoggers who can use their court privileges to extort money from the surgeon.⁵⁴

In another defense against a malpractice suit, Sanger wrote that the common rum-seller had more protection under the law than the medical doctor. Sanger argued that the law allowed patients to "descend upon his physician when he least expects it and least deserves it, in his errands of mercy and his best endeavors to relieve human suffering and correct natural or accidental deformities."⁵⁵



Sanger contrived a hasty exodus from Elmira in late December 1864, just before the onset of the camp's deadliest months. *Upper photo courtesy of the Chemung County Historical Society, Elmira, New York; lower photo: Lanier, ed., PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR, vol. 7, PRISONS AND HOSPITALS (1911).*



EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

Sanger also faced personal troubles after his return to Bangor. The most pressing was his connection with the tragedy of the Elmira Prison Camp. Sanger was identified with the horror of Elmira – vilified in fact – in A.M. Keiley’s recollection of his experience as a prisoner of war. Keiley’s account, published in 1866, was entitled *In Vinculis*. In it, he singled out Sanger for condemnation. According to Keiley, “the better class of officers were loud and indignant in their reproaches of Sanger’s systematic inhumanity to the prisoners, and they affirmed that he avowed his determination to stint these poor, helpless creatures in retaliation for alleged neglect on the part of our own authorities.”⁵⁶ Although Keiley’s charges against Sanger were shocking, after four years of brutal war the general public paid little heed to his denunciation. If Sanger had any public response to Keiley’s criticism it is unknown. The issue, although not forgotten, did not spark much debate immediately after the war.

Being one of the most respected doctors in Bangor, Sanger was appointed to a three-member pension examination board, which served Bangor and the surrounding area. Due to the number of men who served in such battle-tested regiments as the 2nd Maine, the 6th Maine, and the First Maine Heavy Artillery, Sanger and his fellow examiners were kept busy reviewing the legacy of suffering that Maine families bore for years.

As the years passed and the details of the treatment of prisoners of war on both sides became more widely known, the subject of the Civil War prison camps became more controversial. In 1876, when the Democratic party gained control of Congress for the first time since the war, southern Democrats sponsored an Amnesty Bill for former Confederate officials. Maine Republican James G. Blaine opened an attack on the proposed bill by blaming former Confederate officials like Jefferson Davis for atrocities committed against Union prisoners of war. The response from the southern delegation in Congress was fast and furious, led by Representative Benjamin H. Hill of Georgia. Hill argued that the overall mortality rate in Federal

prisons was higher than those in Confederate prison camps, an accusation that was confirmed in the records of the U.S. Surgeon General's office. According to Hill, more than twelve percent of the Confederates in Federal hands died, while less than nine percent of the Federals in Confederate hands died.⁵⁷ While the South was condemned for the horrors of Andersonville, little was said about northern prisons like Elmira.

According to James Robertson, the official mortality rate at Elmira was 24 percent – which “topped even that of the more publicized compound at Camp Sumter, Georgia.”⁵⁸ From all accounts Elmira or “Helmira,” as many former prisoners called it, suffered a combination of disease, lack of food, lack of material goods, harsh weather, and ineffectual medical care bordering on medical mistreatment. Newspapers across the country carried details about the controversy regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. To Sanger, it must have appeared that his honor as a military man and his reputation as a medical doctor were being tarnished. a man of Sanger's character, who had so many times before emphatically defended himself against criticism, could not let the national debate pass without some sort of public reply.

In a long letter written to the editors of several eastern newspapers, including the *New York World* and the *Daily Press* in Portland, Maine, Sanger described the issue of prisoner mistreatment as nothing more than “fancied Northern wrongs.” Sanger's response was well orchestrated to defend himself. His account of the Elmira prisoners was clouded by the passage of time. In describing the physical layout of the camp, for example, he wrote that the problem of the stagnant pond was corrected before it could affect the health of the prisoners – in fact, it was not resolved until after Sanger had left Elmira.⁵⁹ Sanger's letter was filled with rebuttals to “fancied wrongs” committed by northern prison officials. He noted that most of the problems were the product of the “red tape”; the process of setting up and running a medical department capable of handling 10,000 prisoners was more of a bureaucratic effort than a humanitarian one.

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

Sanger also tried to deflect any personal criticism through compassionate posturing. He had allowed his own children to walk among the sick in the hospital and hand out “grapes and fruit,” which brought tears to the eyes of Confederate prisoners when they remembered their loved ones at home. Even if the prisoners had not been weakened when they arrived, it would have “required the strictest care and attention to cleanliness, drainage, ventilation and diet, enforced with the authority of Army discipline” to have prevented the ravages of disease from taking their toll.

Sanger concluded that the Confederate government was the main culprit: “If the rebel authorities had given of their might in subsistence and kindness they would feel less sensitive on the floor of Congress.”⁶⁰ Had South not transgressed in their treatment of northern prisoners, then the retaliation would not have been necessary; the “fancied wrongs” committed against Southern prisoners in camps like Elmira was in response to the treatment of northern prisoners in southern camps. Still, as another medical officer who served at Elmira wrote in 1876, “the sick in hospitals were curtailed in every respect (fresh vegetables and other anti-scorbutics were dropped from the list), the food scant, crude and unfit: medicine so badly dispensed that it was a farce for the medical man to prescribe.” At least to this unidentified Union medical officer, the wrongs against southern prisoners at Elmira were not fancied.⁶¹

Although the national debate subsided with defeat of the amnesty bill, the effect of the controversy took some toll on Sanger. He remained defensive with regard to his involvement. When one former Confederate prisoner, J.B. Hutchinson, called upon Sanger in his Bangor home, he reported that he found the doctor pleasant and kind. Sanger allowed the visitor to copy from his journal the record relating to the mortality rate at Elmira. Hutchinson’s review of Sanger’s records shows that of the 12,121 prisoners who came to Elmira between July 1864 and May 1865, 2,933 died, giving Elmira a mortality rate of just over 24 percent.⁶² In defense of Sanger, it must be stated that he had left Elmira before it entered

the deadliest phase of its existence in February and March 1865, but the poor condition of the prisoners at the time of Sanger's departure no doubt contributed to the high mortality of early 1865.

