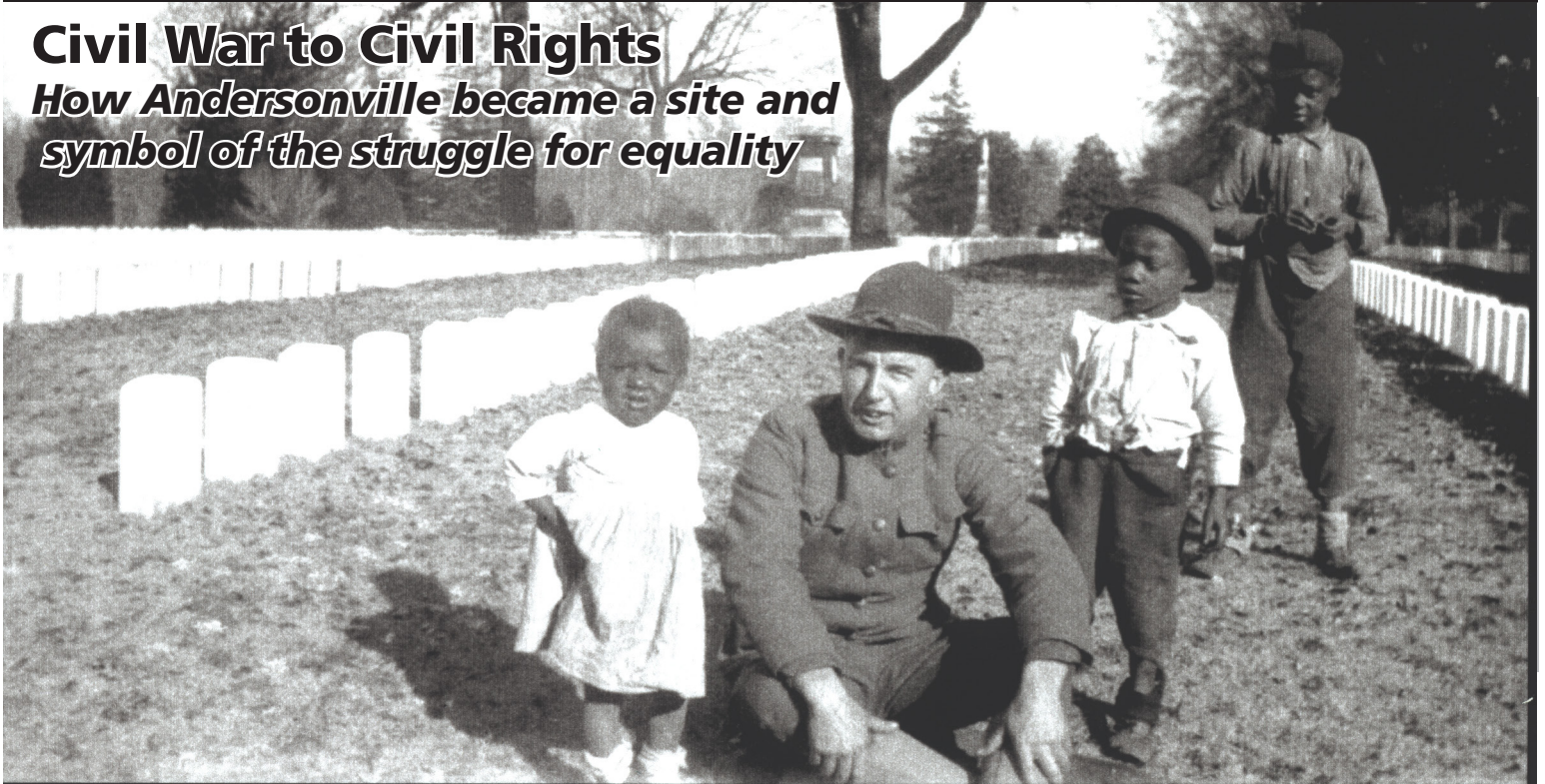




Civil War to Civil Rights *How Andersonville became a site and symbol of the struggle for equality*



“...A few blacks live in the neighborhood, and some of these gathered around...and with tears streaming down their cheeks, testified to the depth of their affection for those whom they esteemed as their deliverers. ‘Poor Yanks,’ said they...our dead were as precious relics, and their streaming eyes and wailing lamentation showed with what veneration and love they looked upon the mortal remains of those through whose sufferings and death a race rose up from chains.” *The Norwich Bulletin - January 1866, describing an expedition to Andersonville*

Introduction

African Americans have played an important, but rarely talked about, role throughout the history of Andersonville. The stockade was built by slave labor and African American soldiers were held as prisoners. After the war, Freedmen saw a connection between their own enslavement and the captivity endured by the Union prisoners. These new citizens took the first steps to preserve and memorialize the site. Despite these efforts, the site was segregated in the 1940s and 1950s. But by the end of the 1960s it received national attention as a place of equality for all Americans.

