Andersonville

Andersonville

The story of a Civil War prison camp

By Raymond F. Baker,
based on research by
Edwin C. Bearss

Office of Publications
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 1972

In the latter part of the Civil War, the Confederate States government built a large stockaded prison camp in south-central Georgia. Between February 1864, when the first prisoners arrived, and April 1865, when the prison ceased to exist, more than 45,000 Union soldiers were confined there. Of these, more than 12,000 perished from disease, malnutrition, overcrowding, and exposure. The prison's official name was Camp Sumter, but most people called it Andersonville.

Andersonville, the largest and best known of Southern military prisons, was located in Sumter County, Ga., at Andersonville Station on the Southwestern (now the Central of Georgia) Railroad, 9 miles northeast of Americus. It was established after Confederate officials decided that the large number of Union soldiers being held in Richmond prisons should be moved elsewhere because they were a serious drain on the city's dwindling food supply. Also, as Gen. Robert E. Lee pointed out in October 1863, the Northern captives would become a liability in the event of an enemy attack. They would have to be guarded securely to prevent their release or escape, but every able-bodied soldier was being sent off to the battlefronts and there were not enough men left to form an adequate guard force. To maintain the prisoners in Richmond would mean detaching much-needed troops from the already hard-pressed Army of Northern Virginia, and this General Lee could not afford to do. City residents, fearful of a prison break, likewise urged the government to move the Federals to another location.

In their search for a suitable prison site, Confederate authorities hoped to find a place more remote from the theater of war, where the prisoners could be more easily guarded, where enemy raids would be less likely, and where food could be more readily obtained. In December 1863, after ruling out several likely locations in Virginia and North Carolina because of local opposition, they finally settled on the Georgia site because of its proximity to the railroad, the presence of a "large supply of beautiful clear water," and the "salubrity of climate."

At that time, Andersonville Station was a small community of about 20 people. The place had originally

been called Anderson for John W. Anderson, superintendent of the railroad when the line was extended from Oglethorpe to Americus in 1854; but the U.S. Post Office Department changed the name to Andersonville in 1856 to avoid confusion with Anderson, S.C. The only buildings were a depot, a church, a store, a cotton warehouse, and about a dozen houses, most of which were poor shanties.

Confederate soldiers and Negro slaves from neighborhood plantations began clearing the land for the prison in January 1864. For the next 6 weeks the hillsides east of the depot echoed to the ring of axes, the crash of trees, the thud of shovels, and the shouts of men as the sandy Georgia soil was stripped of its lofty pines. The trees were trimmed and topped to make logs about 20 feet long. These were then hewed to a thickness of 8 to 12 inches and set vertically 5 feet into the ground to form an almost impregnable stockaded enclosure. The enclosure originally encompassed about 16½ acres of land but was later enlarged to 26½ acres.

Sentry boxes, or "Pigeon-Roosts" as the prisoners called them, were positioned at intervals along the top of the stockade and afforded the guards "a comfortable place in which to stand and watch what was going on inside the pen." A "deadline" was established inside the stockade and parallel to the palisades. It was marked by a wood railing "over which no prisoner" was "allowed to go, day or night, under penalty of being shot." The ground between the deadline and the palisades was called the "deadrun." A stream, Stockade Branch of Sweetwater Creek, flowed west to east through the prison yard dividing it roughly in half.

Huts built on the "deadline," August 1864, looking northeast from a "Pigeon-Roost" atop the stockade. Note the "deadline" at right.

There were two entrances to the stockade, both of which were located on the west front. The North Gate stood about 400 feet north of Stockade Branch and the South Gate about 200 feet south of the stream. From each gate a street ran eastward through the prison to the opposite wall. South Street, at the South Gate, was used to haul in rations to the prisoners. The street leading from the North Gate was called Market Street (or Broadway on some contemporary maps), and along it the prison sutler and other food merchants set up shops and stalls. Both streets were about 10 feet wide.

