

The Ghost That Still Remains: The Tragic Story of Andersonville Prison

by
Rachel E. Noll

It was a place of horror and agony. Murder, disease, starvation and lack of sanitation killed thousands. The smell was nauseating; the landscape was bleak. Many of the guards and commanders of the camp added to the misery and the death toll. Newly freed men came out looking like skeletons, mere shells of what were once strong and healthy human beings. Some were too sick to travel and were cared for by liberating forces that could do nothing but try to comfort them, as they died slow and agonizing deaths. To someone born after the 1950's, this description conjures up the Holocaust and the German concentration camps of World War II. But this was 1865, during the Civil War, and the location of this scourge was near the little town of Anderson, Georgia. Whether one supported the South or the North, what happened at the camp called Andersonville cannot be denied and its impact cannot be ignored.

Historians dispute certain aspects of Andersonville. Was it truly the worst prison camp, or was it simply the camp that has attracted the most attention? Did Captain Henry Wirz deserve to die for what happened there or was he merely a scapegoat? Was the Union responsible for the accelerated death rate by its refusal to continue prisoner exchange and parole? Did Confederate officials intentionally starve prisoners to reduce the number of Union soldiers? The answers to these questions may never fully be known, but there is evidence that is helpful in coming up with logical and sound opinions about these and many other questions.

Although known officially as Camp Sumter, the camp was called Andersonville after the nearby town of Anderson. The village had a train depot, a church, a store, a cotton warehouse, and about a dozen houses that were essentially shanties. Why was this place selected over some larger site like Richmond, Virginia?¹ According to R. Randolph Stevenson, a Confederate surgeon who issued a massive report on Andersonville after the war was over, the site was chosen for "humane reasons." These included accessibility to supplies of food, water, and timber (there were conveniently located saw and gristmills) and the warmer climate. Ovid L. Futch agrees that Confederate leaders thought that it would be easier to ship supplies to Andersonville than to Richmond, but he notes several other factors as well. He points out that Robert E. Lee considered that prisoners would be a military liability in case of an attack on Richmond. He further states that the local citizenry feared prison breaks and possible attacks by Union forces, as there was a shortage of prison

Rachel E. Noll, Assistant Editor of *Perspectives in History* for next year, teaches history at Villa Madonna Academy. She presented this paper at the annual Phi Alpha Theta Regional Conference at Northern Kentucky University, March 31, 2001.

guards. Moreover, the Confederate government wanted a camp that was far enough from active battle that the likelihood of enemy raids would be curtailed, making it easier to guard. Furthermore, the area should be one that could more easily be supplied with food—at a cheaper cost—than could be done in Richmond. Andersonville fit all of these criteria.²

Nonetheless, based solely on these factors, a number of places in the South would have sufficed. So how did it come to be Andersonville that was chosen? The decision had a great deal to do with the chain of command. General John C. Winder was in charge of all prisons in Georgia and Alabama for the Confederacy, eventually becoming commander of all Confederate prisons east of the Mississippi River. General Winder was ordered to find a place in Georgia that would be suitable for a prison and he ordered his son, Captain Sidney Winder, to go out and find it. With orders in hand, Sidney set out to select the site.³

Sidney found a location south of Albany that seemed perfect, but President Jefferson Davis expected that this would only invite a Union raid near the Gulf Coast. So, Sidney left for a place south of Macon called Americus. When he got there, he met Uriah Harrold, acting Commissary Department agent. Harrold suggested they visit the town of Bump Head, an old camp meeting ground that could accommodate hundreds of people. The citizens of Bump Head were not fond of the idea of a camp in their town, and pointed out their excessive distance from the railroad. They suggested that the pair look at Anderson, a small town approximately eleven miles northeast of Americus that had more abundant water. Winder and Harrold, believing that the townspeople had made a good point, left to inspect the area and Andersonville was born soon thereafter.⁴

Although Captain Sidney Winder was the first commandant of the camp, the man responsible for bringing Andersonville to life was Captain Richard B. Winder. He was the camp's quartermaster and was in charge of its construction. Captain Winder ran into difficulties at the very first. Because of the remote location of the camp, it was difficult to get supplies from the railroad. He found that the assurances he had received from General Winder that the people of the area would be more than willing to give up their time, labor, and supplies to help the Confederate cause was not a reality. His attempts to get lumber mills to provide lumber were in vain and he was ordered by the Confederate government to impress sawmills that did not have a contract with the railroads. Most of the mills, however, quickly established a contract with the railroads, and Richard was left with a small lot. The few mills that were left would not sell to the government because it paid such a paltry sum in comparison to everyone else. Captain Winder had no choice but to impress blacks, local citizens, and supplies from the surrounding area.⁵

