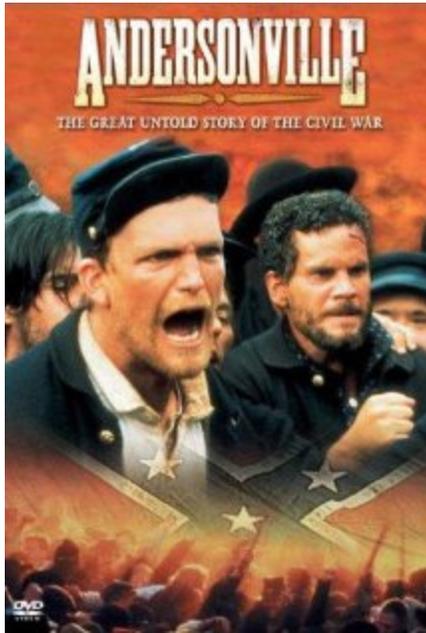




## Using the Film *Andersonville* in the Classroom



Andersonville, or Camp Sumter as it was officially known, was the largest Confederate military prison established during the Civil War. It was built early in 1864 after Confederate officials decided to move the large number of Federal prisoners kept in and around Richmond, Virginia to a place of greater security and a more abundant food supply. During the fourteen months the Andersonville prison existed, more than 45,000 Union soldiers were confined here. Some 13,000 died from disease, poor sanitation, malnutrition, overcrowding, or exposure.

Popular media, such as books and films, have long been used to teach the story of Andersonville. The 1996 film *Andersonville* continues to be a popular classroom tool. This material is intended to assist teachers in clearly identifying historical reality versus Hollywood illusion and aiding students to think critically about the portrayal of historic events.

### Film and the Andersonville Story

It is important to remember that *Andersonville* was produced for entertainment, not necessarily education. At nearly three hours long, the Andersonville film conveys a fictionalized narrative history of the prison, through the eyes of prisoners. The strength of the presentation is its striking visual recreation of the prison compound and the level of historic authenticity seen in background details. For younger audiences, this film may not be the best choice. For shorter and more concise presentations of the park themes, please consider requesting a loan of one or both of our park films.

#### Park Film Loan Program

On request, teachers may borrow a copy of the park's two orientation films, "*Echoes of Captivity*" and "*Voices from Andersonville*" on DVD. Each program is about 30 minutes in length. Contact park staff to request the films. This offering is free, but please return the DVD so others may use it and this offering can remain free. To request the film, please email us at [ande\\_interpretation@nps.gov](mailto:ande_interpretation@nps.gov)

The park offers two films to choose from which explore the story of the Andersonville Prison and the experience of American prisoners of war. You may request one or both for classroom viewing.

"*Voices from Andersonville*" is a 28 minute film which focuses on the history of the Andersonville Prison during the Civil War.

"*Echoes of Captivity*" is a 27 minute film which serves as an introduction to the experience of prisoners of war throughout American history. This film includes the Andersonville story as well as interviews with prisoners of war from WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and the first Gulf War.

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## Telling the story of Andersonville in popular culture

Immediately after the Civil War, former prisoners began to publish diaries that they kept during their imprisonment. Accounts from prisoners like Robert H. Kellogg shocked the public and led to the trial and execution of the prison's commander, Captain Henry Wirz. From 1865 until the turn of the century, dozens more accounts and memoirs were published by survivors, most famous among these were John McElroy's *Andersonville: A Story of Rebel Military Prisons* (1879) and John Ransom's *Andersonville Diary* (1883).

*Andersonville*, a 700-page novel by novelist MacKinlay Kantor, was published in 1955 and would win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction the next year. Written over a twenty-five year period, Kantor's novel blends fact and fiction to create a vivid telling of the prison's operation. Published a decade after World War II, the novel resonated with an audience familiar with the Holocaust and the war crimes trials at Nuremberg and Tokyo.

In 1959, Saul Levitt's play, *The Andersonville Trial*, opened on Broadway in New York City and won numerous awards. The play focuses not on the story of Andersonville Prison, but rather on the trial of the prison's commander, Captain Henry Wirz, which took place in the late summer and fall of 1865. In 1970, the play was produced as a movie and was directed by George C. Scott. *The Andersonville Trial* deals with ethical issues surrounding Wirz and whether or not he was to blame for the conditions at Andersonville.