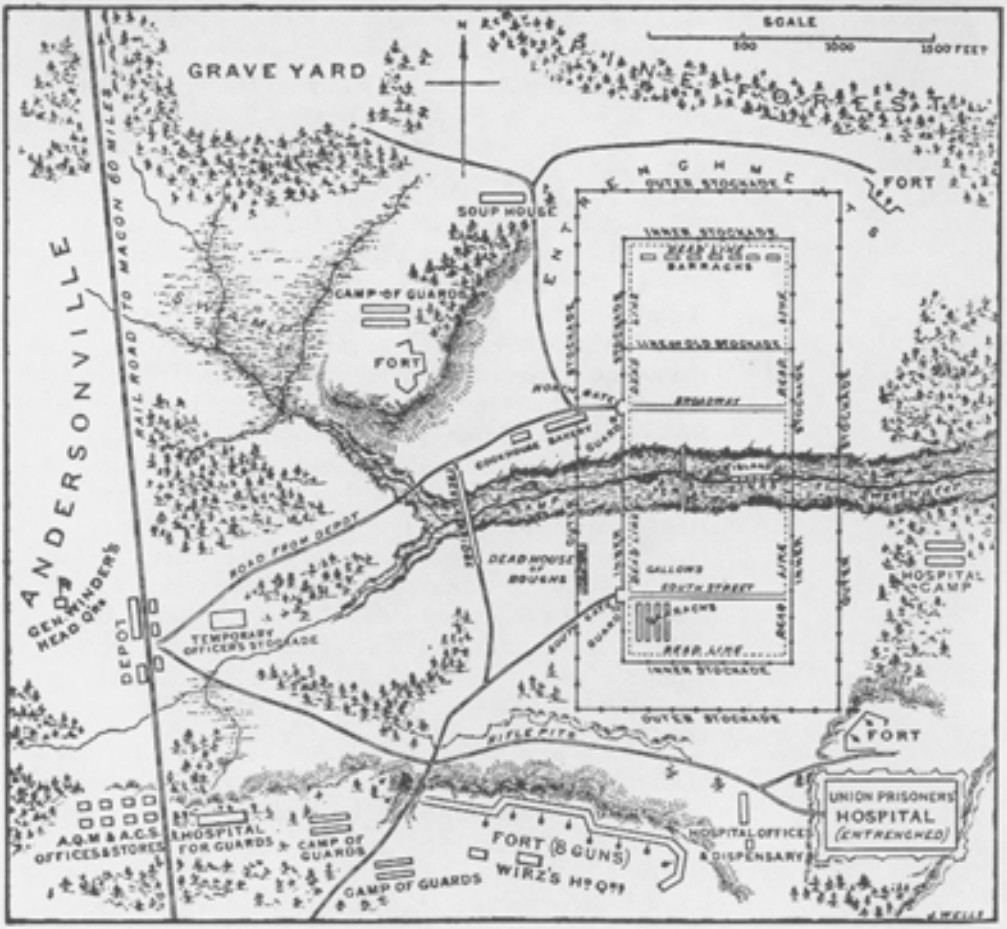
To guard against enemy attack and to quell disturbances inside the prison, earthern forts equipped with artillery were constructed at points along the perimeter of the stockade and interconnected by a line of palisades. The principal work, known as the "Star Fort," stood at the southwest corner of the prison. Other structures built adjacent to the stockade included a bakery, a cookhouse, and two stockaded hospitals.

The post commander in charge of the overall administration of Andersonville during the summer of 1864 was Gen. John H. Winder, former provost marshal and supervisor of Confederate prisons in Richmond. The prison commandant responsible for maintaining order and discipline was Swiss-born Capt. Henry Wirz. The guard force, commanded initially by Col. A. W. Persons, consisted of several Confederate regular regiments, all but one of which were soon replaced by four regiments of the Georgia Reserve (militia) Corps. The militia regiments were, for the most part, made up of undisciplined older men and striplings recently called into service. They were generally held in low repute by both the prisoners and

prison authorities. Both Wirz and Winder wanted to replace them with more seasoned troops, but their efforts were unsuccessful, as all combat-ready units were needed to oppose Gen. William T. Sherman's Federal columns advancing southward through northern Georgia toward Atlanta.

