

Encountering the Complicated Legacy of Andersonville

James A. Percoco

“Americans,” historian Richard White often reminds his audiences, “prefer celebrating to remembering history.” The landscape of the United States is populated with local, state, and national sites, house museums, working farms and other places of our collective past that are deemed of historic significance. Many of these sites do in fact celebrate the American narrative. It’s hard not to stand on the Old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts, and reflect on our national beginning where we tossed off the reins of monarchy. At Biltmore House in Asheville, North Carolina, we stand in awe before Gilded Age architect Richard Morris Hunt’s creation, the home of George Washington Vanderbilt, and admire what our economic system is capable of producing. And at Gettysburg it is easy to get lost in the romance of Pickett’s Charge imagining the gray and butternut clad Confederates, flags unfurled, moving with awesome energy on the Union lines. Even at one of our newest shrines, the Flight 93 National Memorial in Shankesville, Pennsylvania, while recalling the horror of September 11, 2001, we can still be moved by the American narrative of “good vs. evil” as passengers on that doomed flight wrested control from terrorists bent on destroying some iconic edifice in our nation’s capital.

But what about places where Americans fell short of our lofty goals and are fraught with complex and difficult historical questions. There are numerous places that recall the awful legacy of slavery, Colonial Williamsburg being one. At Manzanar National Historic Site visitors confront an uncomfortable history; the confinement of 10,000 plus American citizens of Japanese descent behind barbed wire, deemed a potential threat to American security during World War II.

For many years, I have been challenging my students to confront, at times, the grim underbelly of American history, by visiting places where they have to step out of their comfort zones and wrestle with tough interpretations of the past; places where our vision of American Exceptionalism is crowded

out with voices that counter that narrative. One of the places that I have traveled with students to confront this kind of historic reality is Andersonville National Historic Site in Andersonville, Georgia. In this, the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, teachers may wish to explore this often forgotten part of our four years of fratricide, which, at best, may get a paragraph in a textbook. The site is located in a remote corner of southwestern Georgia, 730 miles from West Springfield High School in Springfield, Virginia, where I teach, roughly a 12-hour trip by charter bus.

Between February 1864 and April 1865, 13,000 Union prisoners of war died in the 16-acre stockade that housed them. Originally intended to incarcerate 10,000 people, the Confederacy was forced by its

war time situation and the failure of a Union-Confederate Prisoner Exchange program to relegate Andersonville to a kind of dumping ground that held over 45,000 prisoners, peaking in August 1864 to 32,000 people of which an average of 125 men died per day. Historian Lonnie R. Speer aptly titled his 1997 landmark work *Portals To Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War*, and Andersonville clearly ranks at the top of the list, while the Northern version of Andersonville, Elmira in New York, earned the moniker “Hellmira.” National Park Service, historian emeritus Edwin C. Bearss once told me, “There are no winners in the story of Civil War prisons.”

The clay surface of the ground is bright reddish-orange, a naturally defined hue by the laws of chemistry reflecting deep iron content. Metaphorically the color of the soil symbolically represents the blood and anguish of the men, and several women, who endured a pitiful existence here. It always strikes me too, how hard the ground is. Physically it serves as a reminder both of the places where people had to sleep and the quality of life they endured while imprisoned here.

Our class trip to Andersonville National Historic Site is the culminating activity for our semester research unit on the prison itself and the subsequent post war 1865 war-crimes trial of the Confederate Camp Commandant Henry Wirz. By the time the charter bus pulls into the grounds of the site, students in my applied history class have already vis-



The photograph "Drawing rations; view from main gate. Andersonville Prison, Georgia, August 17, 1864," comes from General Records of the Federal Works Agency, Record Group 162, in the holdings of the National Archives. It is available online from the National Archives at www.DocsTeach.org, Identifier 533034.

ited the National Archives, poring through related documents including the graphic report sent to Confederate Surgeon General S.P. Moore by Joseph Jones, Surgeon of the Provisional Army of the Confederate States. The Jones/Moore correspondence notes that severe "diarrhea, dysentery, scurvy, and hospital gangrene" were the leading causes of death. The unbelievable filth described in the letter, including an account of the sole source of water supply to the prisoners as a "stream flowing through the Stockade, a filthy quagmire of human excrement, alive with working maggots" meant that "the slightest scratch and even the bites of small insects were in some cases followed by such rapid and extensive Gangrene, as to destroy extremities and even life itself."

