

## **Introduction on the History of Andersonville Prison:**

Notorious, a hell on earth, a cesspool, a death camp, and infamous have all been used by prisoners and critics to describe Andersonville Prison, constructed to house Union POW's in 1864, and all descriptions apply. Andersonville Prison camp in Andersonville, Georgia, or Fort Sumter as it was called, only served as a prison camp for fourteen months, but during that time 45,000 Union soldiers suffered and died there, the death toll nearly 13,000 in little over a year. Andersonville accounted for 40% of all Union POW's who died in the south. The monthly mortality rate was 3000, and around a hundred a day died. The causes of death included malnutrition, disease, poor sanitation, overcrowding, and exposure to inclement weather. One argument in the analysis of Andersonville is whether the abuse and starvation of prisoners was a tragic circumstance of wartime conditions and poverty in the south, or if the mistreatment was purposeful and intended. Most scholarship supports the latter point of view; the only dissenting views are southern writers and historians who espouse a "lost cause" theory of The Civil War, opinions that the south was blameless predicated on the wish "that the south will rise again." In fact, there are articles of war and specific rules on how to treat POW's on both sides, and even though much of the south had succeeded, they still agreed to these tenants of fair and decent treatment of POW's. Fair and humane treatment did not happen at Andersonville. Victims found at the end of the war who had served an Fort Sumter resembled victims of Auschwitz or Dachau. They were starved and left to die with no regard for human life. The prosecution of their leader, Henry Wirz, a Swiss doctor who had practiced medicine in Kentucky, of war crimes, was fair and well documented by examples of mistreatment and abuse by Union soldiers. Many southern scholars continue to believe Wirz was simply a victim of circumstance. The evidence proves his actions to be much more insidious and deadly.

## **The Breakdown of Prisoner Exchange between North and South:**

The reason that a large prison camp such as Anderson had to be built to begin with was because of the failure between north and south to facilitate prisoner exchanges, which flourished in the early years of the war. First, the exchange rate was complicated by how many privates were equal to an officer. Several privates were to be exchanged for one officer, and the higher the officer's rank, the more enlisted men had to be sacrificed.

The primary problem with prisoner exchanges reflected directly on the attitudes among the Confederacy towards black soldiers. The south did not recognize black Union soldiers as real soldiers but instead saw them as "rebel slaves. The mass killing of black Union soldiers by Nathan Bedford Forrest at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, led to a primary breakdown of prisoner exchange:

On April 12, 1864, Confederate forces under [Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest](#) massacred black Union soldiers at Fort Pillow, TN. In response, [President Abraham Lincoln](#) demanded that black prisoners of war be treated the same as their white comrades. This was refused by Confederate President Jefferson Davis. As a result, Lincoln and [Lt. General Ulysses S. Grant](#) suspended all prisoner exchanges. With the halt of exchanges, POW populations on both sides began to grow rapidly. At Andersonville, the population reached 20,000 by early June, twice the camp's intended capacity.<sup>1</sup>

Hence the prisoner exchange broke down by 1864 and prisons on both sides were allowed to proliferate and grow. This was especially true of Fort Sumter in Georgia. As the leaders of the confederacy realized that it needed additional fortification to imprison Union soldiers, they decided upon Andersonville, Georgia because of its location:

In late 1863, the Confederacy found that it needed to construct additional prisoner of war camps to house captured Union soldiers waiting to be exchanged. As leaders discussed where to place these new camps, former Georgia governor, Major General Howell Cobb stepped forward to suggest the interior of his home state. Citing southern Georgia's distance from the front lines, relative immunity to Union cavalry raids, and easy access to railroads, Cobb was able to convince his superiors to build a camp in Sumter County. In November 1863, Captain W. Sidney Winder was dispatched to find a suitable location. Arriving at the tiny village of Andersonville, Winder found what he believed to be an ideal site. Located near the Southwestern<sup>1</sup> Railroad, Andersonville possessed transit access and a good water source. With the location secured, Captain Richard B. Winder was sent to Andersonville to design and oversee the construction of the prison. Planning a facility for 10,000 prisoners, Winder designed a 16.5 acre rectangular compound that had a stream flowing through the center. Naming the prison Camp Sumter in January 1864, Winder used local slaves to construct the compound's walls.<sup>2</sup>

### **Building Andersonville Prison:**

The prison was built on 10.6 acres and was approximately 1010 feet long and 780 feet wide. The walls of the stockade were built from pine logs set in a trench

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1 Andersonville Prison Camp. Retrieved at <http://www.historynet.com/andersonville-prison-camp>

2. American Civil War: Andersonville Prison. Retrieved at [http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/civil\\_war/p/andersonville.htm](http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/civil_war/p/andersonville.htm)

five feet deep. Prisoners complained that the walls of the stockade was so close together, nothing could be seen on the outside. There was a short fence built in front of the stockade called a “deadline” to keep prisoners away from the stockade walls:

The prison pen was surrounded by a stockade of hewed pine logs that varied in height from 15 to 17 feet. Sentry boxes—called “pigeon roosts” by the prisoners—stood at 90-foot intervals along the top of the stockade and there were two entrances on the west side. Inside, about 19 feet from the wall, was the “deadline,” which prisoners were forbidden to cross. The “deadline” was intended to prevent prisoners from climbing over the stockade or from tunneling under it. It was marked by a simple post and rail fence and guards<sup>2</sup> had orders to shoot any prisoner who crossed the fence, or even reached over it. A branch of Sweetwater Creek, called Stockade Branch, flowed through the prison yard and was the only source of water for most of the prison.<sup>3</sup>

Clark Thorpe described the dimensions of Andersonville this way:

At the time we arrived [in early May 1864] I suppose there were about 15 to 18 acres enclosed by a huge fence, built by hewing pine logs, 24 feet long, on two sides and placing them tight in the ground, about eight feet deep, leaving 16 feet out of the ground. At a distance of about two hundred feet apart, outside the stockade, there were rude ladders erected leading to a platform about twelve or thirteen feet above the ground, on which the guards stood. They were protected from the sun’s rays and from storms by a rough board roof.<sup>4</sup>

### **Shelter at Andersonville:**

The prison was not a building however, prisoners arrived before the proposed barracks could ever be built. The only buildings included a commissary and a hospital surrounded by a stockade and various sentry posts for guards. Hence Andersonville was an open-air cesspool where men could not take shelter against the elements of weather. The men were forced to use tents made of blankets or cardboard or fashion a shelter in the dirt underground. One description of the deprivations of shelter were as follows:

Here was a picture of squalor and misery seldom equaled in the sight of man—thousands of men, many of them nearly naked, barefoot, black and filthy beyond the power of words to describe. The space inside was covered,

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3. The Sights Fairly Sicken Me, [Ural, Susannah J., \*Civil War Times\*](#). Oct2014, Vol. 53 Issue 5, p56-63

4. Thorpe, Inside **Andersonville**. [Civil War Times](#). Oct2007, Vol. 46 Issue 8, p40-47

in great part, by rude shelters of all descriptions and sizes, from the somewhat commodious tent made by sewing two army blankets together and stretching them over a ridge-pole and pinning the outer ends to the ground, under which several men could crawl for shelter, to a little affair, made by stretching shirts, blouses, etc., in like manner, which could scarcely shelter two men.<sup>5</sup>

The shelter problems in Andersonville was described by Union prisoner Clark N.Thorp as pure deprivation:

We had now been in captivity about eight months and our clothing was in rags though we had been careful to keep it. You must understand that the Confederate government made no attempt to house its Andersonville prisoners....Here we were, by the thousands, taking the weather night and day as it came, without any covering except the clothes worn throughout the twenty-four hours. Let me say here that during June and July 1864 it rained for twenty-one consecutive days and the rain-fall amounted at times almost to a deluge. During a heavy storm none of us could keep from getting soaked<sup>3</sup>and those poor fellows who were without any shelter were much worse off than those who had only a blanket for a roof...Many of the men had no clothing or blankets to protect themselves, and at night, would dig into the banks and crawl in until they were nearly hidden and often, when a heavy rain came up, the earth would become loosened and cave in, burying all the men sleeping in the hole or cave. I have seen several pairs of feet projecting out of the ground in the morning after a rain.<sup>6</sup>

Clark Thorpe also spoke vividly of the overcrowding:

There were no regular streets except the two running into the stockade from the two gates. Spaces were reserved at intervals where men could get into line to be counted. All other spaces were filled up as any man, or squad, chose in pitching their tents....I speak of tents, not because we all had them by any means, but because many were fortunate enough to have one or a portion of one and if so it meant a great deal—it became a question of life or death to us.

