Those who have visited Salisbury might recall it as a pleasant community that is the home of Cheerwine and the Food Lion supermarket chain. But there is also a much darker side to the city located about 75 miles from Mount Airy, which was brought to light during a free, well-attended program here Saturday led by a husband-and-wife historical team.

“To be honest with you, I had no idea there was a 15,000-person Confederate prison in Salisbury just down the road from us,” Executive Director Matt Edwards of Mount Airy Museum of Regional History said when introducing Ed and Sue Curtis. They appeared as part of the final installment in a History Talks series at the museum. The two proceeded to tell the story of the prison, one of the darkest chapters of a war known for its brutality and human misery.

Penal institutions have never been wonderful places even in the best of times. And conditions at Salisbury Confederate Prison were as harsh and deplorable as any during a period that produced such infamous locales as Andersonville, Georgia, and Elmira, New York. “There’s plenty of room for blame on both sides,” Ed Curtis said of facilities housing prisoners of war in the 1860s.

Little Traces Today

Ed and Sue Curtis were in Mount Airy through their roles as heads of the Salisbury Confederate Prison Association, which is seeking to preserve the colorful history surrounding the facility and those who spent time there. “The prison no longer stands — Yankees burned it,” Sue Curtis told the museum audience, explaining that this occurred during Union Gen. George Stoneman’s infamous raid through North Carolina in early 1865. Only one structure is believed to remain today which was part of the prison complex; it houses an antique store. “There is no picture of that prison,” Mrs. Curtis added, with its appearance preserved only by artwork and drawings from people who were there including former inmates. Finding such a photograph probably would make one rich, according to the historians, who at times mixed in humor to made the prison’s legacy less stark.

At first, Salisbury Confederate Prison was not that bad a place to be, according to their presentation. As battles between the Blue and Gray unfolded after the war broke out in 1861, the Southern government sought locations for prisons to house captured soldiers. Salisbury was not the first choice of Confederate leaders. “But it was the first one to say yes,” Sue Curtis

said. Sixteen acres were acquired from Davidson College for $15,000, not far from the present-day Interstate 85. The prison utilized facilities of a former cotton mill that had been vacant since the 1840s, with the old machinery removed and bars placed on windows. Many new arrivals were glad to be there after the prison received its first captives in December 1861, including some transferred from other locations that were less inviting. “They had been in prisons where there was no daylight,” Mrs. Curtis explained.

Along with open air, the prison had a source of good water, and there was only a 2-percent death rate. Prisoners could sign an oath and venture into town to shop, freely going back and forth simply by giving their word they would return. Sometimes they played baseball, and Sue Curtis said a re-enactment of one notable game has occurred in recent years. Players used crude bats and other equipment reminiscent of the Civil War era, with the players promising to not to cause problems. But a local church got hit twice by balls and a little girl was struck in the head. “Scared us to death,” recalled Sue Curtis, who added that the child was unhurt. The prison housed not only Union prisoners, but Confederate soldiers who had been court-martialed and Southern civilians working against the Rebel cause.

Darker years

Conditions worsened at the Salisbury facility after Gen. U.S. Grant became commander of the Northern army and ended a prisoner-exchange program that had keep the population relatively low. The prison was designed to hold no more than 2,500 prisoners, but by November 1864 that had ballooned to 10,000 due to exchanges ending and captured troops pouring in from Virginia battlefields. About 15,000 men were incarcerated there from 1861-65, with an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 deaths occurring among them. At the height of its miseries, the death rate was 28 percent. Prison officials ran out of space to house the men.

“They were digging holes in the ground and living two or three (at a time) in a hole in the ground,” Sue Curtis said of the conditions faced. “The Union knew what was going on,” the visiting historian continued. “They didn’t allow any supplies to come in.” Even those sent to the hospital didn’t fare much better, having no beds but only pallets of straw on a floor, with little in the way of medicine available. Sanitary conditions were horrible, with one observer noting that “the smell would make a dead man heave.” Prisoners who died were buried in mass graves along trenches, with an old cornfield that served as burial place eventually becoming the Salisbury National Cemetery. The numbers of unknown soldiers buried there rival those of any similar prison of the time, Sue Curtis said. Prisoners were desperate to survive and would do anything to escape, including mounting a bloody riot in November 1864.

By the time Gen. Stoneman arrived in Salisbury around the time of the Southern surrender at Appomattox, the prisoner-exchange program had been revived. Although history suggests that the Union raider would have loved to be the liberator of thousands of captives at the time he torched the prison, that was not the case. “There were very few prisoners left in Salisbury,” Ed Curtis told the museum audience. Yet someone still saw fit to paint a mural of a heroic-looking Stoneman against a background of flames which now hangs in a Salisbury shopping mall as a reminder of the city’s history. “He also killed the business at that mall,” Sue Curtis joked regarding the effect of Stoneman’s image on shoppers.

Preservation efforts

Among the work of the Salisbury Confederate Prison Association headed by Ed and Sue Curtis is seeking to establish a repository of names of all those housed there as well as the several thousand guards who served. Some notable prisoners spent time at the facility, including the brother of poet Walt Whitman and the son of Dr. David Livingstone, the missionary and explorer. An ancestor of Garry Moore, a popular television game-show host in the 1950s and 1960s, served as a quartermaster there, Ed Curtis related. The Salisbury prison also has a local tie, Thomas Lenoir Gwyn, who was a guard in Salisbury before becoming a prominent industrialist and town official in Elkin. A $14,000 project to excavate the prison grounds as part of the research of its history was undertaken in 2005 through Wake Forest University. “We’re working on a new one for the future,” Sue Curtis said.