

Prison Camps (5)

Reading

Civil War prison camps were terrible places, when they saw the photographs of starving Andersonville (Confederate camp) prisoners who literally looked like skeletons, northerners were shocked and horrified. Many claimed the conditions at Andersonville were a cruel conspiracy against northern soldiers. The name Andersonville became synonymous with the horrors of Civil War prison camps, but in reality prison camps on both sides were poorly managed, horrendously overcrowded, and disease-ridden.

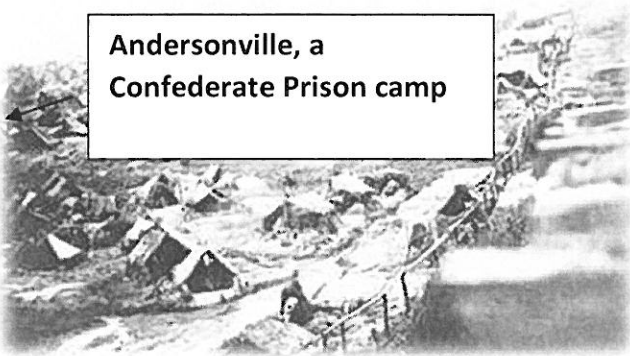
Although some prison camp leaders on both sides were deliberately cruel and vindictive to those in their charge, the conditions in Civil War prisons were mainly caused from poor planning. Prisons were not built large enough and with crowded conditions medical care was not very good. Prisons also did not have any way of keeping up with proper hygiene which caused disease as well. Many of the camps were put in areas with poor drainage and human waste soon filled the prison grounds.

Point Lookout (located in St. Mary's County Maryland) was one of the worst Union prison camps. Tents were provided to house 10,000 men, but the prison population fluctuated between 12,000 and 20,000. The men had to sleep outdoors in Maryland's inclement weather even if they lacked tents. There were stories of cruelty by the camp's black prison guards. As many as 14,000 men may have died of disease at Point Lookout during its two years of operation.

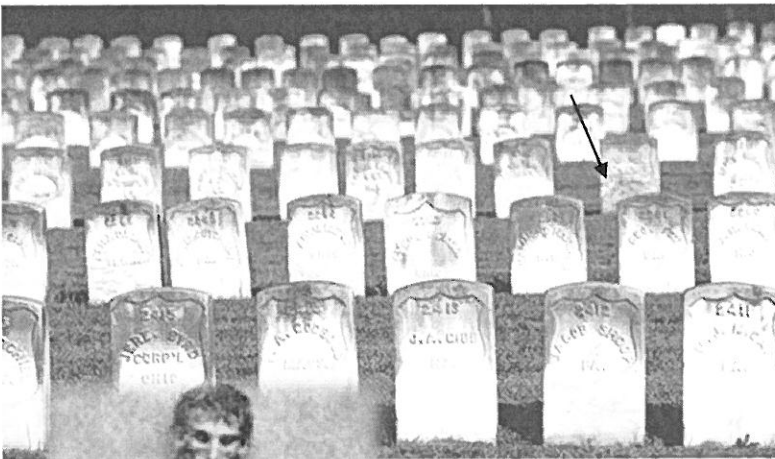
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Photographs

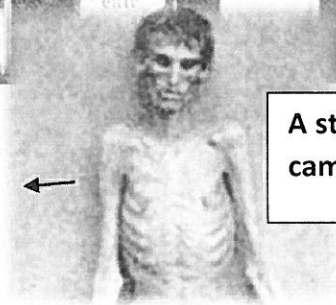
Andersonville, a
Confederate Prison camp



Graveyard at the Andersonville
Prison camp, over 45,000
Union soldiers died there from
starvation, malnutrition,
disease, abuse from guards



A starving prisoner from a Civil War
camp



Point Lookout Union
Prison Camp in St.
Mary's County, MD



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Primary Sources

“Words of mine are altogether inadequate to describe our feelings when the ponderous gates swung open and we saw the interior of Andersonville. Here was a picture of squalor and misery seldom equaled in the sight of man—thousands of men, many of them nearly naked, barefoot, black and filthy beyond the power of words to describe. The space inside was covered, in great part, by rude shelters of all descriptions and sizes, from the some-what commodious [spacious] tent made by sewing two army blankets together and stretching them over a ridge-pole and pinning the outer ends to the ground, under which several men could crawl for shelter, to a little affair, made by stretching shirts, blouses, etc., in like manner, which could scarcely shelter two men”

“Privations, lack of vegetable food and lack of exercise [led many of us to contract that] dread disease, scurvy. The mouth would become infected, the gums swollen so the teeth could not be closed together and we would be unable to chew any solid food. The gums would become black and decayed and, in my own case, with long and sharp finger nails I could gouge away parts which were in such condition as to be exceedingly offensive to the smell.”

Source: Sergeant Clark N. Thorp, Union Soldier at Andersonville Prison Camp, 1863