

Vol LXI, #6

Michigan Regimental Round Table Newsletter—Page 1

June 2021

MEMBER RENEWAL

The MRRT celebrates its 61st year in 2021 – and now is a great time to show your support by renewing your membership! (Or become a new member!).

Membership is \$25 a year – or \$5 for students. Checks should be made out to

Treasurer **Jeanie Graham** (the bank does not like checks made out to the RoundTable) and can be mailed to her home at **29835 Northbrook, Farmington Hills, MI 48334-2326**.

Sadly, a new member, **Paul Gateman, 76**, died on **May 15, 2021**, after a long battle with cancer. Paul was a minister for 20 years, including time at **Zion Lutheran in Ferndale, Michigan**. He was a true **Gettysburg aficionado**.

The **June 2021 meeting** has been cancelled because of the pandemic. However, there is some **GREAT NEWS**. **Jeanie** said that the **Farmington Library** (the new rules as of **June 17, 2021**) will allow us (and other groups) to start making full-scale meeting room reservations for **September** and thereafter, beginning on **August 2nd**. **THEREFORE, WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO HAVE A NORMAL SEPTEMBER MEETING!** The trip committee will be working hard for us on our proposed trip to **Culpepper, Virginia**.

Please visit our website at <http://www.farmlib.org/mrirt>. Links to interesting Civil War programs are available.

Civil War Essentials - Henry Wirz and Andersonville

The Confederate prison camp generally called Andersonville has attained a historical reputation beyond those of other prisons on both sides. Its commandant, Henry Wirz, is virtually the only person in that capacity that even serious students of Civil War history can identify by name. **Yet Andersonville differed from other such camps only by the degree of suffering and death experienced by the prisoners there.**

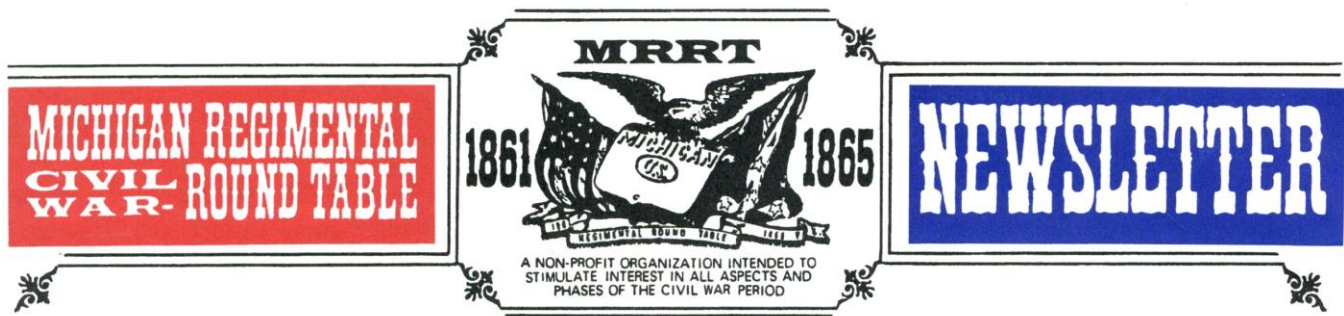
All Civil War prison camps were harsh, deadly places for the inmates. Initially this was because the need for accommodation of enemy prisoners was an eventuality not foreseen by either side in the early part of the war. Each expected a quick glorious victory followed by peace. The bitterness between the two sides did not reach the level that it would later in the war. Enemy prisoners captured in the early battles probably suffered more from lack of planning for their welfare than from vindictiveness. **As the war dragged on and the casualty lists grew however, frustration and anger against the enemy likely caused some deliberate mistreatment of prison inmates.** In the Confederacy,

increasingly scarce food, medical supplies, etc., added to the suffering of all, including captured Union soldiers.



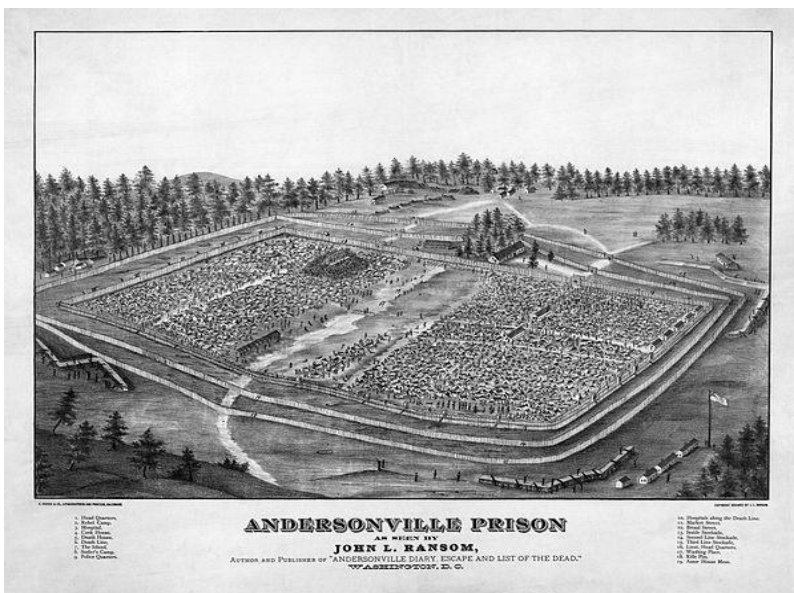
Andersonville itself, officially Camp Sumter, Georgia was constructed in early 1864.

