How the Post Office in Elmira, NY met the challenges of the American Civil War

Alan Parsons

Abstract

At the start of the war, Elmira was named as one of only three locations in New York State for mustering and training troops before being sent into battle. Albany (State capitol) and New York City were the other two locations. Why was Elmira chosen from the western NY area over cities with much greater population (at least today) such as Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo?

The presentation will report on the period of time the mustering/training took place in Elmira and its consequences for the Elmira Post Office. Covers mailed from the “Elmira Rendezvous” and correspondence they contained will be part of the visual presentation.

By 1864 the mustering/training period had either concluded or was winding down to the point where space was available for housing Confederate prisoners-of-war, thus relieving overcrowding at already existing prisoner of war camps in the loyal states.

The Elmira Civil War prison camp lasted little more than a year but nevertheless had its own set of consequences for the Elmira Post Office. These will be examined as well as the routes taken to deliver prisoners’ mail both to northern addresses and to cross-border destinations. A sampling of the presenter’s collection of Elmira Civil War prison camp covers and their contents will be included in the visual presentation.

Elmira has been the county seat for Chemung County ever since the County’s formation in 1837. While this may have given Elmira greater leverage in New York State politics, it was still a relatively small community and bound to be heavily impacted over a five-year period by the presence of Union Army recruits being trained for battle, followed or overlapped by the presence of Confederate prisoners in an overcrowded Civil War prison camp. The impact this had specifically on the Elmira Post Office and mail routes it connected with will be the primary thesis of the presentation.