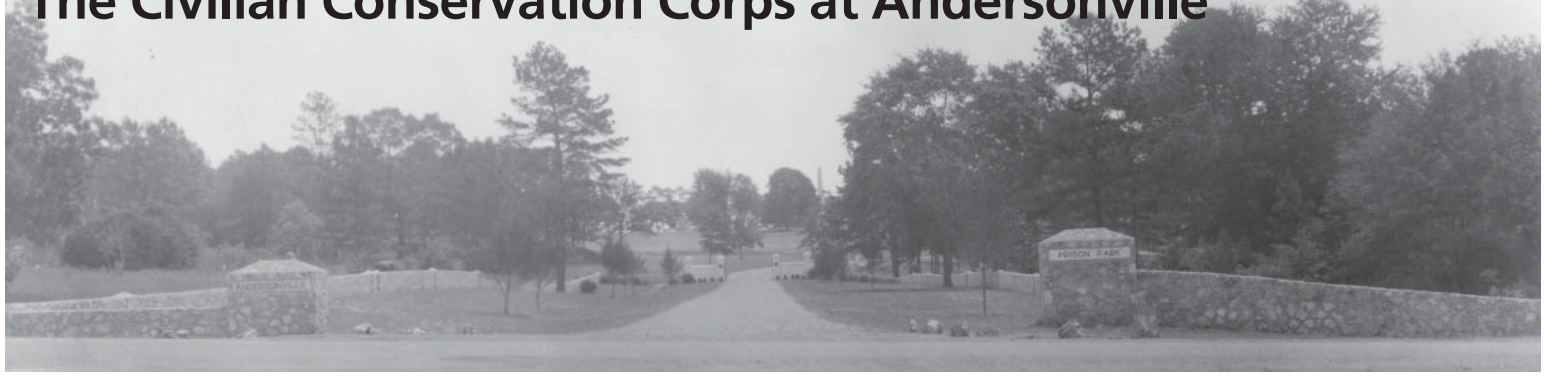




Preserving the Prison; Saving a Nation The Civilian Conservation Corps at Andersonville



“We can take it!” Out of the ashes of the Great Depression rose an organization that lasted only nine years but left an indelible mark on the landscape of the United States, pioneering the fields of forestry and soil conservation, and improving and creating local, state, and national parks. The boys of the “Tree Army” became “Men Who Built the Parks” and left a legacy in parks and forests across the country, including Andersonville. Millions of people still enjoy their work today, decades later.

A Troubled Economy

Many people who had enjoyed the prosperity of the Roaring Twenties found themselves in soup lines and tattered clothes by the early 1930s. Sputtering Model Ts rumbled down dusty roads, carrying passengers and their few possessions toward dreams of a better tomorrow. The growing depression devastated the nation’s economy and left many in dire straits. By 1933, nearly ten thousand banks had failed and more than 16 million Americans were unemployed.

Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was elected president by a landslide in 1932 with his promise of a “New Deal” for the American people. Within days of his inauguration, FDR called Congress into special session to work on emergency legislation to aid the economy and the American people. Many new agencies and programs were created to provide relief and restore the economy. President Roosevelt kept his promise and the New Deal was born.

Roosevelt’s “Tree Army”

Probably the most popular New Deal program was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Designed to reduce unemployment while also conserving natural resources, the CCC affected the lives of millions of Americans, and transformed the American landscape. Nicknamed “Roosevelt’s Tree Army,” the CCC operated through the cooperative efforts of four departments. The Department of Labor oversaw the selection of enrollees, the Army ran the camps, and the Interior and Agriculture departments provided work projects. The work of the CCC initially focused on reforestation,

but quickly evolved to include soil conservation and development of recreational park facilities.

Initially, unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 25 whose families were on relief could apply. They enrolled for six months, with an option to reenlist for up to two years. Enrollees earned \$30 a month, \$25 of which was sent to their families. Eventually, “Local Experienced Men” and World War I veterans were allowed to enroll. African-Americans and American Indians also participated, generally in segregated CCC companies.