In 1996 TNT produced the film *Andersonville*, directed by John Frankenheimer. This film follows the story of a group of soldiers from Massachusetts who are captured at Cold Harbor, Virginia in early June of 1864. They are taken by rail to Andersonville Prison where they meet one of their old comrades who had been captured some years before. They are warned to avoid getting water from the creek and to be careful of the Raiders, a group of prisoners who steal and kill in order to live comfortably inside the prison. The men then try to tunnel out of the prison, but are unsuccessful at this venture. During their time in the prison, they are constantly under threat from The Raiders. Eventually the characters in the film participate in the capture, trial, and execution of the Raiders. At the end of the film, the prisoners of Andersonville are either released or transferred to other prisons.

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## Teaching with Andersonville's popular culture

With the exception of the 1996 *Andersonville* film, much of the popular culture material regarding the Andersonville story is generally appropriate to high school audiences.

Prisoner narratives, such as McElroy's and Ransom's provide a first-hand account of the prison experience. McKinley Kantor's 1955 novel *Andersonville* was long a staple of high school classrooms in the 20th Century.

*The Andersonville Trial*, produced in 1970, is appropriate for high school audiences interested in the moral questions raised by the prison, and how they were addressed during the trial of Captain Wirz.

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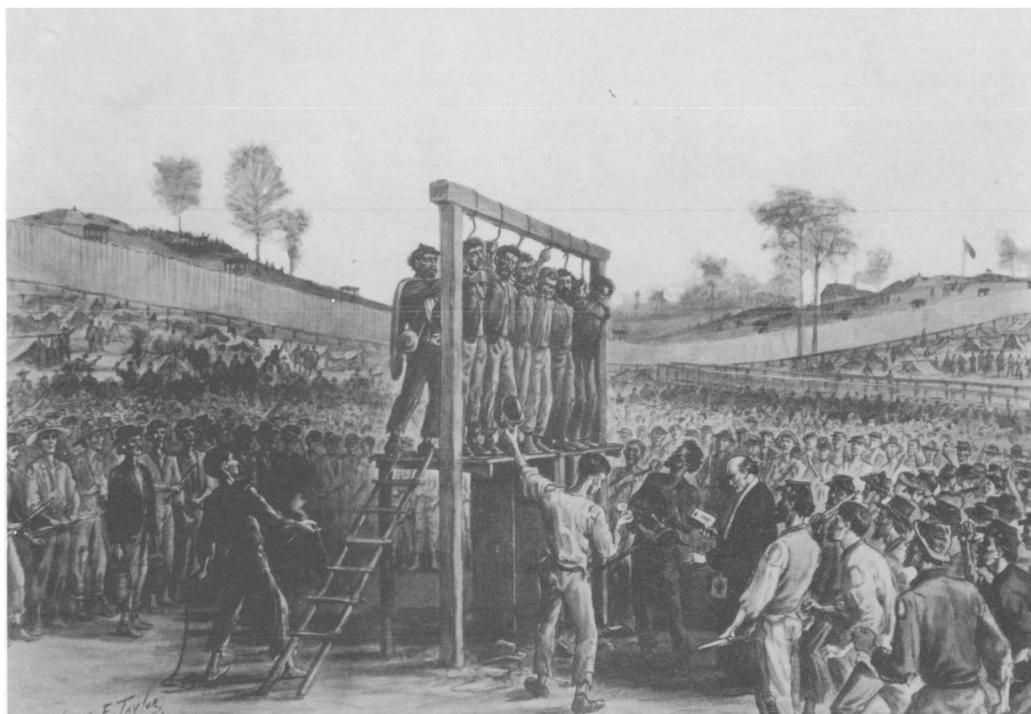
## The Raiders

