Abstract

Civil War prisons were horrific. After the war, Henry Wirz was put on trial for the treatment of prisoners at Andersonville. With these issues at the forefront of American politics, they were unavoidable. I examine the way Civil War prisons and Henry Wirz’s trial were treated in periodical literature in late 1865, and decide the impact it had on American reunion. The depiction of Civil War prisons undoubtedly caused resentment within the nation. Exposure of prisons would change perceptions of loved ones’ deaths, but the depictions of prisons may not be entirely accurate. Analysis of the treatment of these prisons will provide answers as to how the North and South reunited.
Research Methods

My research project’s focus is on Civil War prisons and their role in American periodicals while reunifying the nation after the war. Despite the fact that the Civil War occurred one hundred fifty years ago, the scholarship on wartime prisons during that era is not as robust as one might think. It is perhaps a good thing that American memory is short, but this does pose a challenge in attempting to research this topic.

The premise of this research assignment was to assess the ways in which periodicals treated the Civil War and the various topics that arose from it. Memory is a powerful force, and periodicals shaped popular perception of this era. In terms of my research, Harper’s Weekly was the most significant periodical to discuss Civil War prisons both during and after the war, so I used the HarpWeek archive in order to find issues that discussed the prisons. Multiple articles discussed Andersonville, Henry Wirz, and the subsequent upheaval in politics after the war on these issues. Since these topics were the priority of my research, their firsthand accounts were incredibly important. Despite the proliferation of periodicals during the Civil War era, Harper’s Weekly, as a Northern publication, had the most influence over popular perception of wartime events and prisons.

Even though I did not extensively use databases, ProQuest and EBSCO in particular were helpful because they provided full-text access to two different resources. ProQuest linked my research to a dissertation by Douglas Gardner that dealt with Civil War prisons in American memory. The dissertation provided an immediate and long-term look at the shaping of memory regarding Civil War prisons, and the impact these had upon reunion for the nation. EBSCO’s collection of electronic books were important, as it provided access to Civil War Prisons, a book edited by William B. Hesseltine, that is perhaps the most authoritative text on this era. This book
describes the circumstances and conditions that prisoners faced; this background information is necessary in understanding the era and its memory completely.

In terms of secondary sources, physical books provided the most direction. Even though memoirs were not the focus of my research, *Dancing Along the Deadline* by Ezra Ripple gave background into prisoners' experiences at Andersonville, as well as an idea of who was responsible for wartime prison camps. Even though Ripple's opinion cannot be extended to every prisoner, the memoir was certainly useful to this project. *Captain Henry Wirz and Andersonville* by R.F. Ruhlman is a detailed history of Wirz and Andersonville from the beginning of the war to his execution. This book gave an impartial look at the circumstances of prison camps, and allowed me to connect the way in which *Harpers' Weekly* portrayed this era with the most factual accounts that we have today. Benjamin Cloyd's *Haunted by Atrocity* provided further perspective into how Southerners reacted to the treatment of the Confederacy and its practices, as well as an underrepresented look at how African-Americans viewed prison camps. Cloyd's book gave insight into areas that other sources overlooked, and helped me to construct a fuller conclusion of my thesis.

Library resources were integral to my research project. Civil War prisons are certainly an interesting topic, but they are often neglected in scholarship, and the periodicals, databases, and books that the library provides allowed me to accomplish a great deal while exploring this topic.
The Costs of Secession: Civil War Prisons in American Periodicals

The rancor and bitterness between the North and South after the Civil War is undeniable. These two regions had become separate nations well before the war, and to rejoin them seemed impossible. Immediately after the war, the horror of prison camps came to the attention of this completely unstable nation. Out of the number of camps on both sides, the Southern camps, particularly Andersonville, were the most denigrated. In May 1865, Henry Wirz, the commandant of Andersonville, was arrested for the poor treatment Union prisoners received there. Despite arguments to the contrary during Wirz’s trial, he was hanged in November 1865. The media coverage during this period lambasted Wirz as a criminal, and these reports only salted the wounds that the nation had. The impact that Civil War prisons, particularly Andersonville and Henry Wirz’s trial, had upon Reconstruction was certainly negative. The upheaval that the trial and subsequent hanging created resulted in even more strife between the South and the North. Ultimately, Civil War prisons and Captain Wirz served as scapegoats for the bitterness that the North felt toward the South. By no means were the prisons beautiful places, nor was Wirz completely innocent, but their portrayals were incomplete and, therefore, inaccurate. The treatment of Wirz and Civil War prisons, though unfortunate, was a necessary part of reconciliation for the once bitter enemies to live as a united nation.