The camp was set up on the high ground, and the hillsides were dry and wooded. The original size of the stockade area was 16 1/2 acres and was expanded twice to make room for prisoners. Eventually, because of the number of prisoners, three walls were placed around the stockade. It was built on Stockade Branch, a system of watercourses that met 1/4 of a mile east of the train depot. Stockade Creek, part

of the water system, met up with Sweetwater Creek and then flowed into the Flint River. Much of the area east of the stockade was a swamp, which caused health problems for the soldiers. The bakery and the cookhouse were placed north, or upstream, from the stockade, contaminating the water supply the soldiers used. The stockade and camp had been placed in the area because of “beautiful, clear, water” but by the end of 1864, the water and the swampy land became a major complaint.⁶

When the camp opened on February 17th of 1864, it was not finished. The original plan for the prison was that it would hold 6,000 captured soldiers, later changing to 10,000.⁷ By this time, Colonel Alexander W. Persons was the commandant. When he arrived, no more than 100 guards were on duty. The stockade was not completely finished, there were no locks for the gates around the camp, no lumber for shelters inside the stockade, none of the guards were heavily armed, cookhouse construction had only begun, and most importantly, there had been no arrangements to feed the prisoners. Colonel Persons faced a task of monumental proportions. Not only was he in charge of getting the camp into shape for the arrival of prisoners, he was responsible for the area surrounding the prison, dealing with local civilians, supervising the guard force, chasing down escaped prisoners, and communicating with Richmond. Richard Winder, who now reported to Persons, had the unenviable duty of feeding, sheltering, and clothing the prisoners.⁸

Of all the commandants of the prison, Colonel Persons was the best liked. He had the best relationship with the prisoners and tried to be kind to them, but Persons also faced difficulties in obtaining supplies. He was forced to transport lumber by train in order to build barracks and other shelters. For that reason, very few were built. In all of his time at Andersonville, he was only able to get about fifty carloads of lumber and most of it was used to build houses outside the camp area while Union prisoners suffered without shelter.⁹ At one point, Persons left his command post on a personal mission to find food and supplies for all the soldiers of the camp. He was disciplined for this action and eventually was fired for it.¹⁰

Captain Richard Winder’s position under Person’s command—charge of the inner stockade—was also short-lived. General John Winder replaced him with Captain Henry Wirz. Many of the prisoners did not like Wirz, commenting on his sinister mien. This was especially true of a man named John McElroy, a soldier in the Third Battalion, Sixteenth Illinois Cavalry, and a prisoner at Andersonville. He described Wirz as having a “mouth that protruded like a rabbit’s” and “bright, little eyes, like those of a squirrel or rat”.¹¹

The prisoners thought Wirz was crazy and as mean as any human being could possibly be. Warren Lee Goss, another Union soldier who was imprisoned at Camp Sumter, described Wirz as a “ferocious, round-shouldered little man.” According to Goss, Wirz once made wild gestures at a group of soldiers, including Goss, and they laughed at him because his “person, gestures, and looks were ridiculous.” Goss recalled later that Wirz raged at them saying, “By Got! You tam Yankees; you won’t laugh ven you gets into the pull pen.”¹²

Wirz was born in Switzerland in 1823. Raised a Calvinist, he converted to

Catholicism and created a rift in his family that never mended. Later, out on his own, he apprenticed as a pharmacist, married and had two children, but the marriage ended in divorce. Times grew tough and he owed a great deal of money to several creditors. Swiss law forbade excessive debt and Wirz was exiled as punishment. Wanting to start over and create a better life for himself, he landed in Boston, Massachusetts, later moving to Cadiz, Kentucky, and marrying Elizabeth Wolf. There, Wirz practiced homeopathic medicine, but competition in the region was tough so he moved to New Orleans.¹³

In Louisiana, he joined the army as a private in the Madison Infantry of the Fourth Louisiana Battalion. He injured his right arm and shoulder in the Battle of Seven Pines, making several sections of bone and muscles useless. The wounds, which later became infected on several occasions, served as a constant reminder of the action. In the army of the twentieth century he would have been discharged, but the Confederacy needed soldiers badly and Wirz was allowed to stay on as military records archivist under General Winder. He was then given command of a prison in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and while he was there no reports of brutality or mistreatment were made against him. He eventually took over command of Andersonville.¹⁴