One of the central plot devices in the film *Andersonville* is the conflict that existed between the Raiders and the rest of the prisoners. The Raiders were a real group of several hundred prisoners that operated in Andersonville during the early summer of 1864. Typically these men were criminals before the war, and many were “bounty jumpers” – soldiers who kept enlisting with different regiments and then deserting in order to collect the signing bonuses. Once they began arriving at Andersonville they began to band together and stole food, clothing, tools, and money from prisoners. Sometimes they even killed their fellow prisoners. They especially targeted new prisoners, whom they called “fresh fish.” Eventually the rest of the prisoners grew tired of the Raiders’ actions and a second group, known as the “Regulators,” banded together to arrest the Raiders. With Captain Wirz’s approval, a trial was held inside the prison with newly arrived prisoners serving as jurors. Most of the Raiders were found guilty of minor crimes and were sentenced to run a gauntlet of prisoners, who were given clubs with which to beat the Raiders. The six ringleaders of the Raiders were found guilty of murder and were sentenced to be hung. Capt. Wirz had gallows built inside the prison and on July 11, 1864, the six leaders of the Raiders were executed. On the prisoners’ request, the six Raiders were buried in a separate plot in the cemetery from the rest of the dead. Today, their graves still remain isolated from other burial sections due to the truly dishonorable nature of their crimes.

### Film versus Fact

The central plotline of the film involved the Raiders and while the Raiders were an issue in the prison, they were not the central focus of daily life throughout prison’s existence. In fact, the prison remained open for nearly 10 months after the Raiders’ execution. The Raiders were active in the prison for a relatively brief period. The sailor, Munn, who is featured prominently in the film, was in Andersonville less than three weeks. These men did not dominate the prison for months as depicted.

At the peak of the prison’s operation, late July through August 1864, when 33,000 men were imprisoned there, the Raider’s reign of terror was over, replaced by a more fundamental struggle for survival.



The execution of the Raiders.

## Captain Henry Wirz



Captain Henry Wirz

A central figure in the film *Andersonville* is the prison superintendent, Captain Henry Wirz.

Captain Henry Wirz was born in Switzerland and emigrated to the United States in 1849. After his marriage in 1854, he and his family moved to Louisiana, and when the Civil War started he joined the 4th Louisiana Infantry, Company A. After receiving a severe wound in his right arm, he was assigned to work for General John Winder, superintendent of military prisons.

In April 1864, he was assigned to the command of the military prison at Andersonville. His area of command covered only the inside the stockade. He did not have direct control over guards or supplies. Therefore, he could do little about securing better food rations or improving living conditions. Even given those limitations, he still chose to withhold already inadequate rations as a disciplinary measure. Further challenged by ill health, Wirz remained in charge of the prison stockade and the prisoners inside to the very end of the war. At the beginning of May 1865, Wirz was arrested by Federal officers in Americus, Georgia.

After the war, he was the most famous Confederate to be prosecuted for war crimes. His trial, by a military tribunal, took place between August 23 and October 18, 1865. He was convicted and sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out on November 10, 1865 and he was buried in the yard of the Old Arsenal in Washington, D.C. His remains were later moved to Mt. Olivet Cemetery near Washington.

### Film versus Fact

Prisoner accounts describe Wirz as being quite profane and temperamental. Allegations abounded that he intentionally withheld rations from the prisoners or that he even killed prisoners. Wirz's supporters claim that he tried to help the prisoners but was unable to do so because of the lack of supplies in the Confederacy.

Left largely unexplored in the film is the larger command structure of the Camp Sumter military prison, and the role of General John Winder. Winder, a West Point graduate and veteran of the Mexican War, resigned his Federal commission in April 1861 when the Civil War began. He began to serve in the Confederate army with the appointment to provost marshal and commander of prisons in Richmond. Later he was given command of all military prisons in Alabama and Georgia and for a time, made his headquarters at Andersonville.

His son Sidney Winder was selected to find a suitable location for a new prison to help relieve overcrowding in Libby and Belle Isle in Richmond. His selection of Andersonville was based on its proximity to the railroad and information given to him that the location had a "large supply of beautiful clear water." The General's nephew, Richard Winder, was given the responsibility of constructing the prison.

General Winder died on duty at the Confederate military prison in Florence, South Carolina, of a heart attack in 1865.

During the film's closing credits, the film makes the oft-repeated claim that Wirz was the only person to be prosecuted or executed after the Civil War. This claim originates with Wirz's supporters, who sought to portray him as the sole martyr and scapegoat of a vindictive and victorious army. In reality, there were nearly 1,000 military tribunals between the close of the war and early 1866, and several of these resulted in executions, Wirz being the most famous of these. More tribunals were planned, but never materialized after President Andrew Johnson ordered all military tribunals stopped in early 1866.



General John Winder

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## How did the film *Andersonville* do?