The experiences of those who were imprisoned at Andersonville are critical in understanding prison camps. Memoirs from Civil War prisoners of war, however, must be handled carefully, as some of these sources are propagandist in nature. One particular veteran, Ezra Hoyt Ripple, spent time in Andersonville, as well as Florence, South Carolina, another Southern prison camp. He was a private in the 52nd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment, and was captured by Confederates when attempting to capture Fort Johnson (Ripple viii).
According to the editor of his memoir, Mark Snell: “Andersonville was designed and constructed to hold a maximum of 10,000 prisoners... [it was] built in the shape of a rectangle comprising about sixteen and a half acres...” (Ripple ix). Over time, the prison extended to twenty-six and a half acres, and it held over 31,000 prisoners (Ripple ix). According to records, Andersonville held 49,485 prisoners throughout its operation. Twenty-six percent of those held died in captivity (Ripple 20). Yet, records may be wholly inaccurate. Even though Andersonville was—and still is—considered the worst prison camp of the Civil War, Ripple asserts that his descriptions of it can easily apply to military prisons throughout the South during the war (21).

Ripple’s descriptions of the camp revolve around the resources that the men needed on a daily basis, which were often meager at best. Shelter was simply nonexistent: “…there was no shelter provided, and we were exposed to the rays of the sun...and to the dews of the night, with the rain and storms...” (Ripple 22). The only supply of water through the camp was a stream, and it was usually quite polluted. The captives dug wells, but “these were also polluted by the deposits of filth throughout the camp” (Ripple 37). Finally, the Confederate soldiers brought a trough that brought water into the prison that ensured the prisoners would survive (Ripple 38). As for food, the prisoners received small amounts. Yet, “…variety of rations was better if anything in Andersonville than in Florence” (Ripple 39). Usually, the soldiers subsisted on small bits of beef, cornbread, and bacon. Sometimes, they would receive a pint of rice or beans (Ripple 39). The food “brought to us sooner or later the scurvy...it was not enough to support life at the best” (Ripple 39). As for healthcare, that, too, was limited. Ripple describes a boy who simply could not survive on the rations provided: “…he daily drooped and drooped...I helped to carry him to the gate one morning and he also went out to the hospital, but it was too late...” (35). The captives often desperately needed medical care that could not be provided on site, and thus they
often wasted away, whether it was from malnutrition or other horrible diseases. As for those who
died, they were laid side by side, placed on wagons, and then buried in one mass grave (Ripple
22). Ripple described the scene as “no coffins, no other covering, nothing that would bear
resemblance to a Christian burial” (22). Overall, the prison camp was not a place where anyone
wanted to be. Indeed, the experiences these soldiers endured were horrid.

If records are proven accurate, then many Andersonville captives survived, which raises
the question as to how they were able to. With prison conditions as serious as they were,
prisoners had to find a way to eke out survival. Most did this by attempting to find ways to
escape. Approximately 329 prisoners escaped from Andersonville during its operations (Futch
12). Some got away simply through deception if they were able to leave the prison itself, but the
majority of prisoners attempted to tunnel out to escape (Futch 12). This route was partially
successful; some prisoners did get out, but many were caught in these attempts (Futch 13). Even
with the hope of escape, prisoners still suffered severe psychological issues from their captivity.
Futch describes this affliction:

…studies show that human life requires the maintenance of a satisfactory body
temperature, adequate intake of food, fluids, and air, satisfactory elimination of wastes,
satisfactory amount of rest and activity, and satisfactory relationships with other human
beings…Men placed in a situation like Andersonville Prison, which upsets these
relationships and produces extreme pressures, sometimes follow a pattern of reaction, the
final stage of which is exasperation, dejection, and unreasoning dependence upon any
offer of help (14-15).

Prisoners were able to walk away from Andersonville at the end of the war by “Merely
surviving, perhaps helping comrades to survive, and even keeping busy with planning
escapes…” (Gardner 242-43). The impact upon these soldiers, and the sheer number of dead, left a spirit of bitterness in the North that could only be quenched by more death.