Wirz took charge of Andersonville when the horror was at its height. When prisoners arrived, two things caught their attention and filled them with dread. One was the general misery of the place and the prisoners, and the other was the “dead line.” Private Isaac Davenport of the Seventh Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry characterized his first impression of Andersonville as a “desert looking place” and “very gloomy.” Another soldier from Connecticut, Robert Kellogg, said of he and his fellow comrades that the sight of the place froze their blood with terror and made their hearts fail within them.¹⁵ Lieutenant G. E. Sabre of the Second Rhode Island Cavalry wrote that as they passed along the outside of the camp, preparing to go in, he “felt sick at heart” for he saw the stockade, sentinels, and the sentry-boxes, and the places of horror which were the hospital and the graveyard. The place emanated the energy of hell.¹⁶

One of the objects that added to the prisoner’s misery was the sentry box. These were guard shacks where sentinels kept watch over the area commonly referred to as the “dead line.” The dead line was a row of stakes fifteen feet from the stockade on the interior side, driven into the ground with narrow strips of board nailed on top. Anyone who approached the line was instantly fired on by guards in the sentry-boxes on the stockade. Many of the guards took pleasure in using the prisoners for target practice and cared little if they injured or killed them. A rumor circulated among the prisoners that any sentinel who killed a prisoner approaching the dead line would be rewarded with a furlough, but this was mythical. Nevertheless, prisoners would deliberately run out into the line so that they could end their terrible suffering. In any case, the dead line caused a great fear and loathing of the guards.¹⁷

Many of the experiences of prisoners in other camps on both the Union and Confederate sides were similar to the conditions and treatment of prisoners arriving at Camp Sumter. This can be plainly seen by reading the diaries of soldiers taken

captive on both sides. So, what was it that made Andersonville so unique? What happened at this camp that did not happen to the same degree elsewhere? The answer is many-faceted.

One obvious problem was overcrowding. Andersonville was constructed to hold 10,000 men and it soon became inadequate when General Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the Federal Forces, decided to halt the prison exchange system that had been set up earlier, known as the Dix-Hill Cartel. This exchange, forged by Union General John A. Dix and Confederate General Daniel H. Hill, “paroled” prisoners. The soldiers would either automatically be released with the promise not to aid their cause until official notice to do so, or be held in custody until an equal exchange of prisoners could be made. Grant saw this as a way of prolonging the war on both sides and wanted general exchange to end. The result was a build up of the number of men held in prisons.¹⁸

It is estimated that between February of 1864 and April of 1865, approximately 50,000 men came through the camp. Of that total, nearly 13,000 died there. In July of 1864, the prison held 29,998 soldiers within its confines, and in August of the same year, the average number of men on any given day was 32,899.¹⁹ Obviously, approximately forty acres of land was not enough to hold all those men. Dr. Joseph Jones, Surgeon of the Provisional Army of Confederate States and Professor of Medical Chemistry in the Medical College of Georgia, reported that the average number of square feet of ground to each prisoner in August 1864, was 33.7. Jones stated that on this 33.7 square feet, the prisoners were forced to cook, wash, urinate, defecate, exercise, and sleep.²⁰

Most prisoners were forced to use the ground to carry out the daily functions of life since there was an appalling lack of shelter. No outhouses, bunks, or mess halls were available for the soldiers, at least none made out of wood. The most common form of shelter was called a “shebang.” The shebang looked like a tent and was usually made of cloth stretched across poles and raised up several feet off the ground. The more sophisticated ones were made of a clay substance found near the swamp area that was shaped into an adobe-like structure. These were very rare and often caved in on the soldiers sleeping in them. Some prisoners dug holes or tunnels in order to sleep underground, away from the hot Georgia sun, or to try to escape from the prison. Cave-ins happened in these places as well, but those who tried felt it was worth the risk. Eventually, two sets of barracks were built but they were not enough to keep up with the prison population.²¹

One other essential need became a concern as well: where did one go to the bathroom? The answer came in the form of a “sink.” The sink was the place that the prisoners designated as a latrine. The main sink was the swampy area on the eastern half of the camp, because it took up such a large area and could not be used for anything else. Unfortunately, the streams that ran into the mire did not have a current fast enough to carry excess waste and garbage away, so refuse from the cookhouse and bakery upstream, along with the soldier’s own waste, “clogged” the marsh.²²

