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## 2 Comments on Gettysburg's Stone Walls: Restoration or Rehabilitation? "Wirz's Jewelry": Memories of Captivity

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## 2 Comments on Gettysburg’s Stone Walls: Restoration or Rehabilitation? “Wirz’s Jewelry”: Memories of Captivity

### **Abstract**

*This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.*

Captain Henry Wirz remains one of the most controversial figures in Andersonville’s history. One of just a handful of soldiers convicted of and executed for war crimes after the Civil War ended (not the only one, though perhaps the most notorious), he has taken on a dual identity in American memory as a remorseless criminal and an honorable martyr. Few physical reminders of Camp Sumter survive—only the earthworks and underground remains of the stockade wall logs indicate that a grassy Georgia field once held forty-five thousand Union prisoners of war. Written accounts and sketches, however, provide a fairly reliable basis for fabricating reproduction objects. One of the most memorable is “Wirz’s Jewelry”—the ball and chain with which Captain Wirz punished prisoners who attempted escape, stole supplies, or offended the Swiss officer. This instrument of confinement, carries its own complex symbolism, which has influenced historical memory of Civil War prisons. [*excerpt*]

### **Keywords**

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

### **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

### **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

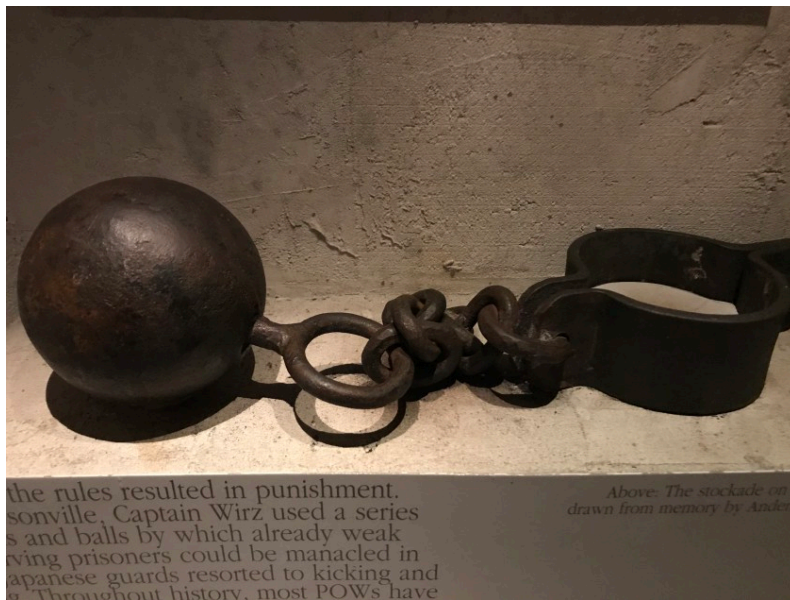
# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

## [“Wirz’s Jewelry”](#): Memories of Captivity

By Jessica Greenman '20

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the rules resulted in punishment. sonville. Captain Wirz used a series s and balls by which already weak rving prisoners could be manacled in anese guards resorted to kicking and Throughout history, most POWs have

Above: The stockade on drawn from memory by Anderson

Wirz’s ball and chain on display in the National Prisoner of War Museum, Andersonville National Historic Site. Photo courtesy Jessica Greenman.

With the stocks and other restraints, the ball and chain physically represents the experience of captivity. The image of prisoners chained to a 32-lb cannon round perhaps more readily evokes empathy for soldiers' loss of freedom than a sketch of men roaming within the (admittedly severely overcrowded) stockade. Still, it seems a rather tame aspect of the prisoners' plight—after all, these devices are meant to confine, not to harm. The “chain-gang” is easy to interpret as one of the less horrifying, and perhaps more necessary evils of prison security. As an element of the camp's story, it is certainly easier to hear about than mass death from dysentery, scurvy, and starvation, or the shooting of prisoners who tripped and fell across Wirz's dead line (a boundary preventing prisoners from approaching the stockade wall by threat of immediate death). To Lost Cause sympathizers of Wirz, it may even symbolize mercy and self-restraint (no pun intended) on the Captain's part.

On closer examination, however, another narrative emerges. In postwar accounts of prison life, Andersonville survivors remembered the ball and chain in a different light. Survivors testifying against Wirz described in graphic detail the sufferings of chained prisoners. Previously healthy men deteriorated quickly from exposure. Some contracted disease after being chained next to sick men. At least one man displayed scars from where the irons dug into his skin. Extended periods of time in such restraints left the men dehydrated, weak, and ill-equipped to survive in the already harsh conditions of the prison. It is uncertain if or how many prisoners died as a result of the ball and chain. Perhaps it is not so hyperbolic, then, that many Andersonville survivors characterized them as instruments of torture.

It is of course important to remember that these witnesses were remembering the physical and psychological trauma inherent to captivity, and many were eager to see the man with the most direct influence over daily prison life punished for their ordeal. Most prisoner diaries are not detailed enough to fully explain life at Andersonville, leaving historians to rely at least in part on often-exaggerated postwar accounts and memoirs.

In this way, “Wirz's Jewelry” serves as a microcosm for memory of Andersonville itself—prisoners were not confined in the stockade, or the chain-gang, with the overt intent to kill. Captain Wirz was not directly responsible for the starvation, overcrowding, and disease that plagued Camp Sumter, causing many more fatalities than any kind of violence. However, he did on many occasions order rations withheld even when they were available. He demanded that guards shoot suicidal prisoners who intentionally crossed the dead line without hesitation. He ordered men chained outside the stockade, even more exposed to the Georgia sun and rain than they were normally. He boasted that he could kill more Union soldiers than General Lee's army.

Captain Wirz may not have been directly responsible for thirteen thousand deaths, but undoubtedly intentionally caused or hastened some, and contributed to the conditions that caused many more. Likewise, other members of Confederate leadership may have been responsible for suffering caused by overcrowding and inadequate supplies, but

they did not necessarily deliberately set out to create those conditions—instead, the exigencies of war drew their attention elsewhere.

Civil War memory is a tangled, uncooperative thing. The cultural wounds that Reconstruction failed to dress can be traced to places like Andersonville—where no one was wholly responsible for unparalleled human suffering, yet no one was blameless either.