As the train from Andersonville Prison slowed and the rumble of the tracks faded, the moans and cries of dying men filled the dark inside of the boxcar. The living, weak and near starvation, consoled the doomed around them—listened, waiting, wondering. "Many of the men were so sick that as soon as they got out of the cars they lay down at the first comfortable spot they could find along the railroad," remembered George Bumbaugh. Others, "reduced to mere skeletons" but with the energy to walk, were driven toward the Confederate prison on the fringe of Florence, in eastern South Carolina. Bumbaugh, a native Pennsylvanian whose account appears in the official history of the 101st Pennsylvania Regiment (1910), was among the Union prisoners of war transferred from Andersonville to Florence in early September 1864. At the time, General Sherman's Union army was advancing on Atlanta; the South was in shambles. Four years of war had exhausted the Confederacy's provisions for feeding and clothing its soldiers, much less its prisoners. This is a story about men who, desperate to be free, received heroic assistance from people only slightly less enslaved than themselves. By mid-summer 1864, the compound at Andersonville had held 32,000 prisoners. Guards patrolled open fields, where prisoners lived in holes or simply on the bare ground, with scant clothing, food, or water in the scorching sun—and died at the rate of 120 a day.
Southern authorities addressed the inhumane conditions by transferring prisoner groups to new locations, decentralizing the system but providing few resources. Some in the 101st went from Andersonville to a camp in Columbia, S.C., where, according to regimental historian John Reed of Butler County, "we were taken out in squads under guard into the timber, where we cut and carried into camp small saplings, limbs, and brush" for firewood and "shelters as we could improvise from such materials." Rations consisted of a tin cup of corn meal and a few ounces of sorghum a day, "with a little rice once a week."

At Florence, plantation owners assigned their slaves to the prison's major, who set them to work building shanty stockades as the floodtide of new prisoners filled the town on September 14.

The prison hospital, meanwhile, was overflowing with sick and wounded; the major told Bumbaugh and others from the 101st: "Take any stable you find unoccupied, and do what you can to make them comfortable, and I will render you all the aid I can."

Buildings were few, provisions were scarce, and security was lax at Florence prison. At first, the new inmates had to wonder why. Then Bumbaugh overheard "the major say, 'No guard is needed; they are too d — d weak to run away.'"

James Gilmore, the son of an Irish immigrant who grew up in Wilkins Township just east of Pittsburgh, was one of the Western Pennsylvanians recruited in August 1861 to form the 101st Regiment. Approximately 950 men from Beaver, Butler, Lawrence, and Allegheny counties made up parts of the regiment's seven companies, all under the command of a former Beaver County district attorney, Col. Joseph Wilson.

After training in Pittsburgh and in Harrisburg, the 101st was dispatched to fighting in Virginia. The words of regimental historian Reed reveal nervousness in the ranks before their first battle, on May 4, 1862, at Fort Magruder, near Yorktown: "We could see the enemy all through the day across an open field. When night came, every stump in the field seemed to be a moving rebel...."

The 101st would see plenty of moving targets in fierce fighting that summer with the Army of the Potomac at Fair Oaks and Harrison's Landing, and in the Peninsular Campaign. In December, the regiment entered North Carolina and fought the rest of the war in the swamps and tidal bogs along the Carolina coast.

The story of such regiments in the war between the states is not often told, for they were seldom part of a large army massing to challenge another large army in epic confrontation. Instead, the regiment's men fought a guerrilla-type offensive far from home in an exotic hot-house, raiding enclaves of Rebels, their munitions depots, and their artillery batteries, as well as small but strategic earthen forts and naval installations in the murky backwaters. The regiment also regularly acted as a battlefront diversion in the movement of other Union infantry commands.

By early 1864, the 101st had proven itself critical to the Union's strategy of weakening the South by depriving its military and civilian populations of supplies and munitions from the sea.
North Carolina’s Albemarle and Pamlico sounds and the rivers that feed them were also settings for constant clashes among the North’s armored gunboat steamers and Confederate “blockade runners” and attack boats. And, before war’s end, the 101st would witness the emergence of other craft never before seen in modern warfare.

As the men from Pennsylvania would learn, in a war fought in the marshes of the South, foot soldiers owed their fate to hostilities played out before them on the water.