The trial of Henry Wirz is perhaps one of the most misunderstood trials of the Civil War. In May 1865, Henry Noyes, a Union captain, went to Andersonville, which was almost abandoned (Ruhlman 168). Noyes retrieved Wirz, saying that Wirz needed to be interviewed concerning the conditions at Andersonville (Ruhlman 168). Wirz believed, based upon the terms of surrender between North and South, that he was exempt from any prosecution, so he accompanied Noyes to Macon, Georgia for an interview (Ruhlman 169). While in Macon, the media surrounding Wirz was perhaps unprecedented: “The city…quickly took on the air of a carnival…new and more exaggerated accounts of the horrible atrocities committed by the ‘beast of Andersonville’ spread” (Ruhlman 170). Wirz was taken to Washington, D.C. for trial in late May (Ruhlman 170). Wirz was subject to a military tribunal, and the jury consisted of men in military careers who eventually went into politics (Ruhlman 181). For his defense, Wirz was represented by a Washington law firm that only had experience in civilian, rather than military, law (Ruhlman 181). Shortly after the defense attorneys realized how horribly the odds were stacked against Wirz, they resigned from the case (Ruhlman 185). Two attorneys, Louis Schade and Otis Baker, stepped forward and offered to defend Wirz, yet they too almost resigned due to the prosecution’s refusal to allow a fair trial (Ruhlman 186, 189). Before the trial even began, the media portrayed Wirz more and more hideously, causing continual outcry against him (Ruhlman 184). One hundred sixty witnesses came forward on behalf of the prosecution “…who presented volumes of hearsay, double hearsay, or fabricated testimony” (Ruhlman 195). The defense had little ability to protect Wirz, since the court continually allowed these oversteps of legal restrictions (Ruhlman 198). The trial concluded on October 24, and Wirz was found guilty for
ten out of the thirteen charges levied against him (Ruhlman 205). On November 6, Wirz wrote a letter of appeal to Andrew Johnson, then president, which was never acknowledged (Ruhlman 205-206). There is evidence to suggest that on November 9, the night before Wirz’s execution, that he received an offer to be freed if he would implicate Jefferson Davis as the one responsible for Andersonville, but Wirz did not accept (Ruhlman 207). On November 10, Wirz was hanged, surrounded by spectators and soldiers who chanted, “Wirz remember Andersonville” (Ruhlman 210). Photographs were taken of the event, and then Wirz’s body was autopsied to ensure that the family would not be allowed to bury him (Ruhlman 211-212). Wirz’s defense attorney, Schade, later claimed his body and buried him in a Catholic cemetery at Mount Olivet (Ruhlman 219).

Even though Andersonville was doubtless a horrible prison camp, the trial of Henry Wirz, which was unfair at best, raises the question of how injustice came about. What must be examined is the media portrayal of these camps. Undoubtedly, the periodical Harpers’ Weekly reveals the impact that the media has on its readers. As noted by Ruhlman, “Harpers’ Weekly published one of the first articles on Andersonville, replete with images of walking skeletons. The nation’s citizens... were in a mood... often described... as ‘having their blood up’, and Captain Wirz was an available target for their wrath” (172). The periodical, based out of New York, primarily had a Northern readership, and it was the Northern citizens’ lust for blood that allowed the trial and execution of Wirz to take place.

Harpers’ Weekly’s treatment of prison camps began even before the war was over. Indeed, the editors of the periodical sought to establish national sentiment concerning prisoners of war and their treatment well before the war’s end. In an article published on December 5, 1863, the periodical describes a rare exchange of prisoners, comparing Union to Confederate
prisoners and the treatment both sides received. It describes the Confederate prisoners: “While the rebel prisoners in our hands are supplied with food in such abundance that they cannot consume it all, with clothing, and even regular rations of tobacco, our brave soldiers...are shivering and starving to death...” (“Union Prisoners”). The state of Union prisoners upon arrival is detailed: “…before leaving, the rebels not only stripped them of socks, shoes, and blankets, but took from them their shirts and pantaloons...” (“Union Prisoners”). The depiction of prisoners may have been accurate, but the treatment of the prisoners, on both sides of the battle lines, had little factual basis. These exaggerations, however, would grow only further. In 1864, after Sherman came through Georgia, and most prisoners were liberated, Harpers’ Weekly blamed the South: “It must be remembered that...this barbarous and inhuman treatment was unnecessary. Our prisoners could have easily been supplied with food, for the Southern people are not suffering for...subsistence; the only difficulty has been...transportation, and this has no application to the region in which our prisoners have been confined” (“Our Exchanged”). These accusations, with no factual basis, would lay the foundation for a vindication of Andersonville and Henry Wirz.