“...That was the worst place I ever saw. That was where they kept all the Yankees that they captured and they had so many there they couldn’t take care of them...and never had enough room for all them Yankees...The most they had to eat for them was peas, and the filth, it was terrible...and they just died like rats that had been poisoned...”

- Former Slave Tines Kendricks

James Gooding and African-American prisoners of war at Andersonville

Around 100 African American soldiers were held captive at Andersonville. Among these was Cpl. James Gooding, 54th Massachusetts Infantry. Gooding recognized the risk of captivity as the price of equality when he wrote President Lincoln in 1863 demanding equal pay: “You caution the Rebel[s], that the United States...insists on having all her Soldiers of whatever creed or Color, to be treated according to the usages of War...would it not be well and consistent to set the example herself by paying all her Soldiers alike?” Gooding died at Andersonville not knowing that Congress authorized equal pay for African American soldiers. More than thirty black prisoners died at Andersonville.



James H. Gooding - section J, grave 3,585

Freedom

Slaves around Andersonville drew a direct connection between their own desire for freedom and that of the prisoners. Both prisoners and slaves created an identity around their suffering and desire for freedom. Prisoners attempting to escape were often assisted by slaves and at times utilized the Underground Railroad.

After the war the former slaves occupied the prison site. Clara Barton spent much of her time at Andersonville in the summer of 1865 talking to these Freedmen about their newfound freedom. The American Missionary Association established a Freedman's School in the prison hospital. However, it was in the cemetery that the Freedmen truly celebrated their liberty. An expedition to the cemetery in 1866 reported dozens of African Americans in the cemetery, paying their respect to those men that died in captivity that they might be free. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Andersonville National Cemetery was the scene of elaborate ceremonies on both Emancipation Day and Memorial Day, in which hundreds of African Americans decorated the graves.



Near Andersonville, by Winslow Homer (1866). In the background, Union soldiers are being led off to Andersonville. *Near Andersonville* is about the future of freed African Americans whose fate, like that of the Union soldiers, still undetermined. Courtesy of the Newark Museum

Preservation

The first to preserve the site were Freedmen like Floyd Snelson, who found employment with the army as caretakers and foremen in the cemetery. African Americans began farming on the prison site, which had reverted back to private ownership. Parts of the stockade, which had symbolized captivity and death, evolved into rail fences and homes, symbols of freedom and prosperity for the former slaves of Andersonville. Visiting former prisoners who often commented on the work being done by these Freedmen. Sgt. Martin O'Hara, 16th Iowa Infantry, reported in his 1880 memoir that, "The spring that bursted out is still there, and the negroes keep it in repair, and regard its waters as holy. Whenever they approach it they do so reverently, taking off their hats."



Floyd Snelson was a student at the Andersonville Freedman's School and the foreman in the cemetery. He led the 1869 Emancipation Day service in the national cemetery.

Struggles and Triumphs

Within weeks after the 1869 Emancipation Day service, the Ku Klux Klan temporarily drove off the white ministers and teachers working for the American Missionary Association Freedman's School. Ben Dykes, the pre-war owner of much of the prison site, boarded up and torched many of the prison buildings. By the 1940s, US Army had segregated the cemetery, isolating the burial of black veterans, including those killed in World War II and Korea, to a single section. This continued until 1960, when the US Army desegregated the cemetery. Six years later, in May 1966, 19 year old Jimmy Williams, an African American Green Beret from Wetumpka, Alabama, was killed in Vietnam. His hometown cemetery refused to allow him to be buried due to his race. His mother

said, "My son died fighting on the front for all of us. He didn't die a segregated death and he'll not be buried in a segregated cemetery." Jimmy Williams was buried with full military honors in an integrated Andersonville National Cemetery, almost one hundred years after the Freedmen first celebrated their Emancipation only a few yards away.



Jimmy Williams, buried in grave E-163