Andersonville was a prison for enlisted soldiers; officers, after the first few months, were confined at Macon. The first contingent of prisoners, 500 men from Belle Isle outside Richmond, arrived at the camp on February 27, 1864, before the prison was completed. In the weeks and months that followed, others arrived at the rate of about 400 per day. These included not only the Federals removed from prisons in and around the Southern capital but soldiers captured on the battlefields of Virginia and Georgia as well as prisoners transferred from Confederate camps in Florida and Alabama. Overcrowding quickly became a serious problem. By late June some 26,000 Union soldiers were confined in a stockade built to accommodate 10,000. By the end of July the constant arrival of new prisoners raised the total number of men being held in the prison to 31,678. The largest number incarcerated at any one time was more than 32,000 in August 1864.

Next to overcrowding, the absence of adequate shelter caused the greatest suffering. Lacking the necessary tools, the Confederates could not provide housing for their captives. The prisoners, except for those confined in the hospitals, were accordingly required to provide their own shelter. Early arrivals gathered up the lumber, logs, and branches remaining from the construction of the stockade and built rude huts. The wood supply was soon exhausted



Plan of the stockade and surroundings at Andersonville, by J. Wells. From the *Century Magazine*, 1890.

and the more resourceful Federals improvised tents, or "shebangs" as they were called, from odd bits of clothing and other cloth. These generally proved inadequate, especially during rains. Many prisoners dug holes in the ground for protection, risking suffocation from cave-ins, and when it rained these holes quickly filled with water. Hundreds of Union soldiers were without shelter of any kind against rain, sun, heat, and cold.

Many Federals who had been prisoners a long time at Richmond or other Confederate camps before being transferred to Andersonville were literally dressed in rags when they arrived. Many others, brought directly from the battlefields, wore clothes that showed considerable wear and which soon deteriorated. Some prisoners had no clothes at all.

The daily food ration, the cause of severe dietary deficiencies, consisted of one-quarter pound of meal and either one-third pound of bacon or 1 pound of beef. Occasionally, peas, rice, vinegar, and molasses were provided. Food was usually issued uncooked. Prison officials intended to cook the rations before distributing them, but the prisoners arrived before facilities had been completed. By the time a cookhouse and a bakehouse were finished in the summer of 1864, the large number of Federals in the stockade rendered them wholly inadequate.

The prisoners, who were allowed to keep their money and other valuables, could supplement their meagre rations by buying food from the prison sutler and other merchants who set up shops inside the stockade. Among the items offered for sale were onions, beans, dried peas, potatoes, cornbread, eggs, flour, soda, blackberries, meats,

condiments, cakes, and pies. Prices were high, however, and only those prisoners with a large cash reserve could do business on a regular basis.

The major water supply came from 5-foot-wide Stockade Branch which flowed through the prison yard. This stream was soon polluted by wastes from the bakehouse and Confederate camps situated along its banks outside the stockade and by the prison sinks inside. A number of springs were found in the bottom south of Stockade Branch, and while the water from these was brackish, it was better than that drawn from the stream. Because they could not remedy the pollution problem, prison officials encouraged their captives to dig wells. Usually a number of men from the same mess would undertake the project, using spoons, half canteens, mess plates, and borrowed shovels. The wells were about 3 feet wide and as much as 75 feet deep. Ropes attached to buckets, cups, or boots were used to bail the water.

The overcrowding, the inadequate shelters, the coarse, meagre rations, and the poor sanitary conditions resulted in widespread disease and a high mortality rate. Altogether more than 45,000 Union soldiers were confined in Andersonville. Of these 12,912 are buried in the Andersonville cemetery. Most of the deaths were caused by diarrhea, dysentery, gangrene, and scurvy—diseases that the Confederate surgeons could not arrest because they lacked proper facilities, personnel, medical supplies, and medicines. During the prison's 13-month existence, more than 900 prisoners died each month. The greatest death toll on any single day occurred on August 23, 1864, when 97 prisoners died.

Issuing rations to 33,000 prisoners, August 1864. This photograph was probably taken near the North Gate on Market Street.