The trial of Henry Wirz is doubtless where Harpers’ Weekly most criticized the South for its injustices against Union prisoners. The language, as well as the assumption that Wirz must suffer regardless of his guilt, created public fervor for his death. The periodical described Andersonville as “that incredible and unmatched crime, by comparison with which the Black Hole at Calcutta, the Jersey prison ship, the Dartmoor prison, and every historical cruelty is ridiculous” (“Henry Wertz”). The Confederates locked prisoners away “stripped of everything valuable, even to their blankets...” (“Henry Wertz”). A letter Wirz had written to General Wilson of the Union army was reported continually as a statement of guilt: “I do not think I
ought to be held responsible for the shortness of rations; for the overcrowded state of the prison, which was in itself a prolific source of the fearful mortality; for the inadequate supplies of clothing, want of shelter, etcetera etcetera” (“The Prison-Pen”). The trial was reported on extensively, describing Wirz “with stooping shoulders and pinched features” (“The Trial”). The prosecution’s witnesses and their statements were written verbatim, yet little information besides the identity of the defense attorneys was provided (“The Trial”). Toward the conclusion of the trial, a description of Andersonville as it stood at the present time was detailed: “The graves of the soldiers starved and poisoned and brutally murdered there are not scattered about over the innocent hillsides of our land, but are dug under the sod that drank their blood and bore witness to the cruelty of Wirz, Winder, and the rebel authorities at Richmond, who kept these demons at their posts” (“National Burial-Ground”). Interestingly enough, an article written shortly after Wirz’s hanging is telling of what he appears to have represented to the Northern people:

The real instigators of this atrocity will perhaps never be personally known. But history...will forever hold those morally responsible who in high positions and by the necessity of the case were familiar of all military details within the rebel lines. If rebel prisoners in our hands had been ‘brutally treated’...and Abraham Lincoln had sat placidly...and General Grant had smoked calmly...their names would justly be as infamous as now they are honored and beloved (“Henry Wirz”).

Undoubtedly, the Northern press had an impact on the way in which Andersonville, all Civil War prison camps, and Henry Wirz’s trial had on popular perception. What are necessary to examine is what these perceptions meant, how accurate they were, and the impact they had on reconciliation.
The experience of those who survived Andersonville can be helpful in determining the accuracy of the information provided by periodicals. Ezra Ripple describes Wirz negatively, stating: “He was a thin, wizened specimen of a man..., utterly heartless...he was always in a rage” (16-17). Yet, to Ripple, Wirz was not responsible for what happened at Andersonville: “I do not...hold the rank and file responsible for the cruelties practiced upon us....The men who could appoint such a cruel, bloodthirsty monster as General John W. Winder to the supreme command of all the prisons in the South have gone to answer to a just God...” (Ripple 43). Even though Ripple’s assessment of guilt cannot be extrapolated to all Union prisoners, it does provide a good indication. It is also important to realize that many prisoners’ memoirs became commercialized in the wake of national interest concerning prisons. Gardner explains: “While the vast majority of prisoner narratives seem to have been published in small editions for specific audiences...some narratives...were republished countless times by various commercial publishers throughout the postwar period...” (233). Ripple’s account, thus, must be read with a degree of caution, but it does provide evidence that Wirz was simply part of a chain that allowed Andersonville to occur.

Southern Civil War prisons undoubtedly caused controversy, but their portrayals did not allow for a comprehensive picture of prison camps throughout the nation. Cloyd describes this phenomenon: “A panoramic drawing of Elmira Prison, in New York,...presented a stark contrast to the claustrophobic, graphic images that northern artists offered of the suffering individuals in the South....The sharp contrast indicated the deepening fury...It also showed a stubborn refusal in the North, fueled by the influence of such propaganda, to confront the reality of the evil done in the name of its cause” (24). A Northern readership saw itself as literally clothing and feeding the enemy, while its own soldiers were dying completely destitute. Yet, these ideas may not have
been true, as Gardner notes: “…many came to recognize that the camp at Elmira, given the North’s relative wartime wealth…could be made to possess certain statistical advantages in rendering arithmetical tallies of comparative wartime suffering and evil” (235). It was ideas like these that led to the use of the “bloody shirt” in Northern politics. The “bloody shirt” idea, emphasized by Radical Republicans, was “a means to establish war guilt and a method through which to express war-induced hatreds” (Blight 51). Civil War prisons were a considerable part of this: “Repetitious mention of the accusations of Confederate atrocity, the celebration of the sacrifice of the Union prisoners’ bravery, and the innocence of the Union government all contributed to… ‘waving the bloody shirt’” (Cloyd 45). This sense of righteousness, along with other factors, would lead to Southern reaction, but this would take time.

