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## “All hope is banished”: Life in Andersonville Prison

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# “All hope is banished”: Life in Andersonville Prison

## **Abstract**

Libby Prison in Richmond became known for its horrible conditions; however, no prison during the war can compare to the cruelty at Andersonville Prison. It was built in February 1864, fourteen months before the end of the war, and in that short time devastating atrocities occurred which made Andersonville the most infamous of the Civil War prisons. [*excerpt*]

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## **Disciplines**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### “All hope is banished”: Life in Andersonville Prison

May 2, 2014

By: Meg Sutter, '16

“When our country called for me we came from forge and store and mill.  
From workshop, farm and factory the broken ranks to fill;  
We left our quite happy home, and ones we loved so well;  
To vanquish all the Union foes, or fall where others fell;  
Now in a prison dear we languish and it is our constant cry;  
Oh! Ye who yet can save us, will you leave us here to die?”

Libby Prison in Richmond became known for its horrible conditions; however, no prison during the war can compare to the cruelty at Andersonville Prison. It was built in February 1864, fourteen months before the end of the war, and in that short time devastating atrocities occurred which made Andersonville the most infamous of the Civil War prisons.

Camp Sumter, more commonly referred to as Andersonville, was a stockade prison near Andersonville, Georgia. Hemmerlein describes the fence as twenty feet high “made of trunks of pine trees set vertically into the ground” which surrounded the stockade. It was originally seventeen acres, enough for 10,000 prisoners; however, in June 1864 the Confederates were forced to expand it another ten acres. This was still not enough space for the 45,000 prisoners that were captive here throughout the war. The largest number of prisoners at Andersonville at one time was 33,000 in August of 1864. Nineteen feet from the fence was the “deadline” which became famous for the deaths of many prisoners who went near or touched the line. There was no shade or vegetation, and only a small stream ran through the middle of camp; it soon became contaminated with the soldiers’ waste. The only shelter prisoners had were tents that they erected if they had the means. While diaries from Libby Prison give historians a good understanding of the conditions of that prison, they cannot compare to the death and atrocities at Andersonville.



Amos E. Stearns, a soldier in the 25<sup>th</sup> Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, was taken prisoner on May 16, 1864, at Drury's Bluff. He was imprisoned first at Libby Prison and was later moved to Andersonville. During his imprisonment, Stearns kept a diary in which recorded his every day life as a prisoner of war. To prevent their liberation, Confederates transferred Stearns and the prisoners at various prisons

in the northern regions of the South deeper into the Confederacy. Stearns arrived in Andersonville on May 30, 1864. The majority of his diary is concentrated on the lack of rations, his beloved Lydia at home, and his faith in God. Soldiers in Andersonville were forced to cook most of their rations, but lacked wood to build a fire. Stearns also kept a good account of the prisoners coming in each day and those dying or being shot at the deadline. By mid-June, he estimated that "our sick prisoners here in Andersonville are dying off at the rate of eighty per day." His desperation as his "Worcester" boys from his unit died around him is very apparent. Worst of all are the hopeless rumors of exchange that circulated. These rumors would plague many prisoners as they wrote in their Andersonville diaries. When Stearns returned home he had contracted scurvy, malaria, ague, heart disease, and weighed ninety pounds.

Sergeant Lyle Adair of the 111<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry was another prisoner who kept a diary at Andersonville. His unit was forced to surrender while guarding the rail lines between Tennessee and Northern Alabama on September 24, 1864. Adair spent months in various Southern prisons before being transferred to Andersonville on December 17 due to Sherman's capture of Fort McAllister and attempt on Atlanta. Adair described the monotony of life at Andersonville, and he spoke of the constant rain and the disease and death that plagued the prison. As Stearns also wrote, most of the soldiers' rations were raw, yet they had no wood to cook the food. Rebel Recruiting officers came around the prison and prisoners "flocked to enlist" just to get out of Andersonville. More than any other hardship, though, Adair fell victim to the rumors of exchange. Men began buying their way out of prison after 1000 sick prisoners were exchanged on March 18, 1865. Adair and other prisoners were teased when on April 4, they were paroled and boarded a train to Thomasville. However, once there, they were ordered back. Adair wrote: "All hope has banished, and we are not living but only drawing out a miserable existence. And *death* seems to be the only words of relief for us from our misery and sufferings." Finally on April 17 they boarded another train and this time it took them to freedom.

John Ransom's diary reads like a novel, yet the atrocities at Andersonville were very real. Ransom was captured near Rogersville, Tennessee, on November 6, 1863. Like Stearns he



spent time in Libby Prison before he was transferred to Andersonville. Ransom kept an updated report of the number of men coming into the prison and the number dying each day. While eighteen to twenty men died when he first arrived in mid-March, 1864, 100 to 130 were dying by June. When he first arrived, Ransom could already tell that “[i]t is going to be an awful place during the summer months here, thousands will die no doubt.”

His prediction proved to be true. By the end of the war in April 1865, approximated 13,000 prisoners had died at Andersonville. Ransom also knew from the start that Captain Wirz—Commander of Andersonville Prison—was a nasty man. He later described him as “domineering and abusive. Is afraid to come into the camp any more. There are thousands of men in here who would willingly die if they could kill him first.” For rations Ransom recorded soldiers receiving a pint of beans filled with bugs,  $\frac{3}{4}$  pint of meal, and bacon the size of one's two fingers. Disease pervaded the prison with constant cases of scurvy, dropsy, diarrhea, gangrene and even chicken pox. Prisoners attempted to escape before they became “sick and faint and all broken down, feverish &c. It is starvation and disease and exposure that is doing it. Our stomachs have been so abused by the stuff called bread and soups, that they are diseased.” Even when some successfully dug a tunnel, the Confederates released bloodhounds to hunt them down and, in some cases, rip them apart. Ransom described being a prisoner of war as “noble and heroic . . . and accounts of their adventures were quite romantic; but the romance has been knocked out of the prisoner of war business, higher than a kite.” After Andersonville, Ransom was transferred to various prisons, attempted escapes, but finally was “a free man” again by December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1864.

Libby Prison may be known for its large escape, but Andersonville is known for the Raiders who terrorized other prisoners in the camp. This group of inmates formed a gang that was also increasing in number; there was an estimated number of 200-400 men involved. They threatened other prisoners, beat them up, stole their food, and sometimes murdered them. Stearns, Adair, and Ransom all mentioned the Raiders in their diaries and the fear that surrounded the camp. Ransom was concerned about the Raiders: “The raiders are the stronger party now, and do as they please; and we are in nearly as much danger now from our own men as from the rebels . . . their crimes would fill more paper than I have at my disposal.” In response, another gang developed, called the Regulators, to oppose the Raiders. On July 3, 1864, a large fight broke out in which the Regulators successfully put

down the Raiders. Captain Wirz arrested 125 men and six were sentenced to death on July 11. After the hangings, the Regulators organized a police force to keep the violence within the camp down. Of course, the horrendous conditions still pervaded.

There is an abundance of diaries from the Southern prisons, with a majority from Andersonville. As for the Northern prisons, it is more difficult to find Confederate diaries. Stay tuned for later posts on the Northern prison experience from Elmira and Camp Chase.

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"Andersonville Prison, Ga., August 17, 1864. Bird's eye view." Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Online. Digital ID: ppmsca 33769. Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-ppmsca-33769.

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