Besides the unhealthful, debilitating prison conditions, the Federal soldiers in Andersonville had to contend with depredations by their own comrades who frequently stole food, clothing, and whatever other valuables they could lay their hands on, and who were not averse to using violence to gain their ends. The "Andersonville Raiders," a large, organized group of thieves, cutthroats, and murderers, were the most notorious and dangerous predators. For nearly 4 months the Raiders held sway inside the prison, and robberies and murders were daily occurrences. Finally, with the help and sanction of General Winder and Captain Wirz, the six ringleaders were captured and, on July 11, 1864, after a quick trial by fellow inmates, hanged from a newly built scaffold near the South Gate. Other members of the Raiders were forced to run a gauntlet of club-wielding prisoners. This ended the wholesale murder and pillage, although some petty thievery continued.

Escape from Andersonville was not impossible but it was difficult. During the prison's existence, 329 prisoners escaped. Many more got away temporarily but they were caught and returned. This was because the prison was situated far from Union lines and because of the efficiency of the dogs used by the Confederates to track runaways. Although numerous tunnels were dug, usually on the pretext of digging wells, very few men seem to have escaped by this method. Successful escapees usually slipped away from their guards while on work details outside the stockade.

When Gen. William T. Sherman's armies captured Atlanta on September 2, 1864, most of the able-bodied prisoners at Andersonville were moved to

camps in Charleston and Florence, S.C., and Savannah, Ga., to prevent their release by Union cavalry columns sent out for that purpose. After Sherman's forces set out on their march across Georgia to the sea, the prison continued to operate on a smaller scale until April 1865. On April 17 a powerful Union column under Gen. James H. Wilson captured Columbus, Ga., and within 3 weeks the last Andersonville prisoner had been released and Captain Wirz placed under arrest.

When the emaciated survivors of Andersonville returned to their homes at the end of the war, there was widespread demand in the North for the punishment of those responsible for what many claimed were deliberately planned atrocities. Next to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, the Andersonville story was the most potent weapon in the arsenal of those who wished to impose a harsh reconstruction on the former Confederate States of America.

Most of the public indignation, bitterness, and anger concerning Andersonville soon focused on prison commandant Wirz, General Winder having died. The Northern press pictured him as a vicious sadist and used such words as "monster" and "beast" to describe him. He was neither, but because he spoke with a foreign accent and because he was the officer with whom the prisoners had the most contact, he bore the brunt of the blame for conditions at the prison.

Wirz, whose name is more intimately associated with Andersonville than any other, was born November 25, 1823, in Zurich, Switzerland, the son of a tailor. He was educated in Zurich and the Kingdom of Sardinia.

Capt. Henry Wirz, commandant of Andersonville prison camp, March 1864—April 1865.

Although he wanted to be a physician, his father objected and he entered the mercantile trade. Emigrating to the United States in 1849, Wirz worked for a while as a weaver in a factory in Lawrence, Mass., and then headed west. In 1854 he was employed as a doctor's assistant in Hopkinsville, Ky. From there he drifted to a plantation at Milliken's Bend, La., where he secured employment as the "doctor" for the plantation slaves. After the Civil War broke out he joined the 4th Louisiana Infantry. In 1862 he was severely wounded during the Battle of Seven Pines, and after recovering was given the rank of captain and detailed to the staff of General Winder, then provost marshal at Richmond.

Wirz was assigned as commandant of Andersonville on March 27, 1864, and soon gained a reputation as a "firm and rigid" disciplinarian. But he was not indifferent to the prisoners' plight. He tried to provide adequate shelter and to obtain food and medical supplies for his charges, but governmental red tape, labor shortages, high prices, local opposition, and the general economic deterioration of the Confederacy hindered his efforts.

After his arrest in 1865, Wirz was taken to the Old Capitol Prison in Washington, D.C. Tried and found guilty by a military commission for conspiring with others to "impair and injure the health and to destroy the lives . . . of large numbers of federal prisoners" and for "murder, in violation of the laws and customs of war," he was hanged in Washington on November 10, 1865.

Despite numerous claims to the contrary, mostly from understandably embittered former inmates, there was no conspiracy on the part of Wirz, Winder, or other

Confederate officials to deliberately exterminate the Federal soldiers confined at Andersonville. The horrors of Andersonville resulted principally from the breakdown of the Southern economy. Throughout the Civil War the Confederacy suffered from three fundamental weaknesses that crippled her military operations and made the functioning of an efficient prisoner-of-war system virtually impossible. First, industrial output was inadequate for logistical support of the armed forces, with the result that military prisons were extremely primitive in their construction, equipment, and maintenance. Second, the Quartermaster and Commissary Corps, for various reasons, were never able to properly clothe and feed the Confederate Army, let alone prisoners of war. Finally, after the first 2 years of the war, rail and water transportation were so crippled that the movement of supplies to peripheral points in the Confederacy was frequently completely cut off. Andersonville was one of those "peripheral points."