The Northern presence in the prison debate completely overwhelmed that of Southerners, and perhaps rightfully so. Yet, this would change. Gardner notes: “Northerners seem to have held the lead in publishing and publicizing prisoner narratives down into the 1880s… [they] came to exercise a disproportionate influence on American memories of the war’s prisoners” (233). According to Cloyd, “The frequent rehashing of the trauma, along with the animosity with which most former prisoners wrote, encouraged hostile memories of the prison camps….The competition and popularity of the memoirs encouraged the polemical nature of the accounts” (39). These memoirs reflected primarily upon Andersonville, because it was what all knew. Gardner states: “…it was Andersonville with its 13,000 unburied dead…that came to symbolize and define the evil of Confederate prisons for white Northerners. No one Union-run camp came to dominate the white Southern imagination in the same way as Andersonville…did for Northerners…” (234-35). Memoirs, however, were not the only form that exploited this. In the 1890s, Century, a periodical, published information about Civil War prisons and prisoners which
“continued the inflammatory traditions of writing about prisoners” (Gardner 252). What these did, however, was perhaps unforeseeable: “…the controversy it generated probably helped to feed Southern interest in the emerging organizational guardians of the Lost Cause” (Gardner 252). Even in 1877, the Southern Historical Society Papers had argued that the Confederate prisoners had suffered just as much as Union prisoners had (Cloyd 52). Cloyd describes this phenomenon: “…southerners could not pretend—as did many in the North—that the atrocities committed in Confederate prisons did not occur…. The deflective memory constructed by southerners blamed the Union government and war policies for the suffering and claimed that Confederate soldiers experienced far worse treatment in Northern camps” (54). These defenses brought about an increase in Southern pride: “As a component of the emerging Lost Cause, defiance of the northern prison interpretation justified the honorable nature of the Confederate war effort, commemorated the sacrifice made by Confederate victims of Union prisons, and demonstrated a sense of renewed optimism that the days of southern penance might soon end” (Cloyd 54). The Lost Cause ideology is certainly an aspect of the United Daughters of the Confederacy decision in 1908 to erect a statue of Henry Wirz in the town of Andersonville (Gardner 252). What remains to be seen is the impact these decisions had upon reconciliation.

Civil War prisons only solidified the bitterness and resentment between North and South. Blight remarks: “These 56,000 [deaths of Civil War prisoners]…left a legacy of blame and victimization that not even the highly organized and sentimentalized reminiscence industry by the 1880s and 1890s could efface” (153). Gardner describes the emotions felt: “Too many remained too bitter for any type of workable and widely-believable intersectional consensus to be found on the issues surrounding prisoners” (247). The problems that arose from sectionalism, however, eventually led to reunion, in which all Americans learned from the mistakes that
occurred during the Civil War (Cloyd 2). Indeed, the fact that Americans were able to reconcile 
is worth noting: “The reunification of the nation after the Civil War was a remarkable cultural 
achievement, and laid the foundation for the American Century” (Gardner 253). Yet, even this 
reunion was bittersweet. Cloyd notes that the debate over prisons between Southerners and 
Northerners was primarily a white one (49). African Americans saw prisons differently: “…the 
emancipationist war meant a redefinition of Civil War prisons as symbols not of atrocity, but of 
freedom” (Cloyd 49). Those who had been imprisoned, even though primarily white, represented 
freedom (Cloyd 49). The African American vision was not fully recognized with the conclusion 
of Reconstruction, and arguably still has not been realized. This vision, however, was not the 
only thing left neglected. Gardner argues that the lessons learned from Civil War prisons should 
have brought about discussions and raised questions about “mass suffering” (255). He 
acknowledges, however, that this is a lot to ask: “Of course, that is expecting too much; the Civil 
War and its prisons provided enough challenges for late nineteenth-century Americans” (Gardner 
255). Even with reunion, it is interesting to recognize that Civil War prison memories remain 
(Cloyd 30). Remembering the past and its lessons, however, is undoubtedly beneficial.

The demonization of Civil War prisons and Henry Wirz, despite its horrible impact at the 
time, was a necessary part of American reunion. It allowed the nation to understand itself better, 
and establish new norms. The United States, despite its troubled past, has certainly grown since. 
Perhaps most worrisome is that these problems did not allow for resolution of similar issues or 
the complexities of racism. This idea, however, is dangerously close to reading history 
backwards, and that is certainly unfair. What is important to realize is the impact these events 
had, and how the citizens of today can understand and remember them. By acknowledging the
past, each person can realize its impact on the future, and remember those who have suffered in the hope of a better future.
Works Cited