I have seen men, by the hundred, standing huddled together for mutual warmth and support (you could not fall very well with men on every side standing tight to you) but these men were weakened by disease and starvation, and during the night many would have to lie down and, in the

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5. The Sights Fairly Sicken Me, [Ural](#), [Susannah J.](#), [Civil War Times](#). Oct2014, Vol. 53 Issue 5, p56-63.

6. Inside Andersonville, by Clark N. Thorpe

morning, if it had rained hard you would approach a man who looked like a pile of sand, the heavy rain having thrown sand over his prostrate body. Many of them would be dead in the morning and would be carried out to the<sup>4</sup>deadhouse by their comrades.<sup>7</sup>

One account on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1864 from Robert H. Kellogg, a sergeant major in the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment Connecticut volunteers, recalled the following conditions present upon entering the prison:

As we entered the place, a spectacle met our eyes that almost froze our blood with horror, and made our hearts fail within us. Before us were forms that had once been active and erect;—*stalwart men*, now nothing but mere walking skeletons, covered with filth and vermin. Many of our men, in the heat and intensity of their feeling, exclaimed with earnestness. "Can this be hell?" "God protect us!" and all thought that He alone could bring them out alive from so terrible a place. In the center of the whole was a swamp, occupying about three or four acres of the narrowed limits, and a part of this marshy place had been used by the prisoners as a sink, and excrement covered the ground, the scent arising from which was suffocating. The ground allotted to our ninety was near the edge of this plague-spot, and how we were to live through the warm summer weather in the midst of such fearful surroundings, was more than we cared to think of just then.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Water Supply at Andersonville:**

A creek ran through the middle of the prison which was supposed to deliver potable water in theory, but overcrowding turned that water into a latrine. Besides overcrowding, efforts were made to make sure the prisoners did not have clean water. The only place in the creek to get clean water was in the middle of the creek away from the sludge and waste, yet Murz and his men put ropes up along the edge of the creek to prevent prisoners from getting the clean water in the middle. In addition, the creek was downstream through the prison and only Wurz and his cohorts lived upstream and had the cleanest water. Upstream the cooks dumped refuse and grease into the water and it was used as latrine. "Sanitation was lax and feces and other waste products dumped upstream often traveled to soldiers drinking the water lower down."<sup>9</sup>

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7. Inside Andersonville, by Clark N. Thorpe

8. The Sights Fairly Sicken Me by Susannah Ural

Sergeant Clark Thorp spoke movingly about the small stream of water all of the prisoners had to live on and the punishment when trying to obtain clean water near the dead-line.

A sluggish stream separated the north from the south side of the **prison** and this was all the provision made by the Johnnies for the drink needed by the prisoners. This stream was surrounded by wet, marshy ground which was unfit for men to camp in, nor could they occupy all of the hill-side so that much of the space was worthless as a camp, but very valuable as a source of disease and death. The water would spread out over this low ground, especially near the west or upper side of the stockade. Into this the men would wade by the hundreds, with the canteens of their squads upon their backs, waiting their turn to get near the dead-line, where they might reach above the muddy water, to get some which was clear. [If the] wrong kind of a guard happened to be on duty, he was apt to get a bullet into his head.<sup>9</sup>

Another description of the scant water supply was sobering:

The only water supply was a stream that first trickled through a Confederate army camp, then pooled to form a swamp inside the stockade. It provided the only source of water for drinking, bathing, cooking, and sewage. Under such unsanitary conditions, it wasn't surprising when soldiers began dying in staggering numbers.<sup>10</sup>

John Maile, a Union Prisoner, describes how the water flowed and what forces of nature and man that made it so putrid:

The surface of the interior consisted of two hillsides, sloping respectively north and south towards the center which was occupied by a swamp of nearly four acres. This was traversed by a sluggish creek which was some five feet wide and six inches deep, and made its way along the foot of the south slope. Up the stream were located the headquarters of Capt. Wirz, the <sup>5</sup>camp of the Confederate artillery and infantry and the cook-house for the prisoners. The drainage of these localities entered the creek which flowed into the prison through spaces between the stockade timbers, and polluted the water which was the chief supply of the prison, and which, at midnight, in its clearest condition, was the color of amber. The intervening space at the foot of the north hill was a wide morass, and when overflowed by rains became a vast cesspool on which boundless swarms of flies settled down and laid their eggs; which were speedily hatched by the fervent heat of the nearly tropical sun, and became a horrible undulating mass. On a change of wind the

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9. Inside Andersonville, by Clark Thorpe

10. Andersonville Prison. Retrieved at [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Andersonville\\_prison](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Andersonville_prison)

odor could be detected miles away; indeed it was reported that the people of Macon petitioned General Howell Cobb, the military governor of Georgia, for a removal of the prison located sixty miles away, lest an awful pestilence sweep over their country!<sup>11</sup>

### **Digging wells for clean water:**

Throughout the camp, many prisoners, because they did not have clean water, started to dig wells. They had a hard time fashioning equipment for such a task, but many prisoners managed. Clark Thorp explains:

During June it became quite the fashion to dig wells. Many wells were dug and the condition of a large part of the prisoners was much improved. The party with whom I associated were fortunate enough to secure good water at a distance of about 18 feet down.

The soil was sandy and apt to cave so that it was necessary to dig the well considerable wider at the top so that it would have quite a slope to prevent caving in. The means used for removing the earth were generally a pair of pants legs tied at the bottom and were hauled up with ropes made from strips of clothing, blankets, etc.<sup>12</sup>

John Maile spoke of confederate help to dig wells for fresh water, although many of men tried to dig tunnels for escape. If the prisoners were only interested in water and not attempting escape, occasional permission was granted to keep the wells open:

As the killed and wounded are scattered over the fields of the sanguinary battle, so our dying sick lay around on every hand. In the early summer, Capt. Wirz issued to the prisoners picks and shovels, with which to dig wells for increased water supply. From some of these wells the men started tunnels through which to escape. Discovering this, the commander withdrew the tools, and ordered the wells to be filled up. Permission to keep one of them open was purchased by a group of prisoners. It was sunk to a necessary depth, covered with a platform and trap door, and supplied about one thousand men.<sup>13</sup>

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11. The Project Gutenberg EBook of Prison Life in Andersonville, by John L. Maile. Retrieved <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/39584/39584-h/39584-h.htm>

12. Inside Andersonville, by Clark Thorpe

13. Prison Life in Andersonville by John L. Maile

## **The Diet in Andersonville:**

The diet or rations given at Andersonville was very substandard, not only was there not enough food, it was not the right kind of food or well prepared. First soldiers had to stand in long lines to organize and be counted for the 4PM rations. If you weren't in line for morning roll call, or you were too sick to stand in line, you did not receive rations for the day. John Maile explains:

At ten o'clock every forenoon a drum call was beaten from the platform at the south gate. At this signal the prisoners fell into line by detachments, forming as best they could in the narrow paths that separated the small tents, blanket shanties or dug-outs. At the same moment a company of Confederate sergeants entered the two gates for the purpose of counting and recording the number of the prisoners. To each of these officers a certain number of detachments were assigned. The men, unsheltered from the fierce sun-heat, had perforce to remain standing during the entire count. If a number less than that of yesterday was in evidence, the Federal sergeant had to account for the deficit. Sometimes a number of men were too ill to stand up, so the line was held the longer while the Confederate official viewed the sick where they lay.<sup>14</sup>

At four in the afternoon meager rations were finally given as John Maile explains, and men fought for every crumb:

At four o'clock in the afternoon rations of corn bread and bacon were issued on the basis of the morning count of those who are able to stand up. Two army wagons drawn by mules entered the north and south gates simultaneously. They were piled high with bread, thin loaves of corn bread or Johnny cake, made of coarse meal and water by our men who had been paroled for that work.

A blanket was spread upon the ground and the quantity for a detachment was placed thereon in three piles; one for every ninety, according to the number of men able to eat. In like manner the sergeants of nineties subdivided the piles to the thirties.

The writer had charge of a division of thirty and distributed as follows: His blanket was spread in front of his shelter tent and on it he spread the bread in as many pieces as there were men counted in the morning.