What transpired at Andersonville does not become a reality to the students until the motor coach drives beyond the entrance gates past the nearly 13,000 cramped but neatly rowed graves of the National Cemetery. All chatter on the bus ceases as students gaze out

the window and take in the sadly compelling view. No longer do the prisoners who suffered and died at Andersonville remain frozen figures in a vacuum. The period photographs that we studied of the men posing proudly in their Union blues for the camera prior to their capture suddenly have a new immediacy. For their research paper, they examined all manner of evidence about Andersonville, officially known as Camp Sumter. We examined countless images, photographed in 1864 of the camp, read numerous accounts of prisoners, read poetry composed by both prisoners and people who had ancestors perish there and even watched parts of the Turner Film production, *Andersonville*. All of that does not coalesce until we walk through the cemetery and visit the camp site.

If students are to understand history, they have to bring together intellect and emotional intelligence. I know that there is no possible way to really know what the past was like, but I believe we can get close, particularly

with visits to the place where history really happened.

With the learners we now have in our classrooms we must support them, as Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown point out in their book, *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*, with an opportunity to "make connections on a tacit level." (86) We need to employ student imagination and there is no better place for that imagination to gestate than at a historic site. In spite of all that the students have read about Andersonville, the maps of the compound, or the many photographs, it really doesn't become knowledge until they see it firsthand. Encountering history in this way is the ultimate hands-on experience.

Let's take this into the collective. The best parts about these field trips are the conversations that take place between students either as we tramp across the site or on the bus ride home. I love eavesdropping on these conversations, because this interplay between

the students reflects their true knowledge. They communicate between one another not only their individual experiences, but their shared sense of community as learners. This reinforces what Thomas and Brown argue: “In the new culture of learning, people learn through their interaction and participation with one another in fluid relationships that are the results of shared interests and opportunity.”(50)

Once the trip is concluded, as a class we can discuss with much greater depth, the historical issues that those living in 1864 and 1865 confronted. We can wrestle more articulately with questions about the Lincoln Administration’s decision not to exchange POWs in order to keep pressure on the Confederate States as well as exact a penalty for the treatment of Black Union soldiers who, in several instances after surrendering on the battlefield, were brutally executed. “Could the Confederate government have done more to alleviate suffering at Andersonville?” is another question students raise. With regard to the trial of Henry Wirz and his subsequent execution as a war criminal, we can examine that event more judiciously in light of what we know and have seen. Prior to our visit, we review primary and secondary accounts of Wirz’s arrest and trial. Some of the students’ research at the National Archives involves delving into the trial records. Another option for teachers is to show the two-hour television play production, *Andersonville Trial* that is available in DVD format and in online streaming format at Amazon. History (formerly the History Channel) also has a documentary called *The Horrors at Andersonville Prison: Trial of Henry Wirz* that covers the same territory, but in 50 minutes. Like many



West Springfield class trip to Andersonville, GA, 1997.

controversial subjects there are really no clear-cut answers. What emerge are more questions and that leads to what I call “the eternal conversation” with the past.

Teachers who would like to teach about Andersonville, but can’t make the trip a reality can visit the Andersonville Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plan at: www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/11andersonville/11andersonville.htm. This lesson will help you and your students to sort through the complex story of Andersonville. I use some elements from the lesson for instruction prior to our site visit.

The Civil War is a difficult period of American history to evaluate. There are many passions on both sides. To this day, we still debate the meaning of the war. Bringing students to such sites is a rich way for them

to learn more fully, to find themselves in the presence of the past. It is these kinds of interplay that I often find sticks with former students, when years later they say to me, “Mr. Percoco do you remember the time we went to ...?” Indeed I do!

My hope is that with their historical imaginations unleashed by the power of their visit, these students, as adults, will continue to be life-long learners, using not only the web, blogging, and tweeting to learn and access information, but in continuing to go to one of the most direct sources—the place. Perhaps they will have an Iphone or Ipad in hand helping them see the site in new ways, but a fundamental truth will remain—they will be standing on and in the presence of the past. 🌐

Additional Resources

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- Hesseltine, William B., ed. *Civil War Prisons*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1962. Reprint, Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1995.
- Marvel, William. *Andersonville: The Last Depot*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.
- Ransom, John. *John Ransom's Andersonville Diary*. Philadelphia: Douglass Brothers, 1883. Reprint, New York: Berkley, 1994.
- Thomas, Douglas and John Seely Brown. *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*. 2011.

JAMES A. PERCOCO, a nationally recognized history educator and member of the National Teachers Hall of Fame, is the Director of Education for the Friends of the National World War II Memorial and the author of *Summers with Lincoln: Looking for the Man in the Monuments (Fordham)*. Visit him at www.jamespercoco.com

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