Sanger's meticulous record-keeping, almost twenty years after the war, is evidence that he could not come to peace with the suffering he witnessed at Elmira. The psychological pressure may have contributed to the dissolution of his thirty-year marriage due to "cruel and unusual treatment" by his wife Emily. Sanger and Emily Sanger were divorced in December 1887. According to Sanger's deposition, he had always been a "faithful, chaste and affectionate husband." Emily had taken to verbally abusing him, calling him "a liar, a thief, a miserable creature, a contemptible villain and a fool, not to be trusted." The court found in Sanger's favor, granting the divorce and attaching Emily Sanger's property for the amount of twenty-five dollars.⁶³ Dr. Sanger was able to find some refuge from his personal troubles by continuing to practice medicine and by lavishly entertaining his friends at his Bangor home.⁶⁴ Sanger also found fraternity with other aging veterans in the ranks of the Grand Army of the Republic and the Military Order of the Loyal Legion. In 1890, he married Mary R. Treat. What the second Mrs. Sanger knew about her husband's former military career, especially his connection to the Elmira prison camp is uncertain. Curiously in her request for a military pension years after Eugene's death, Mary Treat's only reference to Sanger's military career was his service with the 6th Maine.⁶⁵

Dr. Eugene Francis Sanger died from heart disease on Saturday July 24, 1897 at his home in Bangor. The *Whig and Courier* of Bangor recapped Sanger's career with a substantial obituary, and the paper, which barely mentioned his term of service at Elmira, described Sanger as a man of "high ability."⁶⁶ Sanger was buried on July 27th at the Mt. Hope Cemetery in Bangor with "a beautiful national silk flag" placed at the head of the casket and members of the G.A.R. Hannibal Hamlin Post serving as pallbearers. Sanger was laid to rest with the honor he worked so hard to achieve.⁶⁷



Lanier, ed., PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR, vol. 7, PRISONS AND HOSPITALS (1911).

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

The Civil War forever changed the life of Dr. Eugene Sanger. A respected medical doctor before the war, he saw a chance to increase his prestige by volunteering to serve the Union cause. Sanger had the medical skills necessary to be a successful Army Surgeon – skills that earned him commendations for his efforts in improving the overall medical conditions of many Union soldiers. However, his abrasive nature, his arrogance, and his sensitivity to criticism did not mix well with the demands of Army service. This made him defensive and more concerned with his own professional well-being and reputation than with the conditions of his medical charges, especially Confederate prisoners of war.

Dr. Sanger had the medical skills necessary to improve the inhumane camp conditions. His greatest fault was that he chose not to do so. Instead of putting his full medical ability to the task of improving the conditions of the camp, Sanger chose to concentrate on improving his own stature. When criticized for the horrible conditions at Elmira, he hid behind the excuses of bureaucratic red tape and described the problems as nothing more than “fancied” wrongs.

The controversy over Elmira overshadowed the rest of Sanger’s Civil War career. By examining his career, one can see how the war contributed to the development of his controversial personality. Although Sanger was able to return to Maine and resume his successful medical practice, he was not able to put this controversial period behind him. Other people, like the former prisoners, would not let him forget; nor would Sanger’s own defensiveness in the face of criticism. Sanger had left for war with the hope of achieving honor and prestige, which he did. He also returned with a wealth of practical medical experience which benefited him upon his resumption of private practice. His achievements, honor and prestige however, came at a high cost. By failing to serve the Confederate prisoners to the best of his medical ability and choosing instead to promote his own stature, Eugene Francis Sanger earned a lasting connection to the horrors of the prison camps, North and South, which according to one author “must stand as blots on even the darkest page of our history.”⁶⁸

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

NOTES

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⁵Ibid., September 21, 1861, 6th Corr.

⁶Ibid., September 27, 1861, 6th Corr.

⁷Ibid., November 11, 1861, 6th Corr.

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¹⁴Ibid., August 27, 1862, Sanger Letters.

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²⁰Ibid., November 2, 1863, Sanger Letters.

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²⁵J. Michael Horigan, "Elmira Prison Camp – A Second Opinion," *Chemung Historical Journal* (March 1986), p. 3452.

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²⁷Horigan, "Second Opinion," p. 3452.

²⁸*OR*, vol. 7, p. 605.

²⁹Ibid., p. 1094.

³⁰*Confederate Veteran*, 27, 1926 p. 379.

³¹Ibid., 20, 1912 p. 327.

³²*OR*, vol. 7, p. 1093.

³³Horigan, "Second Opinion," p. 3452.

³⁴Keiley, *In Vinculis*, p. 138.

³⁵Clay W. Holmes, *The Elmira Prison Camp* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1912), p. 118.

³⁶Robertson, *Scourge*, p. 91.

³⁷James Huffman, "Prisoner of War," *Atlantic Monthly*, 163 (1939): 547.

EUGENE FRANCIS SANGER

- ³⁸Robertson, *Scourge*, p. 91.
- ³⁹Holmes, *Elmira*, p. 118.
- ⁴⁰Mundy, *No Rich Men's Sons*, p. 33.
- ⁴¹Horigan, "Second Opinion," p. 3453.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*
- ⁴³*OR*, vol. 7, p. 997.
- ⁴⁴Robertson, *Scourge*, p. 85.
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- ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, October 28, 1864, Sanger Letters.
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