Each man had his number and was intently watching the comparative size of the portions. "Sergeant," cries one, pointing to a cube of bread, "That piece is smaller than the one next to it." A crumb is taken from the one and place

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<sup>14</sup>. Prison Life in Andersonville, by John L. Maile.



upon the other. The relative size of any piece may be challenged by any member of the thirty, for his life is involved.<sup>15</sup>

Prisoners were dropping like flies from malnutrition and scurvy. The daily rations were a small piece of cornbread and uncooked bacon in very small amounts with occasional beans, cowpeas, or rice:

The diet consisted of cornbread, raw bacon at times and cowpeas at times. Our provisions were very much short of the necessary. If cooked rations were issued we would get a piece of corn-bread about 2" x 2" x 3," the meal being ground cob and all, coarser than one in the north would buy for his horse, a few beans (perhaps one-half pint) and a couple of ounces of pork or bacon.... Soon the meat supply failed and I have seen a team loaded up high with the under jaws of hogs, smoked and old, and as we did not get a jaw-bone to each man you may guess that we were not fattened by them. <sup>16</sup>

Another soldier John H. Goldsmith of the 14<sup>th</sup> regiment Illinois infantry had this to say about the food:

I had charge of the rations up to the time I left the prison. The rations consisted of half a pound of meal of very poor quality, half a pound of beef, half a pound of peas and two gills of molasses. The ration of molasses was on each alternate day, and of beef the same day...The rations issued to our <sup>8</sup>prisoners was just one-half the quantity issued to the rebel troup. <sup>17</sup>

One prisoner, George A. Hitchcock described the horrors of scurvy as well.

Nearly 150 years ago, in September 1864, George A. Hitchcock looked up from his pocket diary, staring glassy-eyed through a hot Georgia rain. "Signs of scurvy have appeared in my mouth around the gums of my diseased teeth," he wrote. "The gums swell up and turn dark purple. Where others have it and do not recover, this swelling spreads in a few days until the face and neck turn black as if blood settled all over it; then the teeth drop out -- the jaws become set and a general rotting process is the last stage. With others the disease shows itself first in the limbs, rendering them stiff and helpless. My general feeling is one of complete lassitude and low spirits. <sup>18</sup> (3).

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15. Prison Life in Andersonville, by John L. Maile

16. Inside Andersonville, by Clark N. Thorpe

17. The Tragedy of Andersonville: Trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the Prison Keeper By Norton Parker Chipman

18. The Sights Fairly Sicken me, By Susannah Ural

Clark Thorp also had much to say about the horrors of scurvy due to a diet totally lacking in vitamin C:

Privations, lack of vegetable food and lack of exercise [led many of us to contract that] dread disease, scurvy. The mouth would become infected, the gums swollen so the teeth could not be closed together and we would be unable to chew any solid food. The gums would become black and decayed and, in my own case, with long and sharp fingernails I could gouge away parts, which were in such condition as to be exceedingly offensive to the smell. Limbs would be drawn up to the body and the back of them would become discolored and from the heels to the hips resembled, in color, a very severe black and blue spot. A dropsical swelling of the flesh would take place and I could pull the flesh of my feet out of shape or press an indentation into the flesh and it would remain in that shape until action replaced it.<sup>19</sup>

John Maile, another Union prisoner, had this say about the meager food rations:

The cube of bread and morsel of meat constitute the ration for twenty-four hours. One-half may be eaten at once; the remainder should be put in the haversack for breakfast. If any one yields to his insatiable hunger and eats the whole for supper he has to fast until the following evening and must then deny himself and put away the portion for the next morning's breakfast.<sup>21</sup>

Since disease was rampant, many men found themselves in the rudely built hospital. But being sick was not white hospital beds and caring nurses, it was simply more misery as recounted by a prisoner, Joseph Adler:

I should judge the sick were treated badly, the majority of the sick men had to lie on the bare ground; the majority of them had no blankets; they had<sup>9</sup> nothing to lie on and nothing to cover themselves with, and most of the time the food furnished them was unfit for them to eat. A little corn bread and rice soup that I would not give to a dog.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Free Market in Andersonville:**

Many Union soldiers had money and since 45,000 prisoners moved through Andersonville in fourteen months time and rations, clothing and shelter were substandard, many shopkeepers and merchants set up shop inside the stockade and sold fresh vegetables of every kind. Clark Thorpe recounts the open-air market:

The authorities at Andersonville allowed supplies to be sold to the prisoners

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19. Inside Andersonville, by Clark Thorpe

20. The Tragedy of Andersonville by Chipman

for Federal money. Numerous small restaurants flourished in the stockade. From small clay ovens they supplied fresh bread and baked meats. Irish and sweet potatoes, string beans, peas, tomatoes, melons, sweet corn, and other garden products were abundantly offered for sale. New arrivals were amazed to find these resources in the midst of utter destitution and starvation.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to food for the starving men, other services included doctoring, tailoring, and cobbling for worn out shoes. It was referred to as one of the largest cities in the confederacy:

Like most cities (Andersonville was the fifth largest "city" in the Confederacy), it included a host of tradesmen and merchants. There were <sup>21</sup>representatives of many occupations. Barbers and laundries flourished. There were dentists, doctors, watchmakers, bakers, tailors, and many a cobbler repairing rotting shoes. Prisoners who had money could buy almost anything imaginable to eat. James Selman's shanty periodically offered cucumbers, watermelons, muskmelons, onions, and potatoes. Selman's prices were high because he paid enormous premiums to the farmers and women who brought their produce and baked goods to the camp. (He still made a profit). Selman's sutlery, was only the most obvious of several grocery alternatives. Over 200 small businesses operated on Market Street inside of the stockade. Full time vendors cried out "who wants wood?" and "Here goes a bully dress coat, only \$4."<sup>21</sup>

### **The Clothing at Andersonville:**

Besides and inadequate diet, the men had no clothes to wear except what they had arrived with. Therefore most prisoner were soaking in the long Georgia rains and freezing in the cold of the winter. The prisoners wore tatters and because the water was putrid, they could not wash the clothes they had. Unless prisoners could afford to buy new clothes from one of markets inside the stockade, they were left to withstand the often cruel elements of weather. Clark N. Thorp had this to say:

We had now been in captivity about eight months and our clothing was in rags though we had been careful to keep it. You must understand that the Confederate government made no attempt to house its Andersonville prisoners....Here we were, by the thousands, taking the weather night and day as it came, without any covering except the clothes worn throughout the twenty-four hours. Let me say here that during June and July 1864 it rained for twenty-one consecutive days and the rain-fall amounted at times almost to a deluge. During a heavy storm none of us could keep from getting soaked and those poor fellows who were without any shelter were much worse off

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<sup>21</sup> Andersonville, What really happened. <http://ecedweb.unomaha.edu/lessons/andersonvilleact4.htm>

than those who had only a blanket for a roof.

Many of the men had no clothing or blankets to protect themselves, and at night, would dig into the banks and crawl in until they were nearly hidden<sup>21</sup> and often, when a heavy rain came up, the earth would become loosened and cave in, burying all the men sleeping in the hole or cave. I have seen several pairs of feet projecting out of the ground in the morning after a rain. Tunneling under the stockade, for the purpose of escape was often undertaken but seldom amounted to anything except hard work and the discouragement of defeat, as in almost all cases some one would inform on them and the Rebels would come in, dig down to the tunnel and fill it up.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Dead-Line at Andersonville:**

The dead-line, a short fence a few feet from the stockade was zealously guarded to prevent the prisoners from scaling the walls and escaping, an almost impossible task to begin with. The prisoners were very frightened of the dead-line and recounted many tales of accidental crossings. Some soldiers crossed it purposefully taunting the guards to shoot them to escape the hell of Andersonville. Soldiers like Martin E. Hogan reflected on the dead line and how an occasional prisoner would cross the dead-line on purpose:

That dead-line was a slight wooden railing [some three feet] it was on a little upright posts, running inside of the stockade...The horrors of that prison were so great that one man went over the line, and refused to leave it until he was hot dead. So great was the horror and misery of that place that I myself had thoughts of going over that dead-line to be shot in preference to living there.<sup>23</sup>

Clark Thorpe had this to say about the dead-line:

The height of the platform would give the guard easy oversight of the interior of the prison and the top of the stockade made a good rest for his gun. Many of the guards lost no opportunity to shoot at a Yank. There was a dead-line, formed by driving stakes into the ground, leaving about three feet high and<sup>23</sup> sixteen feet from the Stockade. On these stakes were placed sticks of wood 1" x 3." Beyond this line none dared to go unless he wished to commit suicide.<sup>24</sup>

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22. *Prison Life in Andersonville*, by John L. Maile.

