

# Andersonvilles of the North: The Myths and Realities of Northern Treatment of Civil War Confederate Prisoners

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ceedings provide the only extant transcript of Lincoln arguing a plea before a judge, the trial marked the point at which “Abraham Lincoln became a serious bedfellow with powerful eastern money men” (30). It represented Lincoln’s complete break from the river transport industry he had once championed.

Riney might have done a bit more to tie the *Effie Afton* trial and subsequent Rock Island Bridge litigation to larger trends in nineteenth-century legal history. As early as 1837, the U.S. Supreme Court announced in *Charles River Bridge v. Warren* that the law should be interpreted in favor of progress so that the nation would not “be thrown back to the improvements of the last century, and obliged to stand still.” In an era when legal instrumentalism held sway, there was little chance that courts would ultimately side with steamboats over railroads. This is a small complaint, however. *Hell Gate of the Mississippi* is a book that markedly advances our knowledge of an important trial and the jurors and lawyers (including Abraham Lincoln) who participated in it.

*Andersonvilles of the North: The Myths and Realities of Northern Treatment of Civil War Confederate Prisoners*, by James M. Gillispie. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2008. viii, 278 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Reviewer William B. Feis is professor of history at Buena Vista University. He is the author of *Grant’s Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox* (2002).

Writing about Civil War military prisons and the treatment of prisoners is an emotionally charged minefield that relatively few historians have dared enter. Why has the POW experience during the Civil War excited so much passion and remained so controversial nearly 150 years later? Because, as James M. Gillispie points out in *Andersonvilles of the North*, in the rhetorical battle both sides waged after the war over which side had been more civilized in its prosecution of the war, the treatment of POWs became a key litmus test. And, in the beginning at least, the Confederates seemed destined to lose because the writings of former Federal prisoners, illustrated by the ghastly photographs of Andersonville inmates, became Exhibit A for the prosecution.

As Gillispie points out, however, Southerners refused to accept what seemed an inevitable verdict and desperately sought to redeem their sacrifices, to recast their defeat in a new light, and to prevent the victor from writing the war’s history. Through the Myth of the Lost Cause, Southerners sought to show that they were not only more

Christian than money-grubbing Yankees, but that the Confederates had waged a far more civilized civil war. Andersonville, however, seemed to give lie to those claims. To address this problem, Gillispie argues, Southern writers went on the offensive, blaming the North not only for the deaths of thousands of Confederates in Northern POW camps like Elmira and Camp Chase, but also for the suffering of Union prisoners in Southern camps like Andersonville. Federal POWs endured appalling conditions not because of Southern neglect, argued the Lost Cause writers, but because Union armies had destroyed the South's ability to feed not only its own people but enemy captives as well.

Conversely, they also alleged that Confederate prisoners in Northern POW camps "were systematically denied adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical care" and that "Union officials had the resources to provide all of these things but cruelly *chose* not to" [emphasis added] (1). Southerners cited the breakdown of the prisoner exchange cartel in 1863, which they blamed on the North, and a desire to retaliate against the South for the treatment of Union prisoners as proof that Confederate POWs suffered needlessly under a systematic Union policy of cruelty. In the end, Lost Cause writers successfully shifted the focus from Andersonville in Georgia to the "Andersonvilles of the North." By the end of the nineteenth century, that historical sleight of hand had significantly influenced the Civil War POW narrative and even today remains a key interpretive thread running through many books on the subject.

It is this "traditional, well established image of cruel Northern keepers" that Gillispie methodically attacks, although he goes beyond merely shifting blame back to the South. He instead marshals convincing evidence and solid arguments to demolish this Lost Cause image and shows that the suffering and death in Northern prison camps was "far more attributable to the misfortunes of war than to systematic Yankee cruelty or neglect" (246).

This is a fascinating, well-written, and evenhanded work that will undoubtedly become a standard work on the subject of Northern POW camps, including the one at Rock Island. Gillispie's tempered approach shows that the overall topic of Civil War prisons, an emotional issue undoubtedly made more so to Americans by the experiences of Vietnam War POWs, can now be approached methodically and calmly, using evidence instead of agendas as a point of departure for future debate.