Carrying on a Legacy of Preservation

Mere months after the end of the Civil War in 1865, the former burying ground of the Camp Sumter military prison was transformed into the Andersonville National Cemetery. The adjacent prison site fell into disuse, and was purchased by the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a Union veterans organization. From 1890 to 1910, the GAR’s women’s auxiliary, the Woman’s Relief Corps, managed the prison site, hosting Andersonville survivors, and preserving and marking the remaining features of the site. In 1910, the ladies of the Woman’s Relief Corps transferred ownership of the site to the federal government, and for the next sixty years, the Quartermaster Department of the United States Army managed both the national cemetery and what was known as the “Prison Park.”

Officials of the Army’s Quartermaster Department quickly recognized the opportunity provided by the CCC to develop the prison site. Identified needs for Andersonville included the clearing of woodlands, the replanting of trees, the drainage of swamps, the building of access roads, and the renovation of the Star Fort to improve the site for the 60,000 people who visited Andersonville each year.

Army Camp No. 3 at Andersonville was approved in the fall of 1934. A temporary campsite was established on the prison site, above Providence Spring. A permanent camp was constructed west of Georgia Highway 49 and on October 2, 1934 CCC Company 1411 arrived to begin work at the prison site.

The Workday

A typical day for a CCC enrollee started at 6 a.m. with reveille followed by breakfast at 6:30. Then there was roll call and policing of the camp at 7:00. Work began at 7:15. At noon there was a one hour lunch break. Then the work details went back out until 4:00 when they returned to camp for cleanup and inspection at 5:00. After dinner the boys had free time until lights out at 10:00.

The CCC camp planted 38 acres of open field in trees and completed 32 acres of forest improvement projects. All the roads in use in the park at that time (3.4 miles) were graded, drained and hard surfaced. The workers constructed a new entrance gate and rock walls to provide separate access to the prison site.

They put a new tile floor and roof on the spring house at Providence Spring. They improved the access trail to the Spring by constructing a new bridge and hard surfacing the trail.

As of January 30, 1935, the CCC camp had 207 enrollees and staff. Of these, 164 were involved in park and forest work, 14 were skilled supervisors, 25 were involved in operating the camp, and two were forest and park supervisors.

Camp Life

Boys had an opportunity to improve themselves in on-the-job training in auto mechanics, blacksmithing, carpentry, landscape gardening and masonry. In their spare time they could take courses in writing, advanced reading, writing, arithmetic, typewriting, cooking, first aid and crafts. All the boys were issued uniforms to be worn while they were in the camp. Twice during the six month enrollment period enrollees were allowed to go home.

The CCC emphasized sports for the men such as basketball, football, baseball, tennis, horseshoes and boxing. One favorite stop in Andersonville was at the home of a former slave who sold bootleg liquor at 50 cents a pint.

The camp provided a regular Sunday School program and occasional Sunday worship services. The boys were also free to take part in local churches. The enrollees had their own newspaper, the *Timber Topper*.

After fifteen months of work, CCC Camp A-3 at Andersonville was closed. Throughout 1936 a side camp of 50 men from Company 4455 worked at Andersonville in a re-designated Camp A-4. Today, the most visible remnant of the campsite is the stone gateway across from the entrance gate to the National Cemetery.

The Legacy

Nationwide, the CCC operated 4,500 camps in national parks and forests as well as state and community parks. More than three million men enrolled between 1933 and 1942, planting three billion trees, protecting 20 million acres from soil erosion, and aiding in the establishment of 800 state parks. The CCC advanced natural resource conservation in this country by decades, and provided education, training, and experience for a generation of young men.

In 1935 CCC Director Robert Fechner visited Andersonville to dedicate the bridges and roads in the prison park. Impressed with the energy and efficiency of the enrollees, he remarked, "I do not know of another Civilian Conservation Corps camp or project that has made a better showing for the time and money than has been made by Company 1411."

Today, visitors continue to explore the prison site and national cemetery on the roads and bridges built over seventy five years ago by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

In addition to developing the road system around the prison site, and markers for the stockade and deadline, the CCC developed new pathways, landscaping, and erosion control ditches, which are still visible today.