Its purpose was to house Union prisoners removed from camps around Richmond and (Ironically!) to improve their food supply. Originally covering 16 ½ acres, it was to be expanded by an additional 10 acres. **The planned capacity was 10,000 prisoners.** Security was provided by a 16-foot-high outer stockade wall made of logs. The stockade wall was about 1620 feet long and 780 feet wide (see plan drawing). Guard towers, called “pigeon roosts” by the prisoners, were located at intervals along the stockade wall. About 19 feet inside the stockade wall was a barrier fence called the “deadline”. If a prisoner touched or crossed the deadline, he could be shot. The camp’s water supply was a creek which also served as its sewage disposal system. There were no barracks and few shelters, *per se*; the prisoners had to cobble together whatever they could find to ward off the sun and rain. Some could find nothing and had to live in holes in the ground.



Heinrich H. Wirz, called Henry in America, was born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1823. After working in Switzerland, he emigrated first to Russia and then to the US in 1849. He married and worked in several jobs in the north before eventually moving to Louisiana where he became a plantation overseer. It was in this position that he likely learned the methods of controlling and intimidating large groups of men that he used as prison commandant. When the war started, he enlisted as a private in a Louisiana infantry regiment. Although he claimed to have been injured in combat at Seven Pines in 1862, the record suggests otherwise. He traveled to Europe either as a special courier carrying dispatches to the Confederate Commissioners to England and France, Messrs. Mason, and Slidell, or from medical treatment for his injury – the sources differ. He then worked in the Confederate prison department. After other stints in prison administration, **Captain Wirz became the Andersonville commandant in February 1864, but he did not control all aspects of camp administration. Crucially, the camp quartermaster was independent, for example.**

Camp Sumter’s planned maximum 10,000 prisoner capacity was soon exceeded and **by August there were nearly 32,000 Union soldiers crammed into the camp.** This equates to under 40 square feet per prisoner. The increase in population was caused by both the suspension of the Dix-Hill exchange cartel and the almost continuous fighting in the Overland and Atlanta campaigns in the summer of 1864. **The camp’s facilities, marginal at the planned capacity, were totally inadequate at over three times the max.** Food rations, mostly coarse corn flour, were at starvation levels and the supply of water, already polluted, was woefully insufficient in the hot climate of southern Georgia. Little firewood was available to the prisoners to cook their miserable food even though the camp was apparently near substantial woodlands (see sketch).

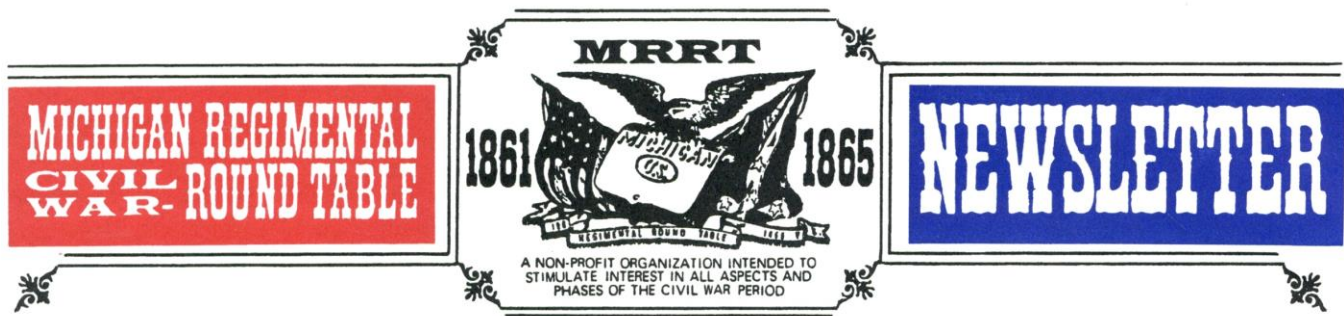


The death rate climbed so that nearly 10 percent of the prison population died in that month of August. The chief causes were probably starvation, scurvy (lack of Vitamin C), typhoid fever, and dysentery. Because clothing was as scarce as food, prisoners who died had theirs scavenged by other prisoners (“before they were cold” wrote one survivor). Wirz’ requests to his superiors for more food and other supplies brought no relief. In July 1864, Wirz reportedly sent 5 Union prisoners back to the North to plead for a renewal of the exchange cartel, but they had no success.