A barn owned by a railroad engineer near Florence was commandeered for use as a prison hospital, and four Western Pennsylvanians—Bumbaugh, Gilmore, and brothers John and Jerome Sheaffer—were among the 12 prisoners assigned to care for the sick. Bumbaugh writes that beds of clean straw were the only comfort available, for the Confederates provided no medicine or nourishment.

Within three weeks, however, most of the patients had passed “beyond pain and misery.”

Perhaps because orderlies out-numbered survivors at the makeshift hospital, the prison’s major made plans to transfer all of the men to the main stockade. Having lasted in other Southern stockades for more than four months, anyone still alive must have felt he was pressing his luck to try again. As Sgt. Gilmore would write to relatives near Pittsburgh, “It is not worth my while to attempt to describe the manner in which we were treated, for you have already heard about it, and it could not be made any worse than it was.”

Hearing an “intimation” that they would be moved on October 9, seven of the prisoners—including Bumbaugh, Gilmore, and the others from Western Pennsylvania—escaped the night before, “piloted by a negro” whom they’d made their confidant. They had a railroad map of North and South Carolina, a watch, a compass, and best of all Uncle Pete, the black guide. Bumbaugh says Pete told them to “rub our feet and legs thoroughly with pine straw, shed from the trees in abundance,” which would “kill the scent, and the dogs would not be able to trail us.”

Undoubtedly, this was a trick used by runaway slaves and passed on from generation to generation. Just as the Underground Railroad in the North had helped runaway slaves reach safety, many enslaved Africans were willing to aid fugitive Yankee soldiers.

Bumbaugh narrates that Pete led the men east of Florence to the banks of the Great Pee Dee River, where, “imitating the noise of an owl,” he summoned the ferryman—his brother. After conferring with him, Pete returned to explain that it was unwise to cross the river that night, then hurried home “in time not to have been missed.”
Minutes later, as the fugitives lay hiding 100 yards from the ferry landing, a search party of men and dogs crossed the river and, unable to pick up a scent, returned, apparently convinced the escapees had taken a different route.

"Shortly after they had disappeared the ferryman’s daughter brought us a basket of provision, consisting of stewed chicken, cornbread, and sweet potatoes. It was a feast such as we had not enjoyed for many a day... freely and cheerfully given us by these humble black folk, without expectation of remuneration." The men did pay the girl a dollar and shortly afterward Pete’s brother ferried them across the river, providing further directions and advice.

Traveling at night, the seven stuck to the railroad bed, going north toward Wilmington, N.C., with detours around stations to avoid detection. Their stealth was justified when they found a scrap of a Charleston, S.C., newspaper which reported that a $500 bounty had been laid on their heads. "This is getting quite interesting," Gilmore remarked glibly.

In his letter (a typescript is part of the Historical Society’s collection), Sgt. Gilmore mentions that Jerome Sheaffer was ill, barely able to travel, while Bumbaugh adds that Sheaffer’s "chronic diarrhea, contracted while confined at Andersonville, compelled us to travel slowly and make frequent halts. We also traveled in our bare feet so that the enemy could not hear our tramp." Sgt. Gilmore eventually lost his shoes, forcing him to "travel shoeless at all times."

The fugitives approached the Little Pee Dee River with trepidation, only to find the "sentinel on duty sound asleep." Minutes later, they came across a black man walking his dog. Says Bumbaugh: "We told him that we were escaping Yankees, and he told us that all the Negroes were our friends."

Once again, the slave took the men in. He took them to the plantation where his wife lived and her brother was the "overseer." The family prepared a "sumptuous breakfast" that Bumbaugh says included rousing shots of peach brandy, "and even Gilmore, teetotaler as he was, did not refrain from indulging."

In an age when slave owners zealously shielded their servants from influences off the plantation, "this overseer ... could read and write, self-tutored, and unknown to his master."

Also unbeknownst to the owner, the fugitives passed the daylight hours on the plantation, as various slaves visited to offer encouragement. One was assigned to lead the group after nightfall to a hidden boat on the Little Pee Dee River near the North Carolina border, but shortly after beginning their trek across the water the men lost their bearings. Again, African-Americans intervened on the white men’s behalf, directing them south toward the Atlantic Coast.