23 *The sights sicken me*, by Susannah Ural

24. *Inside Andersonville*, by Clark Thorpe

John Maile explained the dead-line as follows:

The “dead line” formed a complete circuit parallel to the inside of the stockade and about twenty feet therefrom. It consisted of a narrow strip of <sup>22</sup>board nailed to a row of stakes, which were about four feet high. “Shoot any prisoner who touches the “dead line” was the standing order to the guards. Several companies from Georgia regiments were detailed for the duty, and their muskets were loaded with “buck and ball” (*i. e.*, a large bullet and two buckshot). The day guard at the stockade consisted of one hundred and eighty-six men; the day reserve of eighty-six men. The night reserve consisted of one hundred and ten men; the outlay pickets of thirty-eight men.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Raiders and the Regulators of Andersonville:**

Since there was no rule in the camp except punishment for crossing the deadline or tunneling for escape along with other petty crimes, bands of robbers of Union soldiers, many of whom had enlisted under illegal names and were not model soldiers to begin with, took to robbing new prisoners and stealing everything they owned. Many of the Union soldiers had money and possessions so they were vulnerable at the hands of these killers and robbers. Clark Thorpe described the raiders well:

We termed our habitations "shebangs," a sneak thief a "flanker," a robber a "raider." There being no law within the stockade, evil men among us took to robbing from their comrades. There was an organization of robbers so bold and daring that they would go in squads through the **prison** and whatever they saw, in the way of clothing or blankets, they captured. For instance, four men would be lying under a fairly good blanket, a raider would come along and lay hold of the blanket and if the men under it attempted to reclaim it each man would quickly receive a blow on the head from a short club in the hands of the raiders companions. [These] raiders committed several cruel <sup>26</sup>and vicious murders. At last the Rebels were appealed to and a guard of a few men under a non-commissioned officer entered the **prison** and appealed to the Yanks to organize and hunt these desperadoes down.<sup>26</sup>

But the Union soldiers fought back. They formed their own band of fighters to fight the “raiders” called the “regulators.” The Confederates helped the regulators prosecute the viscous robbers and six raiders ended up being hung. Clark Thorp explains:

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25. Prison Life in Andersonville, by John Maile

26 Inside Andersonville by Clark Thorpe

All that was necessary to cause swift vengeance to fall upon the heads of the evil-doers was done. They were chased and beaten with clubs and captured. The Confederate authorities rendered assistance in the prosecutions, which followed by allowing a jury to be impaneled and a regular court to be instituted with able lawyers from among the prisoners as judges and counsel for the defense and prosecution. The witnesses were subpoenaed, and after a fair and impartial trial, six of the raiders were convicted and hanged, and from that time forward flanking and raiding were unknown among the prisoners.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Commander of Andersonville, Henry Wirz:**

The leader of Andersonville was Henry Wirz, the man many southerners still consider to be a victim of the horrible conditions of Andersonville. Heinrich Hartmann Wirz was born on November 25, 1823, in Zurich, Switzerland. The details of his various occupations in his early years are sketchy before he emigrated to the United States in 1849: He had dreams of becoming a doctor and some accounts have him listed as practicing medicine in both Switzerland and Kentucky before he moved to Louisiana. Other accounts say he trained to be a weaver. He did join the<sup>27</sup>Confederate army in 1861 and he was injured as a private in the Battle of Seven Pines in 1862. Afterwards, he started working for John H. Winder who was in charge of confederate prison camps. One account of Wirz reads as follows and outlines his negative leadership qualities:

As a special assistant to Confederate president Jefferson Davis, Wirz spent a year in Europe acting on behalf of Davis. He returned in 1864 and was selected to oversee the military prison at Andersonville. A difficult and often morose person, Wirz was known to be a weak administrator and to have a bad temper.<sup>28</sup>

Another account of Henry Wirz is explained here:

Henry Wirz was born in 1822 in Switzerland. In 1849 he immigrated to the United States and attempted to go into business as a physician in New York City. Failing at this, he moved to Connecticut and then to Northampton, Massachusetts where he worked as a translator in several small factories. There he took a job working at a water-cure establishment before moving to

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<sup>27</sup> Inside Andersonville by Clark Thorpe

<sup>28</sup>. Omnipresent and Omniscient: The Military Prison Career of Captain Henry Wirz, [http://www.nps.gov/ande/learn/historyculture/captain\\_henry\\_wirz.htm](http://www.nps.gov/ande/learn/historyculture/captain_henry_wirz.htm)

Kentucky to work as a homeopathic physician. He operated water-cure establishments in Cadiz and Louisville until 1857, when he moved to Louisiana to "take charge of" Cabin Teele, a 2,200 acre plantation owned by Levin R. Marshall. At Cabin Teele, Wirz continued to practice homeopathic medicine while overseeing the hundreds of slaves in bondage there. This was Wirz's first experience with controlling large numbers of people, a skill that would serve him later.

At the outset of the Civil War, Wirz enlisted in the 4th Battalion of Louisiana Infantry, organized in his home of Madison, Louisiana. In the aftermath of Bull Run in July 1861, the unit was sent Richmond, where Wirz was assigned to guard duty at Howard's Factory Prison. He immediately began to organize prisoners, and developed a reputation for efficiency and callousness. He was, as one prisoner wrote in 1862, "the essence of authority at the prison... [he] thought himself omnipresent and omniscient." By the fall of 1861, Wirz attracted the attention of General John Winder, who at that time was in charge of the Richmond prison system. Winder placed Wirz on detached duty as a part of his prison management team. In November 1861 the Richmond newspapers reported that Sergeant Henry Wirz was one of seven men on the city's Prison Board, charged with ensuring the security of all military prisons in Richmond. Serving with Wirz on this board was Captain George C. Gibbs. Three years later the two men worked together at Andersonville, and Gibbs later testified against his colleague.<sup>29</sup>

In April 1864, Wirz became the commander of Andersonville. He immediately took control but each set of guards had their own commander, which made the chain of authority difficult to navigate.

Wirz immediately began to reorganize the prison to make it more secure and to improve efficiency. He ordered the construction of a deadline to keep prisoners away from the stockade walls. Drawing on his experience documenting prisoners in 1862, he ordered a daily headcount to be taken. Throughout his time at Andersonville he was frustrated by unclear lines of responsibility. He was charged with daily operations inside the prison – this included taking roll, security, and the issuing of rations and supplies.<sup>29</sup> However, a separate officer was in command of the overall Confederate post of Camp Sumter. Each guard regiment had their own command staff of officers that outranked Wirz. The quartermaster's office operated independent of these two commands, as did the hospital. Wirz could request

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29. Omnipresent and Omniscient: The Military Prison Career of Captain Henry Wirz, [http://www.nps.gov/and/learn/historyculture/captain\\_henry\\_wirz.htm](http://www.nps.gov/and/learn/historyculture/captain_henry_wirz.htm)

guards or rations, but had no direct authority to acquire these necessities, although he could order them withheld. Wirz's letters to his superiors in Richmond belie his desperation to solve this command debacle. In an effort to alleviate these bureaucratic struggles, General John Winder reported to Andersonville in the summer of 1864. However, he lacked a clear command directive, and the presence of a brigadier general further complicated the chain of command at the prison... Wirz was unable to control the bureaucracy that plagued the Confederate military prison system, so he controlled the prisoners in the only way he could – through intimidation and punishment.<sup>30</sup>

Wirz was hated by the Union soldiers and there are many accounts of his vile temper, profanity, hatred of Yankees, and many punishments of “crimes” committed by the prisoners. These punishments included hunting prisoners by packs of wild dogs, shootings, chain gangs, being bucked or whipped, or placed in the stockades. Wirz also prescribed ball and chains for many prisoners who broke his rules. He usually delegated the most troublesome tasks, like outright murder to his subordinates, the sentries and guards he was in charge of. At his trial he was charged with conspiracy "to impair and injure the health and destroy the lives of large numbers of federal prisoners," and with eleven counts of murder; ex-prisoners swore he himself had shot or otherwise killed men in his charge. In *The Tragedy of Andersonville: Trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the Prison Keeper* by Norton Parker Chipman, a large number of Union soldiers, both black and white, testified to what<sup>30</sup> Wirz had done, or the horrors of what his orders had brought about in terms of punishment. Most of the infractions included trying to escape and crossing (even one hand) the dead-line. Escape was often punished by the stockade or chain gangs. Martin E. Hogan, of the 1<sup>st</sup> Indiana Calvary, had this to say when he tried to escape:

I escaped from the prison about the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, and was captured about two days afterwards and brought back. After some of the most profane abuse from Captain Wirz that I ever heard from the lips of a man, I was ordered into the stocks. I was fastened at the neck and ankles and left to stay for sixty-eight hours without any food.<sup>31</sup>

Andrew J. Spring, of 16<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Volunteers witnessed a multitude of chain gangs among the prisoners and explained it as follows:

I saw a chain-gang there; I have seen them every day; there were thirteen of them in it at one time. The men had to keep step with each other. Each man had a small ball (I do not know the weight of it) outside the leg, which he to carry in his hand when he traveled, and also a 64 pound ball to every four

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30. Omnipresent and Omniscient: The Military Prison Career of Captain Henry Wirz

31. Trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the Prison Keeper By Norton Parker Chipman



men. There was a large shackle around the neck with a large chain, much larger than that fastened to the legs around their necks, reaching around the circle.<sup>32</sup>

Spring also testified to a violent shooting for an accidental crossing of the “dead-line”:

There was a man who was asleep under his blanket in the middle of the day. The stockade being so crowded, he had to lie near the dead-line. This man while he was asleep rolled over the dead-line. As soon as he rolled over he was shot.<sup>33</sup>

Black Union soldiers were often treated much worse, frequently by whipping as Spring explained:

I have seen our darky prisoners hauled up and up there and receiving from fifty to seventy-five lashes a number of times.<sup>34</sup>

Jon F. Heath, a rebel officer, testified that Wirz had no problems having savage dogs attack prisoners:

I saw a man in a tree, Captain Wirz ordered the man to come down. The man begged the dogs should not be let to hurt him. He made the man come down and with that the dogs rushed at him. Captain Wirz did not try to keep the dogs off the man; he could have done so.<sup>35</sup>

Joseph Keyser, of the 120<sup>th</sup> in New York, had this to say about Mirz:

As a general thing I thought Captain Wurz was rather overbearing, and very profane and abusive in his language toward our men, on the slightest provocation. I never saw him buck any man-I have seen men bucked by his orders. I heard the orders given.<sup>36</sup>

James Mohan, a rebel soldier said: “I frequently hear Captain Wirz remark that he wished the prisoners were all in hell and he with them.” O.S. Belcher from 16<sup>th</sup> Illinois Cavalry said the following about Wirz and his men:

I heard Captain Wirz say he could kill more Yankees than they were killing at <sup>33</sup>the front, I have seen twenty-thirty men killed at or around the dead-line and shot in different places around the stockade.<sup>37</sup>

James K Davidson 4<sup>th</sup> Iowa Calvary seconded the words of Belcher and added more

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<sup>32</sup>. Trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the Prison Keeper By Norton Parker Chipman

<sup>33</sup>, <sup>34</sup>, <sup>35</sup>, <sup>36</sup>, <sup>37</sup>. Trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the Prison Keeper By Norton Parker Chipman

punishments and deprivation:

I have heard Captain Wirz say he was killing more damned Yankees there than Lee was at Richmond. I have seen men who were starved to death, thousands of them, inside the stockade, I saw men eating food that they took from the ground; I have seen men pick up and eat undigested food that had passed through other men; I saw the chain-gang; I have seen from twelve to fourteen men in the chain-gang; they were kept out in the hot sun.<sup>38</sup>

Edwards S. Kellogg of the 20<sup>th</sup> New York Regiment was bucked six hours at one time while he was an Andersonville for failing to report a man who escaped. "They took a string and tied my wrists together in the first place; they sat me down on the ground next, put my hands over my knees and put a stick over my arms and under my legs, my hands being tied together."

Joseph R. Achuff was also punished harshly for trying to escape:

I tried to escape and was caught; I was put into the stocks in the broiling hot sun. For thirty-six hours I had nothing eat, but two drinks of water from that dirty creek. When I appealed to Captain Wurz, he told me to dry up, or he would blow my damned brains out, that I deserved to be hung. After I was <sup>38</sup>taken out of the stocks, I was ironed. I had shackles fastened around each leg, an iron ring, and a bar of iron between my legs. They kept my legs separated about eighteen inches, so that I had to shuffle along. There was nothing done to cure my legs. Scurvy fell into the wounds, but I was kept in irons....The water that ran through that stockade a horse would not drink. It was the filthiest stuff, with grease upon it. I complained to Captain Wirz and asked him if he could stop the grease from the cook house from being allowed to flow in there. He said it was good enough for me. <sup>39</sup>

Frank Maddox of the 35<sup>th</sup> Negro regiment had this to say about the guards working under Mirz. "The sergeant intimated to us that Captain Wurz gave the men a thirty days' furlough every time they shot a Yankee." Maddox also explained the punishment for a Union soldier who tried to blacken himself and escape: "When they wanted to punish them, they put them across a log and whipped them half to death and put them back to work..[it was] "nigger's law" if they tried to escape by blackening themselves." (10) Maddox explained the whipping for "nigger's law was 39 lashes.<sup>40</sup>

Henry Jennings of the 8<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Troops spoke about one day when he was too wounded to work and the punishment for that crime:

I was placed on duty about a month after I was put on the stockade. My

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38 , 39, 40. Trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the Prison Keeper By Norton Parker Chipman

wound was then bleeding. I was wounded through the thigh of the left leg. I received no medical attention.; they whipped me on my bare back. They made me bend over. ...The whipping had no effect on my wound. Afterward they took me and put me in the stocks. I was kept there a day and a night. I did not get any food or drink while in the stocks.<sup>41</sup>

Another prisoner, Alexander Kennel, noted "I have seen men who were balled and chained, and also men who were bucked and gagged by his [Wirz's] orders; I have seen them put into the stocks."<sup>42</sup>

John Fischer of the (colored) 8<sup>th</sup> US regiment said, "I received very bad treatment there. I was bucked and gagged, and whipped with thirty-nine lashes. I was bucked because I would not go back to work."<sup>43</sup>

Charles E. Smith, from company K of the 4<sup>th</sup> US cavalry saw four men shot at the stockade. One man "was reaching under the dead-line to pick up a piece of bread which some other man had thrown out of his haversack. The sentinel shot him from his post..the man died instantly. Captain wurz was present."<sup>44</sup>

Robert Tatte, private of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteers noted the following: "I<sup>43</sup>saw Captain Wirz commit acts of cruelty..I saw him kick men who were not able to stand on their feet at roll-call, if there was trouble with roll call-no rations."<sup>45</sup>

Clara Barton described a pregnant black worker and what she went through at Andersonville:

She had been bucked and gagged.

**Question.** Describe the process.

**Answer.** The person is seated upon the ground, the knees drawn up, the hands put under the knees, and a stick run through over the arms and under the knees, the hands being tied in front; that makes them utterly immovable..then there is a gag put in the mouth and tied at the back of the head--this woman had been treated in that way--then the overseer had come behind her, kicked her on the back, and thrown her over. She had been stripped in the mean time, for they never whip the negro with the clothes on; she was thrown on her face, and lashed on her back, so that, when her husband found her, he said she was a gore of blood, and she must have been; she had been untied, and was lying there as she had been left.<sup>46</sup>

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41. Trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the Prison Keeper By Norton Parker Chipman

42, 43, 44, 45. Trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the Prison Keeper By Norton Parker Chipman

46. Eloquent Woman. Retrieved at <http://eloquentwoman.blogspot.com/2011/05/famous-speech-friday-clara-bartons.html>

## What Wirz did right:

For all his swagger, brandishing of pistols, and mistreatment of the prisoners at Andersonville, Wirz tried three times to improve the conditions of the soldiers. The first decision was just common sense; he expanded the compound:

With prison badly overcrowded, its superintendent, Major Henry Wirz, authorized an expansion of the stockade. Using prisoner labor, a 610 ft. addition was built on the prison's north side. Built in two weeks, it was opened to the prisoners on July 1. Despite this 10-acre expansion, Andersonville remained badly overcrowded with the population peaking at 33,000 in August. Throughout the summer, conditions in the camp continued to deteriorate as the men, exposed to the elements, suffered from malnutrition and diseases such as dysentery.<sup>47</sup>

Henry Wirz also tried a couple of times to facilitate prisoner exchanges:<sup>47</sup>

By July 1864 Capt. Wirz actually paroled five Union prisoners to deliver a petition to Union officials. This note was signed by almost all of the Union prisoners. It asked for a reinstatement of the prisoner exchange program because the conditions at Andersonville were worse than deplorable. That petition was denied.<sup>48</sup>

In another attempt, the confederates tried to deliver prisoners to the Union lines:

