



8-24-2018

## Andersonville's Providence Spring

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Mark, Maci, "Andersonville's Providence Spring" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 295.  
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# Andersonville's Providence Spring

## **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.*

At Andersonville National Historic Site there is not much left of what was here in 1864 when this site operated as a prison, aside from the earthworks, which now have pleasant green grass growing on them. The petrified stumps of the original stockade do still remain in the ground, but otherwise the park is a quaint pretty scene of rolling hills with tall grass. The only visible indication of the horrors that prisoners suffered here is in the cemetery. The headstones of the prisoners have no space between them, they are placed exactly where the prisoners were buried shoulder to shoulder in trenches, 13,000 of them side by side. Most of the stones have names on them but about 400 do not. This is something distinctive about Andersonville, the fact that so many of those who died here are known. This is thanks to a paroled prisoner, Dorace Atwater, and the secret list of the dead he kept when working in the hospital and the dead house. But sadly, this list was destroyed in a fire that consumed Atwater's home in the early 20th century. Visitors frequently ask whether the museum has the Atwater list, but the best we can do is direct them to a book in the bookstore that has a portion of the list. [*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

## Andersonville's Providence Spring

By *Maci Mark '21*

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Our bookstore contains lots of books about Andersonville and the broader Civil War, and various knick knacks that visitors can buy to show that they were here. But there's a common theme amongst much of our merchandise: the image of Providence Spring. It is on the magnet, the key chain, the pocket watch, post cards, and the pin, and there are even little bottles with labels where a visitor can collect water from the spring. Providence Spring is a spring that came up in August of 1864 and was deemed a miracle for the prisoners. The prisoners' water source, Stockade Branch, was contaminated with human waste and oils from the Confederate guards' camp before it even got to the prisoners. The prisoners would get sick from the water and would have to resort to digging wells (the Georgia water table is about 70 feet down and they only had spoons or broken canteens) or drinking from the stream. The prisoners had been praying for a miracle, in the form of clean water or exchange, and one came in a thunderstorm that broke down the stockade wall, bringing with it lightning that struck the ground and brought forth a spring. This spring had clean water that the prisoners could drink without getting sick. This was deemed a miracle, and in 1901 with the help of the Woman's Relief Corps, the survivors of Andersonville placed a monument to the Spring which has become a popular symbol of the site.



*The pathway leading to Providence Spring. Photo courtesy Maci Mark.*

Park rangers at Andersonville NHS today explain that the spring was covered up when the Stockade was built and that the rains of August 1864 uncovered it. But there are still people who visit Providence Spring and believe that a miracle took place there. Providence Spring has many different meanings to those who visit it; for some it shows that the prisoners' prayers were answered when they felt abandoned by their country, letting them die in prison. Others see how minimal improvements to the conditions at Andersonville – such as clean water – saved many lives. Whether or not Providence Spring is an accurate representation of Andersonville (could it better be represented by the reconstructed Stockade?), it has become one of its most popular and up-lifting stories in a place where 45,000 men suffered and 13,000 paid the ultimate price.