

## The Henry Wirz Monument

By Annemarie Mott-Ewing

On the morning of May 12, 1909, amidst large crowds singing “Dixie” and “Maryland, My



*Image courtesy of Steven Martin, Flickr*

Maryland,” Mrs. Perrin of Natchez, Mississippi unveiled the monument designed to honor her father, Confederate Captain Henry Wirz. The monument, finally completed after four years of fundraising and construction, stood in the center of Andersonville, Georgia, not far from the Confederate prison where Wirz infamously served as commander. The dedication day ceremony included several orators, a Catholic priest offering the invocation and benediction, and a military salute. The morning boasted crowds from throughout Georgia and nearby southern states. The day afterward, *The Brunswick Daily News* reported that with the commissioning and unveiling of this

monument, “that splendid band of women—Daughters of the Confederacy—...have added another diadem to the golden crown of their noble deeds.” Perhaps they would be gratified to know that at the site of this monument, the Alexander H. Stephens Camp No. 78 of the Sons of Confederate Veterans still holds an annual memorial service for Henry Wirz each November.

The Wirz monument dedication day ceremony in 1911 was just one of many commemorative ceremonies that had taken place in Andersonville, Georgia since the end of the Civil War. After closing its doors as a Confederate prison, Andersonville had several afterlives as a national prison, a freedpeople’s school, and a place of Union and African American commemorative practices. In fact, as this essay will explain, the Wirz monument acted as a direct rebuttal to the rich history of African American commemoration of emancipation and expressions of citizenship that had taken place in Andersonville since 1865.

From its earliest conception to its placement in Andersonville, the Wirz monument was embroiled in controversy. As the *Hattiesburg News and Progress* reported, the week before its unveiling, former Senator Joseph Foraker, of Ohio, remarked that he “would not shed any tears if some old indignant patriot were to place under that monument enough dynamite to blow it up.” The monument, a thirty-five-foot-tall obelisk, inevitably invited contention as it honored one of the Civil War’s most infamous figures. Known as the “Butcher of Andersonville,” Wirz oversaw the deadliest of the Civil War prisons. Andersonville incarcerated over 45,000 Union soldiers and had a death toll of close to 13,000 men. As the war ended, Wirz was arrested by Union troops, tried before a military tribunal, and executed by the United States government for war crimes in November of 1865. His trial and hanging were highly publicized in part because the federal government hoped the trial would lead to uncovering a conspiracy of higher-level Confederate officers who had plotted to kill prisoners in Andersonville. Wirz, however, was the only one ever executed for these crimes. His execution continues to be portrayed as martyrdom in Lost Cause rhetoric, and as recently as 2020 a petition for his pardon was submitted to then-President Donald Trump.

Not only was the Wirz monument controversial from its inception because it honored a Confederate officer and convicted war criminal, it also angered many because its inscriptions directly defended Wirz and indicted the United States government. In fact, the monument’s very purpose was to do both. It was originally proposed at the United Daughters of the Confederacy’s (UDC’s) 1905 Convention as a way to explicitly challenge the federal narrative of commemoration adopted by the Andersonville national cemetery.

The Wirz monument sought to offer a Confederate version of Civil War memory and to challenge the memorialization of the Union soldiers celebrated in Andersonville. In the early 1900s many former Union veterans’ groups in northern and western states had erected monuments to their Union dead on Andersonville’s grounds. Some of these monuments and the services which unveiled them mentioned the inhumanity of the prison. For example, when dedicating the Iowa monument, Governor Albert B. Cummins described the “unparalleled inhumanity of the prison” and “infinite cruelties of the stockade.” Since Wirz had been tried and executed for the prison’s atrocities, his reputation was directly aligned with the prison’s. When the UDC convention met in 1905, the President of the Georgia

division, Sarah Hull, argued that the Georgia chapter ought to turn its attention to erecting a monument in Andersonville to tell a different story. Mary Young, historian of Savannah's UDC chapter, noted that the "northern monuments of Andersonville...inscribed a false presentation of Wirz." She argued that "duty called the UDC to right the injustice committed against southern honor and proper history." With the goal of displaying this "proper history," the UDC began fundraising on a national scale and commissioned C. J. Clark of Clark Monumental Works in Americus, Georgia to build the "handsome marble shaft."

Union veterans did not warm to the idea of a monument to Wirz, who had been known for his brutality. At the UDC's 13th annual convention, it was reported that the Union veterans' association, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), had passed a "resolution of protest against the erection of a monument to Captain Henry Wirz." Mrs. Nesbitt, Chairman of the Georgia delegation, responded by reading a series of statements and letters defending Wirz. These documents blamed the North for the prison's overcrowding and squalid conditions, arguing that northern policy brought Civil War prisons into existence in the first place. The UDC's defense of the monument relied both on the assertion that northern prisons were similarly deadly, and that the prison system could have been avoided had the North agreed to continue the prisoner exchange cartel established during the first half of the war. They maintained that the blame for the atrocities at Andersonville did not rest on Captain Wirz, but on the cruelty of the North. This, Nesbitt argued, illustrated the differences between the "two governments. Chivalry and humaneness on the part of the South, Christianity and broad-mindedness. On the part of the North, cruelty in every way, regardless of the suffering of their own soldiers, as well as the destruction of homes and rapine against the prostrate, afflicted South."

A closer look at the United Daughters of the Confederacy's desire to exonerate Wirz with a monument protesting his innocence reveals both the role Civil War prison memory has played in Lost Cause rhetoric as well as the racist origins of the Civil War prison system itself. As historian Benjamin Cloyd has shown, Civil War prisons were established primarily because of the Confederate refusal to recognize African American personhood. At the beginning of the war, instead of housing prisoners of war, an exchange system was created. In 1862, this was systematized in the Dix-Hill cartel, a system with established exchange locations. This changed, however, with the Union's introduction of African American regiments into the

federal army in 1863. Confederates refused to consider African American soldiers as prisoners of war. They adopted a “black flag” policy when fighting African American troops, which meant they would either fight to the death or sell any captured black soldiers into slavery. The Lincoln administration demanded African American soldiers be exchanged alongside white soldiers if the cartels were to continue. The Confederacy refused and also declared that they would charge white officers of African American regiments with inciting slave rebellions if captured. Because of these policies, the North ended the exchange system and prisons were established in both the North and South.

The ending of the cartels also served a strategic military purpose for the North, since imprisoning Confederate soldiers reduced their troop numbers. The Union had the southern states relatively well cordoned off but could recruit troops for their own army from the western states or abroad. The Lost Cause narrative highlighted these political benefits while ignoring that the prison system’s very origins were rooted in the South’s refusal to recognize African Americans as people, let alone as citizen soldiers with the right to be treated according to the rules of martial law.

By employing this Lost Cause rhetoric, the UDC was successful in raising funds and commissioning the monument. The prose eventually engraved on the monument acts to exonerate Wirz and distance him from the prison’s infamy that is preserved by federal monuments on that same site. Wirz is described as “[d]ischarging his duty with such humanity as the harsh circumstances of the times and the policy of the foe permitted.” The “victim of a misdirected popular clamor,” Wirz is proclaimed an innocent martyr by the monument’s inscriptions.

Yet while the UDC celebrated Wirz, Union veteran groups fundraised and lobbied for state funds to continue building monuments in the Andersonville cemetery. Some engaged rhetorically with the Wirz monument itself. For example, the “Report of the Wisconsin Monument Commission appointed to erect a monument at Andersonville Georgia” published in 1911, included a direct refutation of the rhetoric inscribed on the Wirz monument. The Report of the Andersonville Monument Commission argues that “every sentence in this inscription is absolutely and unqualifiedly false.” The report, explaining the need for a

Wisconsin monument to set the record straight, includes transcripts of Wirz's trial and firsthand veterans' accounts to support this case, as well as information about the Wisconsin monument's unveiling on October 17, 1907.

Once the Wirz monument was ready to be unveiled, its controversy continued as debate ensued about where it should be located. The Women's Relief Corps, who managed the national cemetery, opposed the monument being placed on their grounds. During their 1907 annual convention delegates argued passionately that such a monument would "represent not honor, but infamy!" and would represent "the old spirit of the Rebellion." The UDC noted, at their 1907 convention, that no other monument had received such "unreasoning antagonism" from the North. Sarah Hull stated that the Georgia division had decided to locate the monument outside the cemetery for this reason, on "land offered to us in the town of Andersonville" so that it would not be "construed as an act of retaliation or aggression." She also claimed that the president of the Women's Relief Corps had seen "to the removal of unworthy and false statements on sign boards and posters in the prison park of Andersonville," implying that these had included statements about Wirz as well. It is evident that throughout the four-year process, the UDC leadership knew exactly what kind of statement the monument conveyed and that it challenged the federal record of Civil War memory.

In spite of the consternation it caused among northern onlookers, however, the monument became a coveted object in Lost Cause circles. According to local papers, other cities contended to be the home to the Wirz monument. Americus, Georgia, Macon, Georgia, and Richmond, Virginia, all made bids as possible alternatives for its residence. *The Atlanta Constitution* reported on October 18, 1908 that the majority of Georgia UDC chapters had voted to postpone the unveiling as they determined its rightful location. By the 29<sup>th</sup> of that same month the inscriptions were adopted by the UDC and *The Atlanta Constitution* reported that Wirz's daughter had made her plea for the monument to reside in Andersonville, but "if the selection of Andersonville would probably cause bitterness and friction, she asks it be placed elsewhere." Just two days later, it appeared that Richmond had won and *The Atlanta Constitution* ran the headline "Richmond Gets Wirz Monument: Will Be Placed Near That of Jefferson Davis, Fight Was Very Intense." The monument was scheduled to be sent to

Richmond, placed near Jefferson Davis's grave, and unveiled on the one hundredth anniversary of his birth. Upset at the prospect of the monument leaving Georgia, unhappy members of the Georgia UDC hosted a new convention in March 1909 and took a final vote. Andersonville won with 125 votes to Macon's 65, and Americus's 5.

As a Confederate monument commissioned by the UDC to honor an officer, the Wirz obelisk is but one of many erected in the postwar era of "monument fever." As a depiction of the way the Confederate battle over Civil War prison memory was rooted directly in the suppression of African American freedom and citizenship, however, it is worthy of attention. The monument illuminates the way commemorative traditions worked to structure power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While it is clear from the UDC leadership's remarks that the Wirz monument was intended to revise the historical narrative of the federal monuments in Andersonville's cemetery, this revisionist move can also be understood as a broader reaction to what Andersonville had come to symbolize: African American freedom, citizenship, and political engagement.

Both in the Reconstruction era and at the turn of the century, sites of memory like Civil War prisons and national cemeteries loomed large in the public imagination. Andersonville loomed larger than most. It was depicted in art, literature, and political cartoons, and was invoked often in political discourse. In some instances, it functioned purely as a partisan symbol. In Thomas Nast's political cartoon "Let Us Clasp Hands Over the Bloody Chasm" (1872), Andersonville was invoked as the chasm over which the North would never reach to clasp hands with the South. This image served to link Horace Greeley and the Democratic party with the Confederate atrocities of Andersonville. In doing so, it suggested the impossibility of sectional reunion and the dangers of a Democratic president.

Andersonville carried tremendous cultural weight not only because of the atrocities committed there, but because it became integral as a place of practiced African American citizenship both during and after the war. Frederick Douglass invoked the bravery of African Americans in Andersonville as a means to highlight their invaluable participation in the war as an argument for their suffrage. In "An Appeal to Congress for Impartial Suffrage" (1867), Douglass reminded Congress that it was African Americans who remained loyal to the Union

soldiers incarcerated at Andersonville by helping them escape, feeding them, and “affording them aid and comfort.”

Additionally, Andersonville represented the possibilities of African American citizenship after the war. Winslow Homer’s painting “Near Andersonville” (1866), set in 1864, offers an example of the speculative way that Reconstruction was still depicted in the postbellum era. Homer’s painting centers a formerly enslaved woman standing in the light on the threshold of a dark cabin. At her feet are gourds, a well-known symbol of the Underground Railroad. Behind her, Union soldiers are being led to Andersonville prison by Confederates. She stands, representing both hope and uncertainty, looking out at the possibilities of Reconstruction.

These sites of memory, former prisons turned national cemeteries, featured in the Reconstruction era literary imagination as well. One such example is the short story “Rodman the Keeper” by Constance Fenimore Woolson, published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1877. Woolson’s story of a Union veteran in charge of a national cemetery near a Confederate prison reveals the unexpected role such sites of memorialization played in African American attempts to shape the legacy of emancipation.

Woolson’s cemetery in the story highlights the contested space of national cemeteries. She describes it as the only place in this southern town flying an American flag. The town “turn[s] its back on the cemetery,” refusing to face the memorialization of the Union dead on its own land. Rodman, as a former Union soldier, has been tasked with maintaining this cemetery, carefully copying the rolls of the 14,000 Union dead buried there. The cemetery, and Rodman’s role in it, are characterized by a sense of belatedness, perhaps mirroring the already obvious disappointments of Reconstruction itself. Woolson’s text also highlights the continued divisions among mourners and the refusal of a collective cross-sectional memory. Rodman notes that only African Americans tend the Union graves on Memorial Day. Woolson’s portrayal of Memorial Day clarifies the rich history of the way African American commemoration resisted and rebutted Confederate versions of memorialization and revised Union ones.

As discussed previously, Andersonville loomed large in the public imagination and likely even larger for local residents. In many ways, Andersonville represented African American citizenship and Union victory. Even before the national cemetery was created, the land became a symbol of freedom. Late in 1865, African Americans converged on Andersonville hoping for clarity on what emancipation, Lincoln's death, and the end of the war meant. Because of the presence of Union soldiers, Andersonville became a refuge for many—something that became all the more true with the establishment of a freedpeople's school, the Sumter School, on the property. Additionally, the national government hired African American laborers to convert the prison into a cemetery, so jobs were relatively plentiful and many African American families settled nearby. An African American church was also established in Andersonville, and the Black population continued to rise.

Tragically and predictably, this assertion of African American citizenship on the part of the recently emancipated was met with white violence. In 1868, white citizens of Andersonville attacked the freedpeople's village the day after the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified.<sup>1</sup> This violence worked hand in glove with the voter suppression campaign also mounted at the same time, which was designed to keep African American men from coming to the polls for the election of 1868. Ongoing violence, which included white men opening fire on a group of African American men near Andersonville, was successful in suppressing the vote and Georgia's Democratic candidates were victorious.

In addition to the power Andersonville held as a site of African American citizenship, land ownership, and education, it also held significance as a site of memory. Nineteenth-century Americans referred to veterans' cemeteries as "Cities of the Dead," and they often served as sites of ritual gathering. As historian William Blair argues, these commemorations of war were commonly political in nature and instrumental in forming national identity. In the first decade after the war, the Andersonville national cemetery became a place of pilgrimage for African Americans to gather for Memorial Day celebrations which came to be known as "Andersonville Day." The first African American Decoration day, in Andersonville was held on

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<sup>1</sup> Pierson, H.W. A Letter to Hon. Charles Sumner, with 'Statements' of Outrages Upon Freedmen in Georgia, and an Account of My Expulsion from Andersonville, G.A., by the Ku-Klux-Klan. Washington, DC. Chronicle Print, 1870.

April 27, 1869 and was in direct protest to Confederate memorialization plans on that same day. Confederate mourners had intended to decorate the graves only of Confederates, but in an act of resistance, Black students from the Sumter School arrived before sunrise to decorate both Union and Confederate graves.

Unlike Rodman's fictional representation of Memorial Day, the Andersonville gatherings were interracial, attracting both African Americans and northern whites. They stood both as a symbol of Black freedom and citizenship and as a testament to those who died fighting for this cause. These commemorative days were not just symbolic, but functioned powerfully as a way for formerly enslaved African Americans to enact their nascent citizenship, align themselves with white Republicans, and hear from local candidates. The gatherings served political and educational purposes for the African American community, providing spaces to gather, organize, and agitate for access to equal rights. According to historian Benjamin Cloyd, some white residents resented African American and northern white participation in Andersonville Day, and worried that the Wirz monument would invite violence.

Not surprisingly, white residents of Andersonville conspired to quash the interracial tradition of Andersonville Day at the turn of the century. From its onset, they recognized the challenge to white supremacy that it represented and set out to portray it negatively. By 1899, media reports often highlighted violence or included only racist and dismissive language. On 3 June 1898, *The Fort Gaines Sentinel* reported, "Although the crowd of negroes gathered at Andersonville last Monday to celebrate national decoration day was small, the usual riotous behavior was indulged in, resulting in the killing of two or three negroes." Newspapers portrayed the celebration as violent, urged caution in attending, and began stationing the military at the events. They canceled train lines on this day so that observers were unable to attend, and also arrested many who gathered peacefully. While African American participation in Memorial Day had steadily climbed, by 1911 the military reported a dramatic decrease in the numbers of African American citizens participating in these events. Andersonville Day observances took a decidedly Confederate turn. None of this was accidental, just as the attack on Andersonville's freedman's village the day after the ratification of the Fourteenth amendment had not been accidental. Many white residents in

Andersonville were willing to use violence, political power, or granite monuments to suppress African American access to rights in any way they could.

Just as the very establishment of Civil War prisons was rooted in a refusal of the Confederacy to recognize African American personhood, the post-war fixation on Confederate commemoration at Andersonville was also a direct rejection of African American freedom and citizenship. In commemorative objects like the Wirz monument, ex-Confederates and Confederate sympathizers constructed versions of history that solidified their identity and validated their cause for secession. Simultaneously, they used violence and intimidation to suppress African American acts of citizenship and freedom, like Andersonville Day. The Wirz monument, while standing just outside the boundaries of the official, national commemorative space, is a brazen rejection of the national symbols of the Union victory that reside just inside those gates.

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