In the summer of 1864, torrential rains and hot weather made the swamp an ideal

location for mosquitoes and infection. In order to avoid these, most men began relieving themselves whenever and wherever they were. If they were too ill to move, they dug a hole next to where they were lying or simply urinated on themselves in their uniforms.²³ In June of 1864, Warren Goss noted that the smell of the swamp was so bad that they (the commanders of the camp) ordered the necessary digging tools to be given to soldiers to fill the worst half acre of the sink with earth that had been excavated from the hillsides. Finally, in 1865, long after the prison population had reached its height, Dr. H.H. Clayton became chief surgeon of the camp. He ordered the draining of the swamp to get rid of some of the waste and smell that surrounded the area. Although this relieved the situation to some degree, it was too little, too late. Thousands of men had already died from ailments brought on by conditions in the area. Tragically, even this was not the worst of the conditions that prisoners were subjected to at Andersonville.²⁴

Two other factors of significance were food and medical help. When a soldier arrived at camp, he was not issued utensils to eat with—there were none to give. A few came with mess kits but these were confiscated by the guards. Most prisoners had to make do, eating their rations out of canteen halves, old boards, shingles, pieces of twisted tin, or shoes.²⁵

According to official records of the Confederate army, both prisoners and Confederate soldiers should have received a third pound of pork and a one pound serving of beef and a one and one fourth serving of cornmeal. If they were available, sweet potatoes, onions, peas, beans, molasses, or salt could be had. The cornmeal was usually a mixture of corn and the cob ground together. It was hard on the stomach and caused digestive problems. The pork was very fatty and often rancid. It was, however, something to eat and was better than starving to death. Warren Goss said that the rations, which were the best in the first few months, were “miserably inadequate,” and by July of 1864, bacon was nonexistent and when they were given rice or beans, they contained maggots or worms.²⁶

Why was there such a problem getting food? The remote location of the camp was a consideration, but other factors contributed to the problem. One of these was money. Southern farmers in the area could grow enough food to feed all who were stationed at the camp, but they did not want to give up their corn and beef to the Confederate army when the average citizen would pay more for it. They also did not want to grow corn to be eaten when they could make it into whiskey and garner a bigger profit.²⁷

Another factor involved was inefficient transportation. There was a plan to purchase beef cattle in Florida and have the herds “driven” up by “Florida Crackers.” These were skilled cattle drivers called cracklers because of the sound their thin, long, rawhide bullwhips made. They were different from most cattle drivers in that they did not ride on a horse, but walked next to the cattle to drive them. During the war, there were not nearly enough of them to drive the necessary amount of cattle back and forth, and the government made the shortage of men worse by conscripting them to serve in the Confederate army. With the failure of this plan,

camp leaders substituted pork for beef.²⁸

When no food rations or other provisions were left, prisoners had to buy them at outrageous prices. Money issued from the Confederate government was inflated and there was an immense sum of it being printed and circulated. The exchange rate in June of 1864 was \$4.50 in Confederate money to \$1.00 in Union currency and the Union soldiers paid the price for it. The prisoners could not afford much at these rates and it promoted a vicious system that starved many men and sent them to their graves.²⁹

An even more vicious system governed the medical care and facilities at Camp Sumter. The hospital shelter was made of all sorts of tents, not wood, and was originally capable of holding 800 men. It grew in size to 1,400, but even that was not enough. Dr. Isaiah White, Chief Surgeon at Andersonville, wrote in a correspondence to the Surgeon General of the Confederate army that by June 26, 1864, there were nearly 3,000 sick men in camp. Of those, only 1,035 could be cared for in the hospital due to a lack of staff and housing for the sick. He requested that 200 tents be sent immediately and that more medical officers should be sent to deal with the increasing numbers of sick. The Confederate army did not have enough tents for their own soldiers, much less for the enemy, but White received more medical attendants and had 300 by August of 1864.³⁰

Over and above the lack of facilities, there was a desperate lack of medicine due to the inefficiency of supply lines. Attendants would wash out dressings or bandages and use them several times over. They had few actual drugs and had to turn to roots or herbs to try to help relieve the men's pain. All three of the doctors who acted as chief surgeon at the camp continually asked for supplies and were frequently turned down.³¹

Overall conditions of the camp only added to the suffering. Men typically had one outfit of clothing to wear, the one that they were captured in. The "vermin-infested" clothing and lack of boiling facilities promoted the growth of lice and maggots, which became a major concern of the medical staff. The food that made men sick and put them in the hospital was served to them again, exacerbating their already existing condition. Due to close quarters and the large population in the camp, diseases such as smallpox, scurvy, and dysentery could not be contained and killed a substantial number of men. Moreover, the water supply was being contaminated inside the prison as it flowed out of the hospital and stockade. The sick and dying were making others ill as well.³²

