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A Different Sort of Park: Interpreting POW Experiences at Andersonville National Historic Site

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A Different Sort of Park: Interpreting POW Experiences at Andersonville National Historic Site

Abstract

Unlike many other historic sites, Andersonville does not fit neatly into any one box. It is not a battlefield, although we still interpret the experience of soldiers and the ideas they fought for. It is not a historic home or building; the only original parts of the site left are earthworks. Andersonville is a Civil War site but tells a story common to every war. Andersonville National Cemetery contains the remains of American soldiers from every American war except for 1812. Unlike any other National Cemetery entrusted to the National Park Service (except for Andrew Johnson National Historic Site) Andersonville is an active cemetery. Andersonville does not have just one story to tell but rather many different narratives throughout different time periods. It quickly becomes difficult to cover this wide range of topics in a relatively short public program.

Keywords

Andersonville, Andersonville National Historic Site, Interpretation, Pohanka Internship, Prisoners of War

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Different Sort of Park: Interpreting POW Experiences at Andersonville National Historic Site

By Andy Knight '19

Unlike many other historic sites, Andersonville does not fit neatly into any one box. It is not a battlefield, although we still interpret the experience of soldiers and the ideas they fought for. It is not a historic home or building; the only original parts of the site left are earthworks. Andersonville is a Civil War site but tells a story common to every war. Andersonville National Cemetery contains the remains of American soldiers from every American war except for 1812. Unlike any other National Cemetery entrusted to the National Park Service (except for Andrew Johnson National Historic Site) Andersonville is an active cemetery. Andersonville does not have just one story to tell but rather many different narratives throughout different time periods. It quickly becomes difficult to cover this wide range of topics in a relatively short public program.



Through both interpretive programs and museum exhibits, Andersonville centers on the commonality of the prisoner of war experience. Andersonville is home to the National Prisoner of War Museum. Unlike many other museums which are organized chronologically, the National Prisoner of War Museum is organized thematically. It uses objects and examples from many wars to show that many aspects of the experience of the POW are common to all wars in all eras. In interpretive programs it is stressed that the events and conditions of Andersonville are not terribly unique but are common with all prisoner of war camps.

In addition to the breadth of material to cover, the nature of Andersonville itself poses its own challenges for interpretation. Most scholarship on the Civil War is dedicated to

telling the story of battles, mass armies, politics, or to detailing the lives of the major actors. Comparably little is written about the Civil War's prisons. This dearth of academic scholarship translates over into popular history and public consciousness. Most visitors to Gettysburg, for example, have some background knowledge of the battle. However, that is not the case at Andersonville. Those who do know something about Andersonville usually only know about the "raiders" or that Captain Henry Wirz was hanged for war crimes. Both are famous but relatively unimportant to understanding what happened at Andersonville. As a result, interpretive programs have to fill in that missing background knowledge to put Andersonville into context, making it that much more difficult to cover all the necessary ground.

However, having relatively uninformed visitors is not without its advantages. Visitors who do not have much prior knowledge about Andersonville do not have preconceived notions either. A place like Gettysburg, where everyone is an "expert," can be difficult to interpret because interpreters often have to compete with those preconceived notions and deal with breaking down popular myths. Being able to provide visitors with relevant and accurate background information makes it much easier to help them derive meaning from the site.



Andersonville is a unique site with a unique story to tell. It is not just about the Civil War or its soldiers but about a common experience that is as real and relevant today as it was 153 years ago. It is a story that has historically been neglected and that not many are well versed in, often making it difficult to interpret. However, it also provides the opportunity of a clean slate to help

connect visitors to the site and its story. Andersonville's individuality can make it challenging but it is also what makes it special.