A week later, the fugitives reached the ocean "60 miles below Wilmington," wrote Gilmore, near the present-day resort of Myrtle Beach, S.C. There they lay concealed, waiting to hail a boat.

"One foggy morning we noticed a steamer. We gave her the signal. She sent a crew ashore and to our surprise it proved to be the blockade runner Armstrong."

"Of course we were prisoners once more."

Within hours, the men were in jail at Conway, the Horry County, S.C., seat. A few days later, guarded by three aging jailers armed with shotguns, the men began the march back to Florence.

In the opening months of 1864, the 101st regiment was stationed in Plymouth, N.C. Its orders were to defend the town and to restrict Confederate access to the Atlantic Ocean via Albermarle and Pamlico sounds, near North Carolina’s Outer Banks.

Rumors had circulated since the previous summer of a Confederate project at Edwards Ferry, inland from Plymouth several miles on the Roanoke River, to build a monstrous iron ramming vessel. Although known since Phoenician times, a vessel with an apparatus projecting beyond the ship for piercing another craft’s hull—the Union Merrimac is the best known from the Civil War—became far more fearsome in the mid-19th century once wooden ships could be coated in iron sheets. Some "ironclads" were equipped with cannons, but an ironclad ram could repel an opponent’s cannons and small arms fire as it bore down on vulnerable wooden ships.

The infantry commander at Plymouth, Gen. Wessells, took the rumor of the huge ship "very seriously," Reed reports in his regimental history, while Capt. Flusser, who commanded Union naval forces in the region, was "confident that he could sink any vessel the enemy was likely to bring against him...."

Federal fortifications were substantial. Troops numbered about 2,000, and there was a formidable earthwork called Fort Gray, as well as the artillery of the 24th New York Battery. Two other redoubts, Fort Williams and Wessells Redoubt, were well-positioned to bombard river-going ships, and two armored gunboats, the Miami and the Southfield, patrolled Bachelor Bay at Plymouth.
About 4 p.m. on April 17, 1864, Confederate ground troops and artillery attacked Fort Gray, and by evening of the next day had vanquished both forts Gray and Wessels; Reed reports that the South’s “fearful losses” in the assaults included the attacking commander.

With only Fort Williams still free and Confederate infantry numbering nearly 10,000, the aggressors had the upper hand.

In the darkness under a canopy of dense trees “which at many places extended out over the water,” a behemoth iron ship soon appeared in the dancing torchlight of Fort Williams. The Albermarle, as it was called, cruised toward the Southfield and the Miami, which witnesses said Captain Flusser had lashed together with the plan of sandwiching the Albermarle and running her ashore. The Albermarle’s captain apparently foresaw this scheme, for as the Union ships blasted at her with their heavy guns, “she took an oblique course and, passing the Miami’s bow, made straight for the Southfield, striking her fairly on the starboard bow, forcing her gun into the fire-room.”

Captain Flusser, on board the Southfield, met the fate feared most in such encounters when a shell from his own ship—likely intended for the attacker’s porthole—instead rebounded off the Albermarle’s iron sheathing and exploded. Flusser and many others were killed.

Minutes later, Reed recounts, the Southfield was “on the bottom of the Roanoke.”

Hours later, outnumbered 5 to 1, the entire 101st Pennsylvania Regiment and other Federal forces defending Plymouth were prisoners of war, bound for Andersonville.

For men such as George Bumbaugh, Jerome Sheaffer, and James Gilmore, life in Florence or Columbia—or at one of the other locations from which prisoners were dispersed from Andersonville—would become a gruesome milestone. Reed laments that of the 2,000 prisoners who were shipped to Andersonville after defeat at Plymouth, “how sad it is to remember that nearly half ... are now sleeping in the silent city of the dead at Andersonville, with more than 13,000 comrades—sleeping the sleep that knows no waking until the resurrection morn.”

On the second day of the prisoners’ march to Florence from the Conway jail, one of the three guards announced that he was needed at home and could not continue. (Bumbaugh describes all three as bedraggled and too old to serve in the regular army.) Jerry Sheaffer decided he would not survive the trip to Florence, and was allowed to return to Conway, where he had received “good medical treatment,” according to Bumbaugh.

It is not clear whether the captors were aware of the $500 reward, but what is known—history shows—is that the South was being routed by this time. While these Confederate guards drove their prisoners toward Florence Prison, the North’s monumental march to Appomattox had already begun.