In a desperate attempt to relieve the situation at the prison, the Confederates carried thousands of prisoners by rail to Union lines at Jacksonville, Florida, and offered to turn them over to the Federal army. The prisoners were turned away by their own comrades and the South had no choice but to return them to Andersonville.<sup>49</sup>

Henry Wirz was the only confederate leader to be tried and hung for war crimes. Many southerners say he was a victim of chance in a bad situation, but the examples of his abusive behavior prove otherwise. His trial lasted for sixty-three days with 143 witnesses; afterwards, he was found guilty and hanged. This decision is still

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47. Andersonville Prison. Retrieved at [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Andersonville\\_prison](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Andersonville_prison)

48. Andersonville Prison Camp <http://www.historynet.com/andersonville-prison-camp#sthash.sm3cgY1c.dpuf>

49. Andersonville, What really happened? <http://ecedweb.unomaha.edu/lessons/andersonvilleact4.htm>

debated today and a monument has been built in Andersonville, Georgia to pay homage to this war criminal:

For nearly one hundred fifty years Henry Wirz has remained a polarizing figure. In 1866, President Andrew Johnson ordered a halt to further military tribunals, saving most of Wirz's named co-conspirators from suffering a similar fate. In the bitter years of Reconstruction, many Southerners turned to Wirz, the most prominent Confederate to be **punished for war crimes**, as a symbolic martyr of their Lost Cause. Several former Confederates associated with the prison, including **Surgeon Randolph Stevenson** and **Lt. Samuel Davis** published books in defense of Wirz. Prisoners continued to publish memoirs vilifying the side of the man that they saw from inside the stockade – a cruel tyrant that threatened them and their comrades. In the heat of these acrimonious debates, conflicting mythologies emerged. Stories were fabricated – stories that Wirz had personally killed hundreds of men, or that **the supposed star witness perjured himself**, thus proving Wirz's innocence. Every story imaginable to absolve Wirz was concocted – placing blame on **Generals Grant** or **Sherman**, or even on the prisoners. **A monument was erected in memory of Henry Wirz** in the town of Andersonville that further reinforced these increasingly popular notions. In response, prisoners and their descendants further exaggerated the cruelties of Wirz. In the absence of scholarship on the man or the trial, these myths have permeated the popular understanding of Andersonville.<sup>50</sup>

What Wirz did was to break the law with help and support of the Confederate army around him. The articles of war are very specific regarding how to treat prisoners and Henry Wirz refused to adhere to these tenants. It might be less important to ask why Wirz was tried and convicted of war crimes, but why more confederates<sup>50</sup> weren't charged as well. Analysis of his conviction rages to this day in the south, but his war crimes are clear:

Whether or not Wirz violated the existing laws of war is not subject to debate. The existing legal frameworks of the day stipulated that prisoners must be given access to the same supplies available to the armies in the field. Wirz's own staff members, including his colleague from Richmond who also worked at Andersonville, George Gibbs, testified that Wirz failed to meet that legal obligation. His threats to kill or injure prisoners as a means of control by intimidation backfired on him and reinforced the belief that he was withholding things not to exact a degree of control, but to purposefully torment and kill his captives. The real debates and legacies of Henry Wirz are much bigger than his own actions in the prisons of Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia. Did the difficult circumstances of managing an overcrowded prison

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50 . Omnipresent and Omniscient: The Military Prison Career of Captain Henry Wirz

in a crumbling Confederacy justify Wirz's decisions and behavior? Should Wirz have been tried by a military tribunal or civil court? Was he legally protected from prosecution? What responsibilities do officers bear for their commands? These are difficult issues that have resurfaced again and again in our history. The legality and process of military justice continue to divide us well into the 21st century. <sup>51</sup>

### **Rare Cases of Human Kindness at Andersonville:**

Some human kindness did dwell in a couple of the medical stewards and Clark Thorpe tells of his experience of becoming so sick he could not function any longer. <sup>51</sup>Through his medical experience and the help of kind steward, he found shelter, and some medicine to help his scurvy.

In the month of July, I became so helpless that a few friends volunteered to carry me out to the gate, in hopes that I might be admitted to the hospital. Many poor fellows as helpless as myself were borne by comrades and laid upon the ground near the gates, waiting for the hour to come when they could be seen by Doctors, on the outside of the inner gate.

Here we lay in the broiling sun, between two stockades where no breath of air could come and many of us were not even looked at by the doctors. During the day one-horse wagons were used as ambulances in carrying the sick to the hospital....On being taken from the ambulance I was set upon the ground among a lot of other comrades. Soon a hospital steward came along and eight of us were assigned to the first tent in the ward, where we slept protected from the weather for the first time since the 1st day of May. Our rations were not materially different, but we received some medicine for our scurvy, although not very much to brag about. The medicine consisted of less than one pint of, shall I say, swill and prepared thus: a bushel or so of corn-meal was put into a barrel at the head of the ward and filled with water from a neighboring swamp, a stream from which ran across the lower end of the hospital grounds, this, when allowed to sour, became the medicine which was to cure our scurvy.

A few days after we had been thus fortunate in securing a tent on entering the hospital, a few boards were hauled into the hospital and unloaded near our tent. We inquired for what purpose and were informed that all tents were to have bunks put into them. The seven men in the tent with me, all scurvy patients, were quite an intelligent body of men and pretty good talkers and we proceeded at once, with arguments, to persuade the hospital

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51. Omnipresent and Omniscient: The Military Prison Career of Captain Henry Wirz

steward to have the boards put into our tent first, which he finally consented to do, and for the first time our beds were raised from the ground. Our improvement after this was quite marked.

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After Thorpe received some medicine for his scurvy and a roof over his head for the first time, he feared he would lose what had become true privileges at Andersonville. His troubles were not over however, and he suffered until he could not stand it any longer on the ground with fleas crawling all over him until he<sup>52</sup> appealed again to the kindness of the medical steward:

Gradually I became able to walk with my limbs a little straighter until I could stand with my knees at an angle of about 90 degrees, resting my weight upon my toes. At this time came the terrible news that our tent was to be used for gangrene patients and the following day we were separated and I never knew what became of my seven comrades.

I was put into a tent which would hold four men but the only occupant when I entered was a poor, moaning helpless wretch who died the same night. There had been as many as four deaths in one day in some of these tents and

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52. **Inside Andersonville: An Eyewitness Account of the Civil War's Most Infamous Prison** By George Skoch, Retrieved at: <http://www.historynet.com/andersonville-prison-camp#sthash.K2c4b2p6.FhmxKaHd.dpuf>

I presumed this one was as bad as any. Each of these poor fellows was absolutely helpless and had been so for many weeks and each one contributed to the vermin which formed a large part of the floor of the tent. The rest of the floor was sand about 3 or 4 inches deep...no more awful misery could be suffered than fell to my lot that night.

After enduring all that human nature could I took up my abode in the street, about morning, and was there when the steward came around with his assistants and carried out into the street those who had died during the night, which included my tent mate. The steward inquired what I was doing out there. I told him I had moved and preferred to sleep outside. He informed me that I would have to go back into the tent. I told him I would not and called him to witness and, hobbling back into the tent on my toes, I pulled back my sleeves and scooped up a handful of the tent floor. The fleas were constantly springing from the sand scattering much of it and the vermin crawling out would take more of it. I constantly brushed my wrists to keep them from crawling up on my body.

When the sand became quiet in my hand not much more than half of the amount I had scooped up remained, I threw the rest down and turning fiercely upon the steward demanded if he had the heart to see a man put into such a place as that to sleep and telling him that, under no circumstances except being tied in the tent, would I again attempt to occupy it. A parley ensued when he offered me a nurse's tent, with bunks in it, providing I would take the tent which I had formerly vacated and care for the eight gangrene patients with which it had been filled.

During this conversation I had been standing with bent legs and upon my toes and, casting my eyes downward, I said to him, "I am a pretty subject to attempt to take care of eight men covered with gangrenous sores." He urged me to take it as it was the only alternative and I accepted and for three hours I stood upon my toes, attending to my patients. One man, among the eight, had 35 open sores.<sup>53</sup>

Through helping others, decent lodgings and an ability to eat his rations, Thorpe improved and regained his health:

The exercise, the imperative necessity for hard work, a good place in which to sleep caused my health and condition to rapidly improve and it was not many weeks before I could walk and touch my heels to the ground, with the limbs nearly straight. My mouth, also, gradually improved until I could chew my rations.