Everyday, the medical staff went through the ritual of "sick call." It usually started at 8:00 a.m. with twelve doctors lining up at booths outside the South Gate of the prison. The sick would stand in line and be looked over to determine if they could be saved. Terminally ill soldiers would be rejected and left to die a slow and agonizing death. At the peak of overcrowding, only the most treatable were taken and, of those that passed through the "doors" of the hospital, 76% did not make it out alive. Prisoners were dying in large numbers, and those in charge had not a single tool to dig graves for them. These were the conditions when Henry Wirz took

command. Several months later he was able to procure implements to give these soldiers a decent burial.³³

With all of the pain and suffering that occurred at Andersonville, there had to be someone to blame, someone to take responsibility for the horrors that were perpetrated. The Union's most logical answer was Henry Wirz, commandant of the camp for the longest period. Wirz was charged with murdering thirteen prisoners of war and tried as a war criminal. He was found guilty and on November 10, 1865, he was hanged. Was he truly guilty, or was he being used as a scapegoat?

Bruce Catton believes that the latter was the case. He wrote in 1959, "Wirz was a scapegoat, dying for the sins of many people, of whom some lived south of the Potomac River, while others lived north of it." He also expressed the idea that the real problems behind the atrocious conditions of Andersonville were beyond Wirz's control. Catton intimated that the Southern economy failed Wirz and that Southern dreams were too grand for the actuality of what could be accomplished. He mentioned that Camp Sumter was just about as terrible as any place could be, but there also were other prison camps, both Union and Confederate, that had the same type of reputation as Andersonville. If that was true, why single out this one and make Wirz die for it?³⁴

At Wirz's trial, there was a massive amount of testimony both for and against him. Many former inmates testified against him, while other former prisoners defended him. Testimony from both sides was biased, especially from former inmates who only knew the hell they lived through and assumed it was Wirz's fault because he was in charge while they were there. Historians, taking a more objective view, have studied thousands of pages of official records and correspondence to see that Wirz did try, on numerous occasions, to get relief. He wrote the acting Assistant Adjutant-General of the Confederate Army in 1865 to obtain shoes for paroled soldiers who were doing work that the government would have had to pay someone else to do. He was worried about them, for they had shoes that were worn out from "service" to the Confederacy, and he did not want them to go barefooted. Other acts of goodwill on Wirz's part have been documented, such as requesting lumber and tools to erect shelters and more rations for the men. This does not sound like a man who would intentionally murder men.³⁵

Ovid Futch blames the horror of Andersonville on the mismanagement of the Confederate high command. He posits that those in positions to help Alexander Persons or Henry Wirz with the necessary rations, supplies, and soldiers needed to run a decent and humane camp did not do so; people like General Samuel Cooper, General Howell Cobb, and Governor Joseph E. Brown. Despite these and other impassioned arguments, Wirz was used to appease northern citizens who read diaries or accounts of former prisoners and were outraged at the treatment they had received. The Federal government was not going to put Jefferson Davis or Robert E. Lee on trial. And, as long as the public had their thirst for vengeance quenched, people cared nothing about truth and real justice.³⁶

It is said that people study history so that they do not repeat the same mistakes over and over again. And yet, the same lessons are continuously repeated in different places of the world at different times. There are men and women who are literally digging up the past at Andersonville so that people can learn from what went wrong there and see that it never happens again. The hope is that studies such as these will be a guiding light to a generation of children, parents, and grandparents who will understand the value of human life and treasure it.

Endnotes

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4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. *Ibid.*, 17-18; "Andersonville," *Blue and Gray*, 11; Futch, *Andersonville*, 11.
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7. "Andersonville," *Blue and Gray*, 11.
8. Edward F. Roberts, *Andersonville Journey: The Civil War's Greatest Tragedy* (Shippensburg, 1998), 23, 26.
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10. "Andersonville," *Blue and Gray*, 9.
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26. Ibid.; Goss, *Soldier's Story*, 79.
27. Roberts, *Andersonville*, 25.
28. Ibid., 24.
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30. "Andersonville," *Blue and Gray*, 18; *OR* (ser. 2) 7: 418.
31. McElroy, *Andersonville*, 165, 167; *OR* (ser. 2) 7: 592-593.
32. McElroy, *Andersonville*, 167.
33. Ibid.; "Andersonville," *Blue and Gray*, 18; Bruce Catton, *American Heritage Civil War Chronicles* (Fall 1992), 51.
34. "Andersonville," *Blue and Gray*, 34.
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36. Futch, *Andersonville*, 13-15.