Andersonville

National Historic Site
Georgia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Andersonville prison camp, 1864.

". . . it takes 7 of its ocupiants to make a Shadow"

—Sgt. David Kennedy, 9th Ohio Cavalry

Andersonville, or Camp Sumter as it was officially known, was one of the largest of many Confederate military prisons established during the Civil War. It was built early in 1864 after Confederate officials decided to move the large number of Federal prisoners kept in and around Richmond, Virginia, to a place of greater security and a more abundant food supply. During the 14 months the prison existed, more than 45,000 Union soldiers were confined here. Some 13,000 died from disease, poor sanitation, malnutrition, overcrowding, or exposure.

The prison pen initially covered about 16½ acres of land enclosed by a 15-foot-high stockade. It was enlarged to 26½ acres in June 1864. The stockade was in the shape of a parallelogram 1,620 feet long and 779 feet wide. Sentry boxes, or "pigeon-roosts" as the prisoners called them, stood at 30-yard intervals along the top of the stockade. About 19 feet inside the wall was the "deadline," which the prisoners were forbidden to cross upon threat of death. A stream through the prison yard—Stockade Branch—supplied water to most of the prison. Two entrances, the North and South gates, were on the west side of the stockade. Eight small earthen forts located around the exterior of the prison were equipped with artillery to quell disturbances within the compound and to defend against feared Union cavalry attacks.

The first prisoners were brought here in February 1864. During the next few months approximately 400 more arrived each day until, by the end of June, some 26,000 men were confined in a prison area originally intended for 10,000. The largest number held at any one time was more than 32,000—about the population of present-day Sumter County—in August 1864. Handicapped by a deteriorating economy, inadequate transportation, and the need to concentrate all available resources on its army, the Confederate government was unable to provide adequate housing, food, clothing, and medical care to their Federal captives. Horrific conditions, along with a breakdown of the prisoner exchange system, resulted in much suffering and a high mortality rate. On July 9, 1864, Sgt. David Kennedy of the 9th Ohio Cavalry wrote in his diary: "Wuld that I was an artist & had the material to paint this camp & all its horors or the tongue of some eloquent Statesman and had the privleage of expresing my mind to our hon. rulers at Washington. I should glory to decribe this hell on Earth where it takes 7 of its ocupiants to make a Shadow."

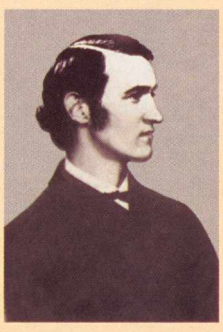
When Gen. William T. Sherman's Union forces occupied Atlanta on September 2, 1864, moving Federal cavalry columns within easy striking distance of Andersonville, Confederates moved most of the prisoners to other camps in South Carolina and coastal Georgia. From then until May 1865, Andersonville was operated on a smaller basis. When the war ended, Capt. Henry Wirz, the stockade commander, was arrested and charged with conspiring with high Confederate officials to "impair and injure the health and destroy the lives . . . of Federal prisoners" and "murder, in violation of the laws of war." Such a conspiracy never existed, but anger and indignation throughout the North over the conditions at Andersonville demanded appeasement. Tried and found guilty by a military tribunal, Wirz was hanged in Washington, D.C., on November 10, 1865. A monument to Wirz, erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, stands today in the town of Andersonville.

Andersonville prison ceased to exist in May 1865. Most former prisoners returned to their prewar occupations. In July and August 1865, Clara Barton, a detachment of laborers and soldiers, and a former prisoner named Dorence Atwater, came to Andersonville cemetery to identify and mark the graves of the Union dead. As a prisoner, Atwater was assigned to record the names of deceased Union soldiers. Fearing loss of the death record at war's end, Atwater made his own copy in hopes of notifying the relatives of some 12,000 dead interred here. Thanks to his list and the Confederate records confiscated at the end of the war, only 460 of the Andersonville graves had to be marked "unknown U.S. soldier."

Handmade shirt and trousers worn by Sgt. Nathan P. Kinsley *(in photograph)* of Co. H, 145th Pennsylvania Infantry, while imprisoned at Andersonville 1864-65.

The prison site reverted to private ownership in 1875. In December 1890 it was purchased by the Georgia Department of the Grand Army of the Republic, a Union veterans organization. Unable to finance improvements needed to protect the property, this group sold it for one dollar to the Woman's Relief Corps, the national auxiliary of the G.A.R. The Woman's Relief Corps made many improvements to the area with the idea of creating a memorial park. Pecan trees were planted to produce nuts for sale to help maintain the site and states began erecting commemorative monuments. The W.R.C. built the Providence Spring House in 1901 to mark the site where, on August 9, 1864, a spring burst forth during a heavy summer rainstorm—an occurrence many prisoners attributed to divine providence. The fountain bowl in the Spring House was purchased through funds raised by former Andersonville prisoners.

In 1910 the Woman's Relief Corps donated the prison site to the people of the United States. It was administered by the War Department and its successor, the Department of the Army, until its designation as a national historic site. Since July 1, 1971, the park has been administered by the National Park Service.



Sent to Andersonville at age 19, Dorence Atwater, 2nd New York Cavalry, became the keeper of the books recording the deaths of prisoners. His lists proved invaluable to Clara Barton.

Clara Barton led the efforts to get medical supplies, aid, and care for the troops. President Abraham Lincoln authorized her to gather information on missing soldiers to inform their relatives. Barton came to Andersonville in July 1865 to identify and mark the graves of the dead.

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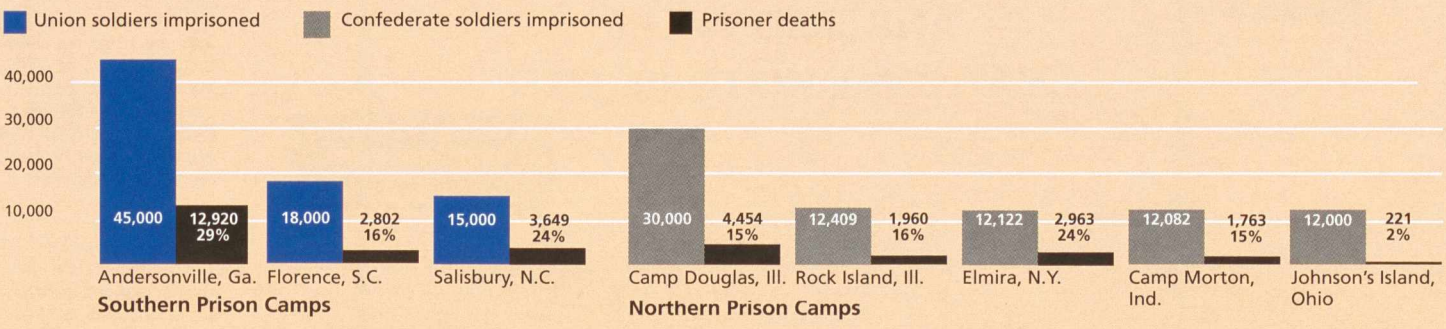
Capt. Henry A. Wirz enlisted with the 4th Louisiana Infantry and later saw duty at prisons in Alabama and Virginia. Wirz was assigned to Andersonville in March 1864 and put in command of the prisoners. He held this position until the end of the war, when he was arrested, tried, and hanged as a war criminal.

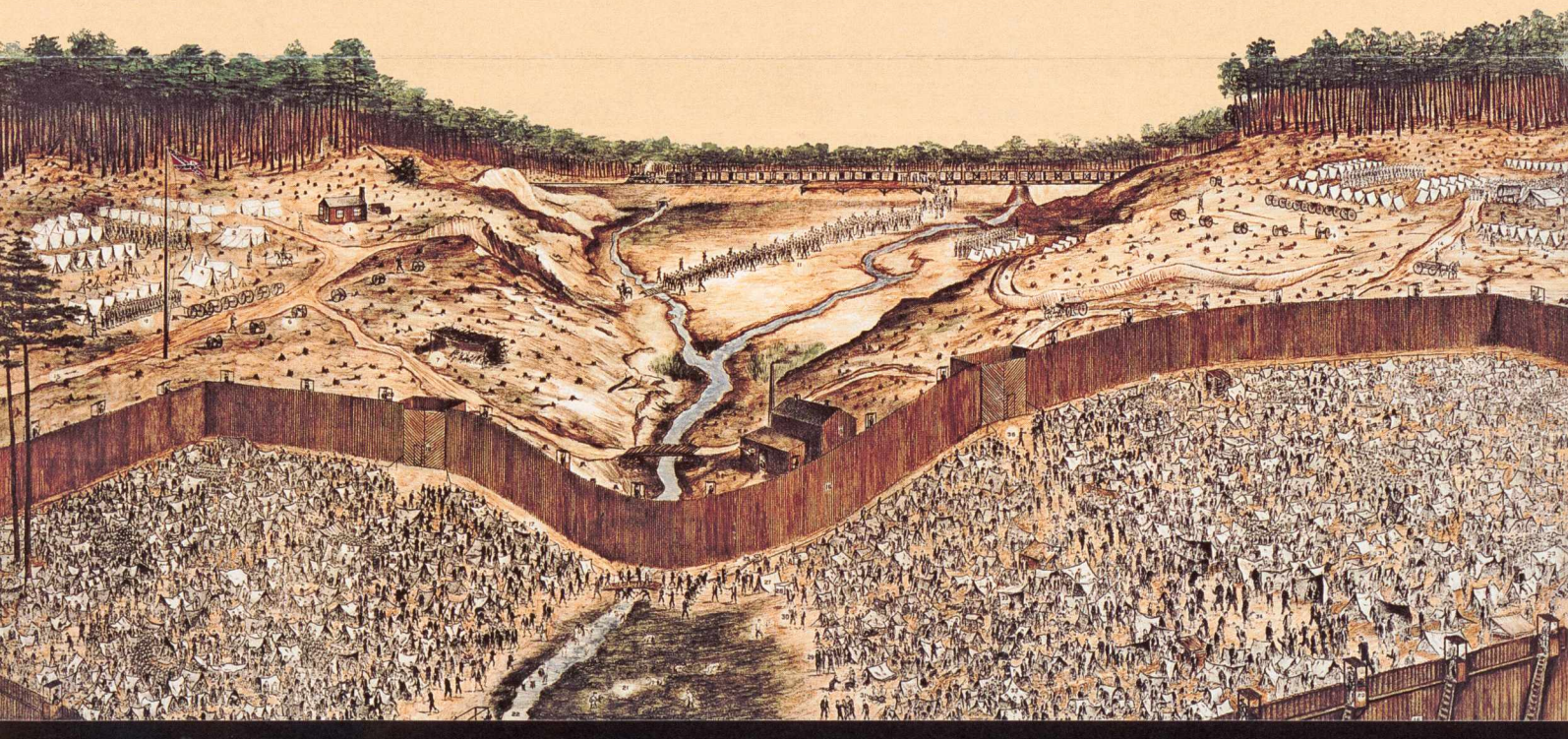
Civil War Prison Camps

When the Civil War began, neither side expected a long conflict. Although there was no formal exchange system at the beginning of the war, both armies paroled prisoners. Captured men were conditionally released on their oath of honor not to return to battle. This allowed them to return to camps of instruction as noncombatants. It also meant that neither side had to provide for the prisoners' needs. An exchange system set up in 1862 lasted less than a year. North and South found themselves with thousands of prisoners of war.

In the South, captured Union soldiers were first housed in old warehouses and barns. As the number of prisoners increased, camps were built specifically as prisons in Florence, South Carolina, Millen and Andersonville, Georgia, and many other locations. Most were wooden stockades enclosing open fields, as depicted in the lithograph below of the Andersonville camp by former inmate Thomas O'Dea. In the North, officials converted many Federal camps of instruction into prisons. Stockades were placed around Camp Butler in Illinois, Camp Chase in Ohio, and camps at Elmira, New York. Other Confederate prisoners were held at Fort McHenry in Baltimore and Fort Warren in Boston Harbor.

The confined soldiers suffered terribly. The most common problems confronting prisoners both North and South were overcrowding, poor sanitation, and inadequate food. Mismanagement by prison officials, as well as by the prisoners themselves, worsened matters. The end of the war saved hundreds of prisoners from an untimely death, but for many the war's end came too late. Of 194,732 Union soldiers held in Confederate prison camps, some 30,000 died while captive. Union forces held about 220,000 Confederate prisoners, nearly 26,000 of whom died. The mortality rates for some of the Civil War prison camps are shown below.





A Memorial to All Prisoners of War

Exhibits in the museum, clockwise from left: Stockade lock and canteen, Andersonville prison; Holy Bible, World War II; Korean War pamphlet for returning soldiers; rubber sandals, toothpaste, and toothbrush from Vietnam; "blood chit," Persian Gulf War; radio and headset from World War II.

ALL PHOTOS NPS

Andersonville National Historic Site is the only National Park System area to serve as a memorial to all American prisoners of war. Congress stated the park's purpose as providing "an understanding of the overall prisoner of war story of the Civil War, to interpret the role of prisoner of war camps in history, to commemorate the sacrifice of Americans who lost their lives in such camps, and to preserve the monuments located within the site." In 1998 the National Prisoner of War Museum opened at Andersonville, dedicated to the men and women of this country who suffered captivity. Their story is one of sacrifice and courage.

It is neither dishonorable nor heroic to be a prisoner of war. Often capture comes as a complete surprise and is frequently accompanied by injury. Internment is a physical and emotional ordeal that is all too often fatal.

Throughout the nation's history, American prisoners of war have confronted varying conditions and treatment. These are affected by such factors as climate and geography, a culture's concept of the armed forces, its view of reprisals as a legitimate activity of war, and even something as simple as the whim of individual captors. International rules require that prisoners of war be treated humanely and not be punished for belonging to enemy forces. History has taught that the concept of what is humane treatment varies with different nations and cultures.

The American prisoner of war experience has been one of constant trials. Prisoners have suffered and seen fellow captives die from disease, starvation, exposure, lack of medical care, forced marches, and outright murder. They have been victims of war crimes such as torture, mutilation, beatings, and forced labor under inhumane conditions. POWs have been targets of intense interrogation and political indoctrination. At times they have faced severe privations because their captors were not adequately prepared to care for them.

Some Americans have experienced the prisoner of war ordeal for a few days, others for years. All have experienced the loss of freedom. This is the most important story told at Andersonville National Historic Site. To fully understand this loss is to cherish freedom all the more.

Your Visit to Andersonville

Andersonville National Historic Site consists of the National Prisoner of War Museum, the Andersonville National Cemetery, and the prison site. Here you can begin to understand the hardships and suffering of prisoners of war, North and South, during the Civil War. The harshness of war, though, is tempered here at Andersonville by a landscape of beauty that perhaps inspires hope.

Location and Activities

The park is 10 miles northeast of Americus on Ga. 49. We suggest you begin your visit at the National Prisoner of War Museum, which also serves as the park visitor center. National Park Service personnel will answer questions and provide information. An orientation film provides insight into the ordeal of being a prisoner of war. Museum exhibits examine the American POW experience throughout the nation's history. A computer database lists Union prisoners and Confederate guards at Andersonville. Publications are available in the sales area. Schedules of activities and special events are posted at the museum. Camping is not permitted in the park. There is a picnic area near the museum.

Andersonville National Cemetery

Andersonville National Cemetery, established July 26, 1865, is a permanent resting place of honor for deceased veterans. The initial interments were of those who had died in the nearby prison camp and are contained in sections E, F, H, J, and K. By 1868 over 800 additional interments in sections B and C—Union soldiers who had died in hospitals, other prisoner of war camps, and on the battlefields of central and southwest Georgia—brought the total burials to over 13,800. Of these, more than 500 are unknowns. Today the cemetery contains over 18,000 interments. The cemetery is composed of 18 sections, A through R (no section O), and one memorial section. Sections are arranged in four quadrants separated by the cemetery roads. Please respect graves and funerals that might be in progress.

How to Find a Specific Grave

If you wish to find a specific grave in Andersonville National Cemetery, visit the National Prisoner of War Museum. Computers in the lobby provide the locations of the Union prisoner graves, other Civil War soldiers interred after the war, and modern-day interments. Once you obtain the grave number from the database, look on the chart beside the terminals to find the corresponding section in the cemetery.

Preservation and safety

Help us preserve the park for this and future generations. • Stay on the roadways and do not park on grassy areas. • The earthworks are fragile; climbing on them destroys the valuable historic resource. • Do not disturb the plants, animals, monuments, buildings, relics, and artifacts within the park. • The possession and use of metal detectors on park grounds is prohibited. • Wading is prohibited in the POW commemorative courtyard. • You are in an area where natural conditions can be hazardous. Wear shoes to protect yourself from sandspurs which grow wild in the grass. • Be wary of snakes, poison ivy, and fire ants (characterized by red sandy mounds), which have a painful sting. • Be alert and observe posted traffic regulations.

More Information

Andersonville National Historic Site is one of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. To learn more, visit www.nps.gov.

Andersonville National Historic Site
496 Cemetery Rd.
Andersonville, GA 31711
229-924-0343
www.nps.gov/ande

The Georgia Monument in Andersonville National Cemetery, sculpted by William J. Thompson, honors all American prisoners of war.

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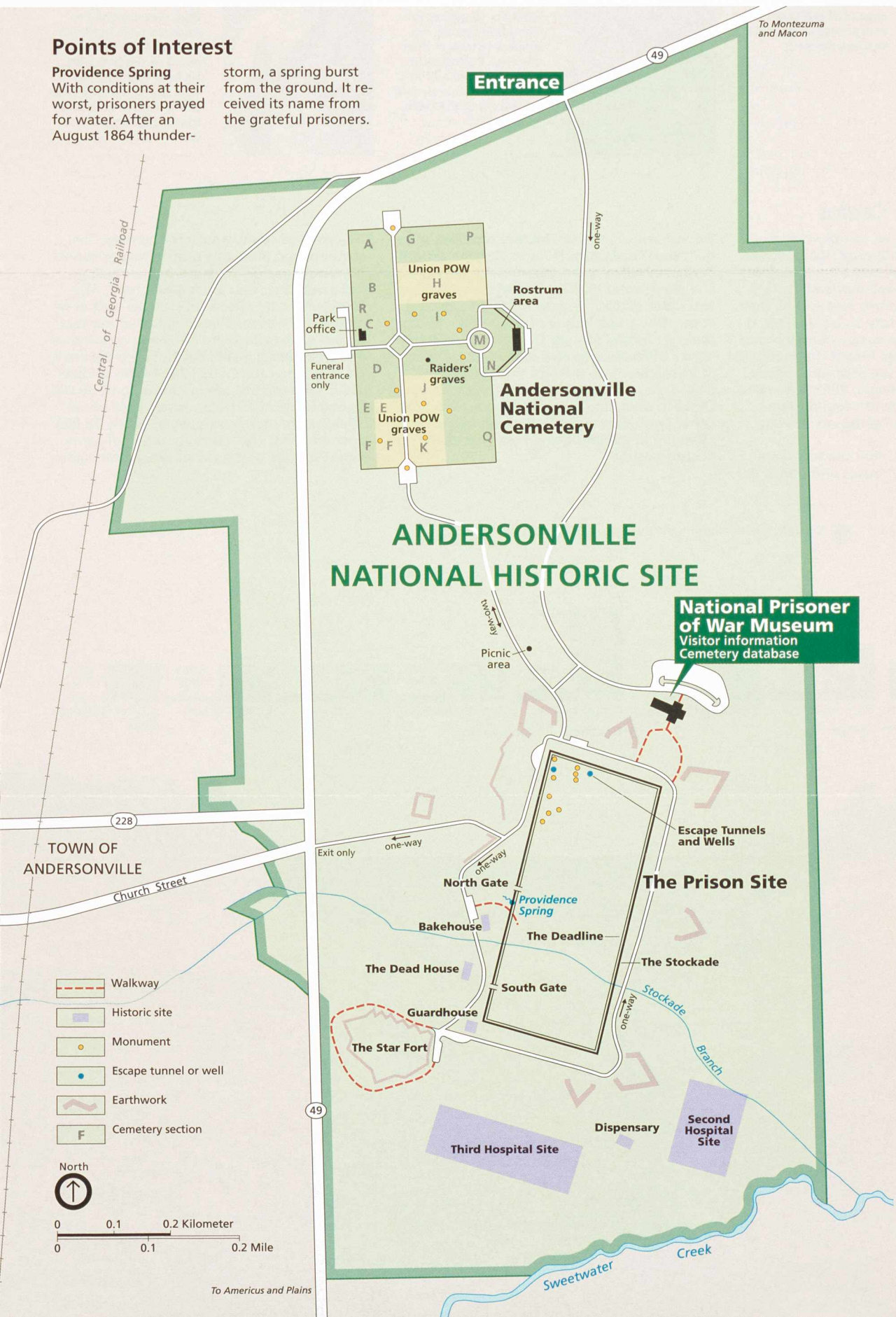
Points of Interest

Providence Spring

With conditions at their worst, prisoners prayed for water. After an August 1864 thunderstorm, a spring burst from the ground. It received its name from the grateful prisoners.



The Stockade

The inner row of posts marks the location of the deadline. Prisoners were forbidden to cross the four-foot-high rail. The outer row of posts marks the location of the stockade wall. It was built of 20-foot pine logs sunk five feet into the ground. The northeast corner, and the North Gate and adjoining walls, are reconstructed.

Escape Tunnels and Wells

Prisoners dug many tunnels attempting to escape confinement. Nearly all of the men who made it outside the stockade were recaptured. Not all holes in this area are escape tunnels; many are remains of wells that prisoners dug searching for fresh drinking water. Two examples of wells are now enclosed by wrought-iron fences. Other wells and tunnels are designated by concrete survey markers.

The Star Fort

This earthwork and several others around the stockade's perimeter were built to quell prison disturbances and guard against Union cavalry attacks.

The Dead House

The men who died in the stockade were removed to a small structure built of tree branches outside the South Gate. From here they were carried by wagon to the cemetery for burial.

Third Hospital Site

The third and last prison hospital was a large stockaded structure without adequate sheds for sick prisoners. Because of the Union blockade of Southern ports, a transportation shortage, and great demands on existing supplies, few medicines were available. There was little Confederate doctors could do to alleviate patients' suffering.