While still an inmate of the hospital in the early part of December 1864, the Confederates [attempted to improve the hospital by building sheds with the assistance of Yankee workmen]. Having been a wood-worker previous to



<sup>53</sup>entering the army, I was fortunate enough to be selected as one and, after being paroled, wherein we promised not to attempt to escape, we began our work.

You can scarcely imagine the delight with which we hailed our greater liberty, having no guards over us and allowed to roam at will, outside of working hours.<sup>54</sup>

### **Escape from Andersonville:**

Many prisoners tried to escape from Andersonville and most escape attempts were unsuccessful. The tight guard over the dead-line and the lack of tools to build tunnels was a deterrent. The camp kept bloodhounds that hunted down escaped <sup>54</sup>prisoners and often tore them apart. Punishment for escape was being bucked and whipped (especially if you were black), being put into the stocks without food or drink or wearing a ball and chain. Invaluable aid was often given by African Americans to aid prisoners:

The aid that African Americans gave to Union soldiers fleeing Andersonville had its roots in traditional structures used to maintain slavery. Conscripted enslaved laborers built the prison and local whites feared the Yankee presence would fuel slave revolts. In addition, these black workers prepared the ground for escape tunnels and drove the meal wagons that sometimes provided another means of escape.<sup>55</sup>

Two escapes, one successful and one not are recounted here. In both instances the prisoners were aided by African Americans:

After using a tunnel to escape, William L. Farmer of the 111<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteers hid in the swamps a quarter of a mile from the prison, using the water to shield his scent from the hounds. Enslaved African Americans concealed and fed him until they could arrange his transportation to Union lines near Atlanta. <sup>56</sup>

Clark Thorp also executed an escape plan with several of his fellow prisoners and again they had help from the slaves:

During [our Sunday] rambles five of the party, with which I was connected, met a colored man from the banks of the Flint River six miles away from

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53, 54. Inside Andersonville by George Skotch

55, 56. Andersonville Prison Camp Retrieved at <http://www.historynet.com/andersonville-prison-camp>

Andersonville and, in conversation with him, conceived an idea of escape by way of the Flint River to the blockading squadron in the Appalachian Bay [Apalachee Bay] in the Gulf of Mexico.

Plans were all laid for an escape and the evening set when he agreed to meet us on a certain road and [in trade for blankets and other provisions] pilot us to the Flint River. After having left camp we failed to meet our colored friend but were never able to tell whether through his fault or ours. We started down the river on foot, knowing full well that, in the morning, the Andersonville pack of hungry blood-hounds would be after us.

*After traveling a few miles as rapidly as possible, Thorp and his comrades located a boat and, in a hollow tree, its paddles. They started moving downstream, but they encountered one hazard after another: rapids, shoaling waters, submerged boulders, slippery rock and seething torrents. Finally Thorp and his party abandoned the water in favor of the riverbank and a chance for some shut-eye. They were awakened by a locomotive whistle, and discovered a nearby railroad depot.<sup>56</sup>*

Clark and his fellow prisoners faced blood-hounds and Rebel soldiers, but still they persisted, being fed and assisted by slaves:

Many Rebel soldiers were evidently taking a train that stood by the depot [so] we began to get away from that river as fast as possible. Keeping in the woods, [we soon] ran across a party of Negro men and women working in a <sup>56</sup>field. I don't know whether they went without their dinner or not, but it was pork-killing time and they brought us a pork stew with corn pones enough for ten men.

[Later the slaves had told us that] a few miles below the city there was a large spring only a short distance from the river. They also told us that 5,000 Rebels were encamped there. After striking the river we followed the bank until we came to the creek formed by the spring. We could see the bottom plainly and supposed we could wade it. Jones soon had his clothing off and commenced to cross the creek. By the time he was six feet from shore he was in water up to his neck and we knew that if we crossed that stream we must swim and two of the party could not do that.

After consultation it was deemed best to try and make a circuit around the Rebel camp. [But after encountering a guard at a Rebel outpost, we returned] to the river where we finally induced our timid (they were only afraid of water) comrades to swim. Now commenced a careful march down the river and before daylight we had put many miles between that Rebel camp and ourselves.

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56. Inside Andersonville by George Skotch

Towards morning a heavy fog settled over the river making it difficult and dangerous to proceed. The country appeared to be open and settled, and we concluded to go on in hopes of reaching a wood. When we were compelled to land we found we were in a large grove of young forest trees without underbrush or means of concealment.

We built up a fire, imprudently, of course, and lay down to sleep. When we woke up we found the day well advanced and that the fog had lifted. After some hours we discovered three boys, two black and one white, approaching the grove seated upon two horses. [When they saw us, they turned their horses and galloped off.] Our situation now was nearly hopeless. We were in Mitchell County, Ga., and on the opposite bank was Baker Co., notorious for its numerous packs of blood-hounds. We argued that if we took the boat and proceeded down stream that the pursuing parties would head us off and if we crossed the river into Baker county they would soon have a pack of trained hounds after us.

An hour or so later our expectations of pursuit were realized. A party of four white men and three negroes, mounted upon dripping horses, approached the grove from down stream and the leader, a white man, of 50 or 60 years, with a gun, asked what we were doing there. They were evidently much excited, more so than we were. Leaning on my left elbow and looking up at him I coolly informed him that we were resting a bit and he informed us that he should have to place us under arrest, as he was a confederate soldier on furlough, and would be held accountable if we escaped. We told him that we expected that and were ready to go with him.

[Taken to the old gentleman's home], we were greeted by his son-in-law, a Rebel Major. He invited us to his plantation, where he gave us a good supper, and said that in the morning he would hitch up and let his boys take us over to Newton [to begin] our return trip, putting the best face upon it we could. Arriving at Newton we were turned over to a Provost Marshall [who] treated us very kindly, furnished us with all the tobacco we wished, loaded us with eatables and peanuts, and locked us in a room in the court house for the night. Having no chairs, beds or blankets, to make us comfortable, we got somewhat restless in the morning and some one of the party, happened to have a pocket-knife, we took off the catch which held the door and when our jailor came he found his prisoners sitting on the court-house steps enjoying his tobacco.

The day was Sunday and we did not march. The following morning we started on foot for Albany. There we were put on a train for Andersonville.

Happening to be the first to step off the car on our arrival, I found myself in front of Captain [Henry] Wirz. He said, "What is your name?" I told him, "Thorp." "Oh yes, you are the five fellows what runned away last week." I told

him, "Yes sir, we are the fellows." The Captain, one of the most violent tempered men I have ever met, flew into a violent passion and began a tirade of abuse interspersed with many oaths and uncomplimentary names. He<sup>57</sup> ordered us to be taken to the little stockade [where] prisoners were severely punished. But, strange to say, we were never punished for an hour. A day or two later we were turned into the stockade.<sup>57</sup>

John Maile found escape to be almost impossible as the camp was heavily guarded:

To increase the difficulty of tunnel escape, slaves and teams were employed to build piles of pitch-pine along the cleared space beyond the outer stockade. At night, when these were lighted, a line of fires was made which illuminated a wide area. From these fires arose columns of dense smoke, which in the sultry air of a midsummer night hung like a pall over the silent city of disease and starvation. Yet the city was not wholly quiet, for undertones of thousands of voices that murmured during the day at night died away into the low moans of the sick and the expiring, or rose into the overtones of the outcry of distressful dreams. In the edge of the gloom beyond the fires, patrols paced to and fro until the dawn. Every evening the watch-call sounded, "Post number one, nine o'clock and all is well." This cry was repeated by each sentinel until it had traveled around the stockade back to the place of starting. "Nine and a half o'clock and all is well," was next spoken, and likewise repeated. Thus every half hour from dark to daylight the time was called off, and this grim challenge greeted our ears every night until the survivors bade the Confederacy good-bye. Not that our captors benevolently wished to increase the sense of the shortness of the time until our release, but to be assured that the guards were keeping awake.<sup>58</sup>

### **Final Release and the efforts of Clara Barton and Dorrence Atwater:**

As the end of the war drew near, Thorp and his fellow captives knew that exchange of prisoners or outright release was near and they just had to wait:

Spring came at last and rumors of an exchange became more and more frequent, and finally a large number of prisoners were taken from the stockade and sent to Vicksburg. After a few days another party were sent away and you can imagine with what utter despondency those left would see the gates closed and we inside.

At length the day came when we were to leave the stockade, the last of all the thousands who had suffered there. When I glanced around me, on going

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57. Inside Andersonville by George Skotch

58. Prison Life in Andersonville by John Maile

through the gates, I presume there were not one hundred men following and the stockade was tenantless, forever, thank God.