In any discussion of Andersonville, or any Southern prison for that matter, it is important to recall that almost as many Confederates (25,976) died in Northern prison camps as the 30,218 Federals that expired in Southern. The eminent historian William B. Hesseltine, whose study *Civil War Prisons* has become a classic, said that:

All things considered the statistics show no reason why the North should reproach the South. If we add to one side of the account the [North's] *refusal to exchange the prisoners and the greater resources, and to the other the distress of the Confederacy the balance struck will not be far from even. Certain it is that no deliberate intention existed either in Richmond or Washington to inflict*

Andersonville, August 1864, looking northwest across the enclosure from a point on the stockade southeast of the sinks.

sufferings on captives more than inevitably accompanied their confinement.

When Andersonville prison ceased to exist in April 1865, the grounds reverted to private ownership and were later obtained by the Federal Government. The stockades eventually disappeared, the logs either being cut down or rotting away. All the buildings were removed, and various crops were cultivated in the area. In May 1890 the prison site was purchased from the Government by the Grand Army of the Republic, a veteran's organization. The GAR and its auxiliary, the Woman's Relief Corps, made many improvements to the area with the idea of creating a memorial park. They planted trees and shrubbery and prevailed on States and patriotic organizations to erect monuments to the soldiers imprisoned there.

The most prominent landmark erected by the WRC is Providence Spring House. It marks the site where, on August 14, 1864, when the oppressive summer heat, the crowded conditions, and the inadequate sanitation facilities were making life in the prison virtually intolerable, a spring of clear water that had been accidentally buried when the stockade was built gushered forth during a rainstorm as if in answer to the prisoners' prayers. To the worn and weary Federals, it seemed truly an act of Providence, and they named it "Providence Spring."

The prison site, which contains 84.20 acres, was donated to the United States in 1910. It was administered by the U.S. Department of the Army until 1970, when it was made a national historic site and placed under the

jurisdiction of the National Park Service. The gently sloping terrain with a stream flowing through it is much as it was during the Civil War, but the grim environment of 1864-65 has been transformed by the planting of 30 acres of trees and grass. The stockade and "deadline" are marked by 4-foot-high white concrete stakes, and the North and South Gates and the stockade corners are identified by masonry pillars. Some 26 wells and escape tunnels dug by the prisoners still exist at the north end if the prison site, and these are now fenced and marked with signs. Traces of the Star Fort and the other earthworks that were built around the stockade can still be seen.

THE NATIONAL CEMETERY

With the dissolution of the prison camp, the area one-third mile to the north which had been used as a burial ground for deceased prisoners was appropriated by the Federal Government. It was established as a national cemetery on July 26, 1865. A month later, the famous Civil War nurse, Clara Barton, who helped to identify and mark the graves of those who died while confined at Andersonville, hoisted the first U.S. flag to fly above the burial ground. By 1868 additional interments, including the remains of Union soldiers originally buried in cemeteries at Milledgeville, Macon, Sandersville, Irwinton, and Americus, Ga., had increased the total burials at Andersonville National Cemetery to 13,669.

The cemetery, like the nearby prison site, presents an appearance today far different from that seen by the haggard prisoners of 1864-65. It is composed of 17

sections—A through R (there is no section 0). The remains of most of those who died in the prison camp are in sections E, F, H, J, and K. The graves of the six Andersonville Raiders are set apart from other interments in a small rectangular plot in section J, beyond and to the right of the flagpole near the main gate. All the graves are marked with simple white marble headstones bearing the name and State of the individual interred. Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania have erected large monuments to honor their Civil War dead buried in the cemetery.

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents,
U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, D.C. 20402 – Price 40 cents
Stock Number 2405-00493

☆ GPO : 1972 O—474-881

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior