
James Madison Page in collaboration with M.J. Halley. *The True Story of Andersonville Prison: A Defense of Major Henry Wirz*. New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1908. Reprint, Scituate, MA: Digital Scanning, 1999.

Book Review

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James Madison Page, a Second Lieutenant in Company A, Sixth Michigan Cavalry, was a prisoner at Andersonville for seven months. Other prisoners wrote accounts of the prison, and many of them blamed Major Henry Wirz as “the sole cause of the suffering and mortality endured at Andersonville” (p. 9). Page felt their accounts served “to increase the friction between the two great sections of the country” by unjustly accusing Wirz (p. 10). He wrote this book to reduce that friction as he defended Wirz, feeling that Federal authorities should also share the blame.

Page began his book discussing his lineage “to show how thoroughly ‘Yankee’ I am in ancestry, birth, education, and environment” (p. 15). He recounted his duties as a soldier, several battles, and his capture at Liberty Mills. He spent time imprisoned at Libby Prison and Belle Island in Richmond before arriving at Andersonville.

As a child, he had learned the “biblical quotation, ‘A soft answer turneth away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger,’” which became his life motto (p. 56). Other prisoners wrote about the poor treatment they received, which he felt happened because they failed to follow that motto. During his imprisonment, no Confederate officer or soldier insulted, browbeat, robbed, or mistreated him because he tried to be polite and respectful to them.

Page discussed conflicting descriptions of Andersonville, quoting Ambrose Spencer and his book, *A Narrative of Andersonville*. He also described daily life and friendships with their Alabama guards, who General John Winder replaced with militia and home guards when he took command of the Southern prisons. He did not blame Winder for the meager rations and lack of clothing but “General Winder had an intense hatred for Union soldiers and the Federal Government and was thereby the wrong man to be in command of helpless prisoners” (p. 75).

Page felt other prisoners portrayed Wirz as a monster. Some claimed he put poison in the prisoners’ vaccines. The doctors at Andersonville worked hard to

minister to the sick prisoners, yet they faced charges of torture and neglect. Several prisoners correctly wrote “the hospital was inadequate,” but the surgeons and Wirz were not at fault because “the Confederate Government was in an impoverished condition” (pp. 82, 83). He recounts the garbled account that John McElroy wrote in *A Story of Rebel Prisons* of the shooting of Hubbard, which failed to discuss the situation with the mob charging him as a traitor. Many sick gave up and died because Secretary of War Edward Stanton stopped the prisoner exchange. Page explained how Melvin Grigsby’s account of Andersonville blamed Wirz, and referenced how John W. Urban described that the prisoners felt abandoned by the Federal Government. The soldiers held a mass meeting and created a set of resolutions requesting prisoner exchange (a fact denied by McElroy). Several prisoners failed to write fair accounts about the raiders.

When he first saw Wirz on horseback at Andersonville, Page saluted him. His comrades rebuked him for this, but “the salute was the beginning of our friendship” (p. 59). He recalled meeting with him to request better quality meal for his sick comrades and noted, “[w]ithin a day or two after this, meal of a better quality was issued to us, and a day or two later still, we received corn-meal mush, and later, bread” (p. 79). Page explained what happened when the guards erected the dead-line and ordered them to move their house which extended three feet into the deadline. Again, Page appealed to Wirz, who came to the site and ordered the soldiers “‘not to interfere with your cabin.’ . . . We had the distinction of occupying the only house, cabin, hut, quarters, or habitation within the dead-line at Andersonville” (p. 88). He also discussed how Wirz enlarged the prison and started the brewing of “corn beer” to combat scurvy. “But all that Wirz and his staff of medical men could do failed to stop the ravages of disease and death” (p. 102). Page appealed to Wirz for help against the raiders; Wirz let the prisoners take charge of the arrest and trial of these men. Page again met with Wirz seeking help for his dying comrades, but Wirz explained,

I am doing all I can, I am hampered and pressed for rations. I am even exceeding my authority in issuing supplies. I am blamed by the prisoners for all of this suffering. They do not or will not realize that I am a subordinate, governed by orders of my commanding officer. Why, sir, my own men are on short rations. The best I can do is to see that your sick comrades are removed to the hospital. God help you. I cannot (pp. 126-127).

Page recounted the arrest and trial of Wirz and questioned why Colonel E.D. Townsend, Assistant Adjutant General, who “figured very prominently in the prosecution,” failed to mention Wirz or the trial in his memoirs (p. 189). He also questioned why the thirteen specifications against Wirz provided specific details about each soldier’s death but none ever provided the name of the victim, even when he died several days after the mistreatment. Wirz left Andersonville on sick leave in late July, during which time he supposedly murdered several of these prisoners, but Lieutenant Davis was in command at that time. Page explained how the press portrayed Wirz “as the greatest criminal of ancient or modern times . . . a fiend, a demon, and a very monster in human shape” (p. 206). He was disappointed that he could not testify; only ten or twelve of the 160 prisoner witnesses testified. He also discussed the last days of Wirz, meeting with his attorney and a Roman Catholic priest, and his refusal to implicate Jefferson Davis in the murders to have his sentence commuted.

Page concluded his book “confident that Major Wirz was innocent of the terrible charges of which he was condemned” (p. 222). He shared an article explaining why the judge advocate failed to allow Father Whelan to testify, the final letters of Wirz accepting his fate even though innocent, an article showing the unfairness of the trial, and his attorney’s letter. Page felt that he could now tell the truth forty years later. It was time to obliterate the bitterness caused by the war, grant pensions to Confederate soldiers, and “to wipe out the so-called ‘Mason and Dixon’s line,’ and hang out the latch-string for each other” (p. 248).

Historians are fortunate that Page did not want to die with this on his conscience. He provided a very strong case in defense of Wirz. Anyone researching Andersonville should read this very well written book to learn the whole truth about Andersonville.

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Our reviewer: Jennifer Thompson is an adjunct professor at American Public University Systems / American Military University. She graduated from APUS in 2006 with her MA in Military Studies / Civil War. She earned her BA in General Studies from Indiana University. Since 2006, she has served as editor for the Indianapolis Civil War Round Table's newsletter, *Hardtack*. She is happily married for thirty-five years to her husband Jerry. They have two grown children, Jeremy and Rose, and four grandchildren, Crystal, James, Shyann, and Cherokee.