In a rain storm, the group searched out a kindly widow who offered her house for the evening. Shortly, one of the guards said that “if we didn’t object,” he would lie
In fact, James Gilmore, shoeless during most of his ordeal, did not give up.

"Most of the boys’s feet and legs was given out, and my one leg was not any better, having marched so great a distance.

"So, again there was three guards, and they started to take us to prison.... Some of the boys had become very much disheartened with our luck and had become careless whether they went back or not. But I dreaded going back to prison, and thought I would try and get off. So Sheaffer and I gave the others the nod and took off.

"The guards took aim at us, but not a one of their guns went off—Providence protected."

WHAT HAS BEEN HAND IN OUR FAMILY—MY FATHER TOLD ME THAT MY GRANDFATHER MADE THE FRAME MUST HAVE CARRIED IT WITH HIM DURING

dent toward their goal of the Union command post at New Bern, N.C., than they accomplished on their first try. Four days later, in a driving rain outside of Clinton, less than 50 miles from New Bern, the hungry and exhausted men knocked at a shanty door, once again looking for a handout from a black man. By then, their luck had run out.

"The nig informed his master," writes Gilmore, in family correspondence now in the Historical Society’s Archives, "who took his nig the next morning to the nearest military post and raised some 20 conscripts and some hounds, and captured us again. I gave up all hope of escape then."

Within a week they had struggled into friendly territory. "Sometimes we had something to eat and sometimes it was rather scarce: raw corn and potatoes is pretty hard on your teeth."

Gilmore reports that on November 14, having recruited a few others he got to know along the way, they reached the post at New Bern, "bringing 35 Africans in with us."

Meanwhile, Bumbaugh and the other prisoners were returned to Florence, where by giving fictitious names they avoided execution: shortly after the first escape, an order had been read in prison that the fugitives would be shot without trial.

Ironically, Bumbaugh did not have to wait long for his freedom. In late November, suffering from a fever and badly swollen feet, he was among some 1,500 sick prisoners set free at Florence. Remembering the bounty still on his head, George Bumbaugh, Company A, 101st Pennsylvania, signed his parole at the prison gate "George H. Dunbar, Co. A., 85th New York."

Dr. James Gilmore lives in Pittsburgh on Inverness Avenue in the Murdoch Farms area of Squirrel Hill, in a house his father built in 1926. The James Gilmore who escaped Confederate captors three times in 1864 was his grandfather. Dr. Gilmore donated the correspondence and the picture and frame to the Historical Society in 1993.
None of the accounts of the escape mention whether men carried any personal effects, but it's also possible that someone else who survived Andersonville liberated the frame for Gilmore. Almost an entire regiment of Western Pennsylvanians, after all, entered Andersonville together. "What has been handed down in our family—my father told me—was that my grandfather made the frame while in Andersonville Prison, and so, yes, I guess he must have carried it with him during his escape."

The Gilmore family hails from County Down, Ireland. They reached Allegheny County about 1830.

Soldier James Gilmore was born on the family farm in Wilkins Township along Greensburg Pike, east of Pittsburgh, in about 1840. He entered the war as a private and returned as a second lieutenant, took up farming and married Elizabeth Plumer of Bakerstown, Pa. Dr. Gilmore says his grandfather was active in the Turtle Creek United Presbyterian Church and was a member of the Wilkins Township school board. He died in 1926.

Several generations of Gilmores served their country in war. "My father served in France in World War I," says Dr. Gilmore. "As far as he was concerned, Memorial Day was holier than Christmas. He carried bitter feelings about the South all of his life, especially the Southern generals who went to West Point. The way he saw it was those generals swore an oath of allegiance to their country before the war and then went back on it."

Dr. Gilmore, aware of his family's role in the nation's defense, visited Andersonville Prison twice—once as a boy of 8 or 9 when his father was still alive and once three years ago. At Andersonville, says the obstetrician now retired from Allegheny General Hospital, minor scrapes and scratches often led to death. "Any open wound was practically a death knell. People were in such poor condition that they had absolutely no resistance to infection."

After hearing James Gilmore's Civil War story, one would have to conclude that he had resistance to burn. His own view, expressed in the 1864 letter to his family, was "we never would have gotten through if it had not been for" the African Americans.