*Thorp and his fellow soldiers were transported to Jacksonville, Fla., then on USS Constitution to "Camp Parole" in Annapolis, Md. There, they were issued rations, clothing and back pay before being sent to their respective regimental headquarters for discharge. Thorp was mustered out of the Army at Fort Wayne, Mich., on June 22 and returned to Ohio. He found work as a railroad busman, and in 1868 married, eventually raising two sons and a daughter. Despite his Andersonville ordeal, he would live another six decades before dying<sup>59</sup> in August 1927, at the age of 86, in Lakewood, Ohio.<sup>59</sup>*

George Hitchcock had this to say about bidding Anderson farewell:

Well, this is about the last of **Andersonville** for us and it is a general abandoning of this horrid place for orders came for us all to be ready to start at eleven in the forenoon, but as means of transportation did not arrive, we did not start until ten at night when we were roused out of a sound sleep. And went out through the gates in perfect darkness and in a pitting rain, a most fitting [and] appropriate time and aspect for us to pass out of a place that, if we are allowed to live long, will always combine more of the realities which we expect will be found in that dark and terrible region of despair of a future world known as "hell" than any other can to us. Thankful for past favors (we cannot feel too thankful that we have been allowed to remain to see almost the termination of the glorious reign of the Dutch Captain [Wirz]), we cast one (not long lingering) look back into the darkness and pack into old freight cars, eighty three in a car and move out on the northward track toward Macon.<sup>60</sup>

Clara Barton and Dorrence Atwater, the latter who had been a Union prisoner at Andersonville, were primarily responsible for finding all the soldiers who had perished at Andersonville, informing their families of their deaths, and later erecting tombstones for every dead soldier. Dorrence Atwater, who had served in the hospital at Andersonville during his imprisonment, had taken exact notes of every fallen comrade in Andersonville, smuggling his notes through the Confederate guards upon his release, and contacted Clara Barton to obtain her help.

In June of 1865 a young clerk named Dorence Atwater contacted Barton and requested copies of her lists of missing soldiers. Atwater had been a prisoner at Andersonville and had been paroled to work in the hospital, where he diligently maintained a copy of the death records. Ecstatic, Barton contacted Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and asked to accompany the US Army's expedition to Andersonville to identify the graves there.

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<sup>59</sup> Inside Andersonville by George Skotch

<sup>60</sup>. These Sights Fairly Sicken Me by Ural

At Andersonville in July and August of 1865, Atwater and Barton poured through the letters she had received, and began to search for these missing soldiers in the Andersonville Death Register and captured hospital records. While laborers worked to erect headboards in the cemetery, Barton wrote dozens of letters informing families that their loved ones had died at Andersonville. At the end of the expedition, Barton was given the honor of raising the American flag for the first time over the recently established Andersonville National Cemetery.<sup>61</sup>

Barton set up the Missing Soldiers Office and hired clerks, including Atwater, to respond to the numerous letters she had received from families of prisoners at Andersonville. She also helped Dorrence Atwater who was court marshaled and ordered to give over his accounts of the dead the Confederacy said belonged to them. Atwater refused:

After returning from Andersonville, Barton set up the Missing Soldier's Office in Washington in 1865. She hired numerous clerks, including Dorence Atwater, to respond to the more than 60,000 letters that she received. By the time the Missing Soldiers Office closed in 1867, Barton and her staff had identified more than 20,000 missing soldiers, including nearly 13,000 who had died at Andersonville Prison.

Because of her fame as a nurse, she received much of the credit for the work of the Missing Soldiers Office and the Andersonville expedition. In a post war speaking series she was hailed as the "Heroine of Andersonville" and toured the nation displaying artifacts that she had collected at the prison site and lectured on the sufferings of the prisoners. She was even inducted as an honorary member of the Andersonville Survivor's Association, and the army's expedition to Andersonville to identify the graves quickly became known as Barton's expedition, even though she had only accompanied the previously planned endeavor and had worked primarily writing letters - not<sup>61</sup> identifying graves as has often been claimed.

Barton's greatest contribution to the Andersonville story is through her work in the Missing Soldiers Office and her support of Dorence Atwater. Atwater was court-martialed and jailed in the fall of 1865 related to a dispute over the<sup>61</sup> ownership of the Andersonville Death Register. It was through Barton's efforts that he was finally released and she then supported his publication of the Death Register. Barton is often mistakenly given credit for identifying the graves at Andersonville. However, she deserves a great deal of credit for her

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61. Clara Barton. [Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition](#). Q1 2014

efforts to account for the missing soldiers, both at Andersonville and across countless battlefields.<sup>61</sup>

### **Legacy of Andersonville:**

The final legacy of Andersonville was very grim, and Confederates yelled foul that so much negative attention was laid at the feet of Fort Sumter. The Confederates claimed that their shrinking armies and lack of food and overcrowding was the primary reason Andersonville was such an atrocity. The facts were more insidious,<sup>61</sup> however. First, it has been proven that it was the Confederate actions of refusing to parole black soldiers and treat them equally that led to the breakdown of prisoner exchange in the first place. Second, the south's deliberate and abusive treatment of the prisoners at Fort Sumter broke the laws of the articles of war both sides were obliged:

During the war, almost 45,000 prisoners were received at the Andersonville prison, and of these 12,913 died (40 percent of all the Union prisoners that died throughout the South). A continual controversy among historians is the nature of the deaths and the reasons for them. Some contend that it constituted deliberate Confederate war crimes toward Union prisoners; while others contend that it was merely the result of **disease** (promoted by severe overcrowding), the shortage of food in the Confederate States, the incompetence of the prison officials, and the refusal of the Confederate authorities to **parole** black soldiers, resulting in the imprisonment of soldiers from both sides, thus overfilling the stockade.<sup>62</sup>

It is fitting to render the final opinion of John Maile, a Union prisoner who saw the worst abuses of Andersonville, yet still tried to be fair when observing the big picture regarding the resources of the north and the south: He still observed the offenses of the Confederacy to be criminally negligent even while recognizing the differences between the north and the south:

In the movements of strategy and battle, many combatants were taken prisoners; these were sent to the rear for safe-keeping and maintenance. With practically unlimited resources this additional burden was scarcely felt at the North.

At the South, the case was different. The extended territory occupied by the armies was practically unproductive for the people. It was, therefore, inevitable that the prisoners of war share the general limitation. As their numbers increased, it was necessary that they be conveyed to localities beyond the reach of rescue. Their increasing hosts could not wait upon the size of the stockades built for their confinement, and the limited forces that

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<sup>62</sup>. Andersonville Prison. Retrieved at [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Andersonville\\_prison](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Andersonville_prison)

could be spared for their safe keeping must in some way hold them closely in hand.

Moreover, unfriendly prejudices were increasing by the very fact of invasion, and as the North was held responsible for the war, the prisoners were the objects of bitter hatred. In numerous minor particulars, such as ample supply of water, of shelter and of food and fuel, the obligations of the southern military authorities were criminally negligent; yet many of the features of the prison circumstances were probably unavoidable.

John Maile observed that staying true to the Union cause was above all relevant, even with the crushing circumstances and deprivations induced by the captors at Andersonville:

One recollection has burned itself into memory. At Andersonville there was a standing offer of immediate release to any prisoner of average strength who would take the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy and engage in non-combatant service. Officers who entered the prison with these proposals were shunned by our men. I recall a recently naturalized Federal prisoner who thus enlisted. When he re-entered the prison in Confederate uniform as <sup>63</sup>a recruiting officer, his reception was such that he fled to the gate for his life; shouting to the guard to protect him. For flag and country our boys could uncomplainingly die a lingering death, but they could not turn traitor.<sup>63</sup>

Finally in observing the legacy of Andersonville, there are several facts which must be ascertained. It is true that the south had significantly less resources than the north, but it was through their actions the war was instigated to begin with. In addition, because the Confederacy refused to treat black and white prisoners equally leading to the mass murders of black soldiers, their actions alone virtually stopped the prisoner exchange. Therefore, the south should be held responsible for the large amount of prisoners they had to deal with and they were, as John Maile said, criminally negligent in their treatment of Andersonville prisoners. Surely there was some blame to go around, as there is in any war, but the south created the circumstances that led to a facility such as Andersonville, and the deaths of 13,000 men during only fourteen months, a little over a year is significant and atrocious and the majority of blame rests squarely on the shoulders of the Confederacy.

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63. Prison Life in Andersonville by John Maile