In all, 45,000 Union prisoners were held at Andersonville from February 1864 until early May 1865. Nearly 13,000, or about 28% died while there. The dead were buried in mass graves. A Union soldier named Dorence Atwater managed to keep a list of prisoner deaths (July 2018 *MRRT Newsletter*)

which became invaluable after the war when their remains were being recovered for reburial in the National Cemetery. There were several escape attempts, of which a handful were successful, allowing news of the camp to reach the north.

Wirz was arrested May 7, 1865, and then taken to Washington. He was tried by a military court on 13 specifications related to the suffering and deaths of the prisoners held at the camp. After a two-month trial in which 158 witnesses testified, **he was found guilty on 12 of the 13 specifications. He was sentenced to be hanged and his execution took place on November 10 at the Old Capitol Prison.** The drop of the trap failed to break his neck, so he slowly strangled to



death. It was reported that the formation of soldiers drawn up at the base of the gallows repeatedly chanted “*Wirz, remember Andersonville*” as he writhed at the end of the rope. He was buried on the grounds of the Washington Arsenal after his execution, but his remains were later reburied in Mt. Olivet Cemetery. **In the time since the Civil War, the matter of Henry Wirz’ guilt or innocence has been debated by partisans and historians.**

Certainly, many men suffered and died in all the prison camps on both sides of the war. Camps like Elmira NY, Camp Douglas near Chicago, Johnson’s Island in Lake Erie, etc., saw large numbers of Confederate prisoners die. Frustration and the desire for revenge undoubtedly motivated some camp guards and commandants on both sides to cruel behavior. **The Confederate officer prisoners held at Fort Pulaski were deliberately put on short rations in reprisal for Andersonville and about a dozen died before the order was rescinded.** It is also true that the Confederacy lacked the resources to consistently feed and clothe its own soldiers during the war and thus also the needs of Union prisoners. The suspension of the exchange agreement in the second half of 1863 resulted in a swelling of prison populations which pressured all the camps. Captain Wirz made documented attempts to get more food, etc., for his prisoners to no avail.

On the other hand, Andersonville’s death rate was twice the average for Confederate prisons. The failure to supply firewood and lumber for huts is hard to explain in a camp near stands of timber. Why were the shortages of food and other essentials at Andersonville so much worse than at other Confederate prison camps? A letter from a Dr. Joseph Jones, sent by the CSA Surgeon General to investigate, was a damning piece of evidence identifying Vitamin C deficiency as the chief issue. Although some witnesses testified that they saw no overt acts of cruelty by Captain Wirz, others described specific episodes. Wirz apparently made no attempt to prevent the exploitation of some prisoners by gangs of others. He was also accused of diverting supplies sent from the north to his guards or others instead of the prisoners.

It is therefore left to each of us to make our own judgement as to whether Henry Wirz deserved the sentence of that military court in 1865.

Quiz Questions: This month’s questions pertain to Michigan Regiments and Personalities:

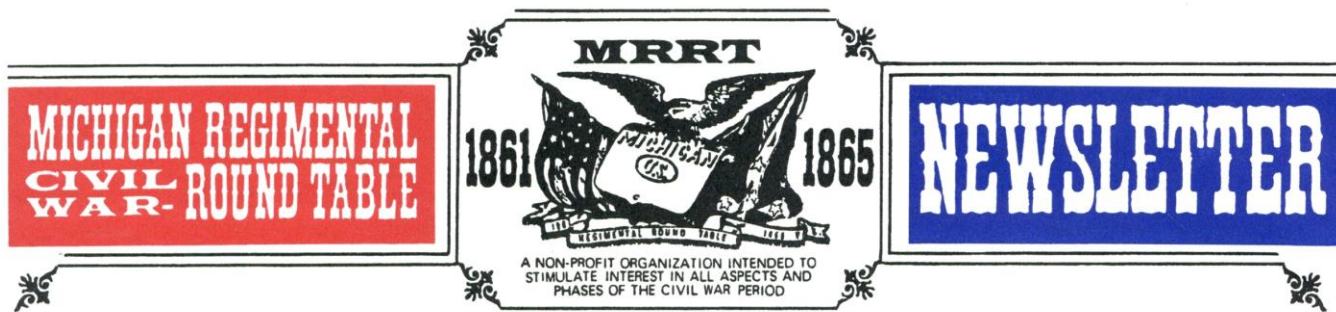
1. Who commanded the 1st Michigan Infantry and who was its first volunteer from Farmington, the first soldier to enlist from the state of Michigan?
2. Which Michigan infantry regiment was often called ‘the most photographed regiment in the Union Army’ and who was its first commander, killed at Malvern Hill, Virginia on July 1, 1862?
3. Which Michigan regiment won more medals than all of the other Michigan units, and what did the nickname give to this unit?
4. Which unit heroically battled the 26th North Carolina Infantry on the first day at Gettysburg, and who was its commander, who was wounded that day when a bullet creased his skull?
5. Which Michigan regiment helped save the Federal Army at Chickamauga, and who was its first commander, an ex-governor, from Pontiac?