*Andersonville* is a fairly accurate representation of prison living conditions, including sanitation, shelter, disease, food, and especially the need for clean water. Like in the film, many prisoners tried to tunnel their way out of the prison, but most were caught and returned to the stockade. Of the 45,000 prisoners held at Andersonville, only around 300 successfully escaped. The Raiders in the film were a real group that preyed on their fellow soldiers, and they were actually tried and hanged inside the stockade.

In several scenes throughout the film, African American prisoners are visible. In fact, there were around 100 African American soldiers, most from the 54th Massachusetts, and the 8th & 35th U. S. Colored Troops. As depicted in the movie, they were often used on work details outside the prison, as were several young musicians.

It is important to remember that *Andersonville* was produced for entertainment, not necessarily education. As such, there are some things to consider. The film begins in June of 1864. By that time the prison had already been open four months and had around 20,000 prisoners inside.

Although several of the characters are loosely based on real people, their specific stories are fictionalized. For example, there really was a young boy named Patrick Shea from New York who was a prisoner. In the film he is instrumental in helping the other characters survive. However, the real Patrick Shea actually died in March of 1864, and was among the first prisoners to die in the prison. The Raider, Munn, did not arrive at Andersonville until mid-June, well after the main characters' arrival after Cold Harbor. Martin Blackburn was a real prisoner who died in Andersonville, but nothing else is known about him.

The central plotline of the film involved the Raiders and while the Raiders were an issue in the prison, they were not the central focus of daily life throughout prison's existence. In fact, the prison remained open for nearly 10 months after the Raiders' execution.

As shown in the film, the execution of the Raiders is a quick affair; in reality, one prisoner, Charles Curtis, attempts an escape and his fellow prisoners pursue him and return him to the gallows. The rope around the neck of Collins was so rotten it snapped, and he too, was returned to the gallows by fellow prisoners. These incidents at the gallows illustrate the resolve of the prisoners to punish the Raiders for their actions.

Rumors of parole or exchange were a constant presence in the prison. These rumors were used as a method of controlling prisoners and using false hope to reduce the risk of escape attempts.

One of the biggest incidents in the history of the prison is completely omitted from the film. During a severe storm in August of 1864, a spring appeared inside the stockade, providing clean drinking water to all the prisoners, who quickly named it "Providence Spring."

The end of the film is not entirely true to history. At no point were all of the prisoners loaded up at once and removed from the stockade as depicted in the film. Beginning in September of 1864, prison officials began moving prisoners healthy enough to travel to other prison sites in order to avoid General William T. Sherman's march through Georgia. This was a gradual process that lowered the prison's population to just a few thousand by the winter of 1864, when many prisoners were actually returned to Andersonville. The last of the prisoners were not removed until late April of 1865.

The final scene of the film shows Section H of the Andersonville National Cemetery. The initial focus is on grave 7624 which appears to be that of prisoner Martin Blackburn, a character in the film. Blackburn's grave is actually located at grave 10674, near the rear of Section H. A slipcover was used to 'relocate' Blackburn's grave to the front row for the shot.

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**Questions for Students  
to Consider**

1. How were Josiah and his comrades captured and brought to Andersonville?
2. Why do the men have a hard time recognizing Dick Potter?
3. Describe the creek area and explain why Dick Potter tells the men to avoid it.
4. What is the deadline? Why are the Confederate guards so young?
5. What factors might have led men to form the Raiders?
6. What kinds of things do the men use to build their shelter and to dig an escape tunnel?
7. Why isn't their escape plan successful?
8. Captain Wirz explains to Col. Chandler why conditions are so bad. What reasons does he give? Do you think that the men inside the prison agree with Captain Wirz's assessment? Why or why not?
9. Explain why the Regulators form and how they handle the Raiders.
10. During the Raiders' trial, the defense lawyer argues that there is no law at Andersonville. Do you agree with this statement? If so why? If not, what laws do apply?
11. Describe the symptoms of scurvy as you see them appear in Martin Blackburn.
12. The prisoners spend much of their time talking about exchange. Why do the prisoners say the exchange system stopped?
13. Describe the food that the prisoners get. How do they prepare it? What diseases occurred in the prisoners as a result of their insufficient diet?
14. Based on what you see in the film, who deserves blame for what happened at Andersonville? Captain Wirz? The Confederate government? The Raiders? The prisoners themselves? Explain your answer, citing evidence from the film.
15. Considering how short-lived the Raiders reign was, why do you think the film makers decided to focus on them as the central plot of the story?