Our thanks to “Old Sarge” for his help with these great questions.

Civil War Essentials – Stephen Mallory, Confederate Secretary of the Navy

Before the Civil War

Stephen was born in 1812 on the British controlled island of Trinidad where his father was a construction engineer. **When Stephen was 8 the family moved to the Florida Keys where his father and brother both died shortly thereafter.** Stephen left to attend school at a Moravian academy in Pennsylvania. Stephen then returned home at 17 when his mother no longer could afford the tuition. His schooling had ended.



Stephen then served in several posts in Key West, including Inspector of Customs and Collector of Customs. His service in the Second Seminole War (1835-1837) brought him into close contact with the Everglades. During the war he “waded through its mud up to my middle for weeks.”

After the war Stephen returned to Key West as Collector of Customs. A major promotion came in 1850 when he became a U.S. Senator. He secured a position on the Committee of Naval Affairs. Stephen resigned on January 21, 1861, and then headed south for an eventual position as Secretary of the Confederate Navy.

Secretary of the Confederate Navy

When the war began, the Confederacy had no navy. The only usable shipyard was at Norfolk, Virginia, and no machine shops capable of building an engine large enough to power a respectable warship.

Secretary Mallory was up to this major task. He purchased tugboats, revenue cutters and river steamboats to be converted into gunboats for harbor patrol.

Knowing that the Confederate Navy would never be as large as the Union Navy, Secretary Mallory decided to concentrate on several items that would aid the Confederate cause.

- Torpedoes (mines) would be planted at the mouths of harbors and rivers. By the end of the war, these “infernal devices” had sunk or damaged 43 Union warships.
- “Torpedo boats”, small half-submerged cigar-shaped vessels carrying a contact mine to attack blockading ships.
- The Confederacy developed the world’s first combat submarine, the *C.S.S. Hunley*, which sank three times in trials, drowning the crew each time (including the inventor Horace Hunley) before sinking a blockade ship off Charleston in 1864, going down for the fourth and last time.
- Mallory believed that the best way to break the blockade was to buy and build ironclad warships. He authorized in June 1861 the rebuilding of the *U.S.S. Merrimac*, renamed the *C.S.S. Virginia*. The building of the first ironclad was kept a secret from the Federals as they worked on their own ironclad ship. This resulted in the famous battle of the *U.S.S. Monitor* and the *C.S.S. Virginia*, which made wooden Naval ships obsolete.
- The main source for Confederate ironclads and other large ships was expected to British shipyards. James Bulloch of Georgia was assigned the task of buying ships in Great Britain. He was ideal for the task with 14 years’ experience in the U.S. navy and 8 years in commercial shipping. He quickly signed contracts for two steam/sail cruisers that became the famous commerce raiders *Florida* and *Alabama*. In the fall of 1861 James loaded a fast steamer with 11,000 Enfield rifles, 400 barrels of gunpowder, several cannons, and large quantities of ammunition and then successfully ran through the blockade into Savannah harbor.

After the War

Stephen was captured by the Federals after the war ended and imprisoned, charged with treason. President Andrew Johnson pardoned him after more than a year in prison. He returned to Florida and practiced law. He died in 1873.

Quiz Answers:

1. Colonel Orlando Wilcox and Andrew Crosby (who is buried in the cemetery on Grand River down the street from the Farmington Library).
2. 4th Michigan Infantry and Colonel Dwight A. Woodbury of Adrian, MI.
3. 17th Michigan Infantry and the “Stonewall Regiment”.
4. 24th Michigan Infantry and Colonel Henry A. Morrow of Detroit.
5. 22nd Michigan Infantry and Colonel Moses Wisner who died of disease at Lexington, Kentucky on January 4, 1863.