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Inside Andersonville

Peter Drummey 00:00

I know I'm keeping you, but let me tell you just one more thing.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:03

[Intro music fades in] I am Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai and this is a bonus episode of The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. We recommend that before listening to this bonus episode, you listen to the eighth episode from our third season titled, 'The Mortal and Everlasting Life of Frederic Augustus James: Enduring Life Behind the Deadline of a Civil War POW Camp.' That episode explored the letters and journal of a remarkable individual who volunteered to fight in the American Civil War, became a Confederate prisoner of war and died at the infamous prison camp known as Andersonville. In this bonus episode, we sit down with library assistant Brandon McGrath-Neely to talk about his impressions of James's writings and his experience as a park ranger at Andersonville.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:03

Well, so for listeners who might not know, tell us a little bit about Andersonville's history as a camp, but then also Andersonville as a national park site. Where is it? How large is it? How does one get there?

Brandon McGrath-Neely 01:18

Andersonville is a civil war prison in rural Georgia to get there means that you're driving well out of the way. There were not often people who just stumbled upon Andersonville. It was generally someone who really wanted to be there, or often a family in which one person really wanted to be there and the rest of the family was stuck in the same car. It is a relatively small park by National Park standards, if you imagine the size of Gettysburg or Antietam or even the National Mall in DC, it is not comparable. It's a small open field with the remnants of a fort and then a large national

cemetery. So, in terms of the national consciousness and its actual geographical footprint, it's relatively small. It began as a prisoner of war facility during the American Civil War. The Confederate Army and government realized that they needed a new site and wanted one that was further away from the fighting. So, they chose rural Georgia. It was further away from the conflict and less likely to be attacked or liberated by the Union army. It was closer to local food sources. At the time, food was a huge issue at the prisons in Virginia. And so, the idea was that if we take it further into the breadbasket, that it's more likely that we'll be able to feed both the prisoners and the guards who are keeping watch over them. And because it is kind of in the middle of nowhere, if these men escaped, it would take them a long time to make it back to Union lines, if at all, more likely they would be captured or become lost and returned back. So, by design, it is kind of far away. It remained a prison from about the middle of the war up until the end and after the end of the war, it undergoes this really interesting and fascinating process that forces us to think more about memorialization and what we do with the things that are left over. Then perhaps it forces us to think about the war itself. Certainly, the stories of people like Frederick Augustus James or John McElroy, come to mind when we think of the prison. These are men who spent time in the stockade. They're in tents or what's sometimes called, 'shebangs,' trying to survive this kind of open weather environment, dealing with the effects of starvation and widespread disease.

Brandon McGrath-Neely 03:16

But the Civil War ends in [18]65 and the prison ends with it. After that, the stockade walls begin to come down. The Confederate guard buildings are reused by local African American populations as schools, and so education is happening at the site of this Civil War prison near a stockade that was built using enslaved labor, and then the National Cemetery, this, at the time it was not a national cemetery. The cemetery becomes a site of commemoration, both for the Union prisoners who died or who whose family members or friends or service members died there and are buried in these trench graves, also for the locals, these people in Georgia who may have sympathized with Union prisoners or may have sympathized with the guards who were pressed into service to watch over them, who have their own experiences with war and its causes, as well as for the black community recently enslaved or otherwise free African Americans in the area who are actively engaging in the

memorialization process of the cemetery itself. In the modern period, the prison yard is still used to interpret the Civil War history, not so much this reconstruction education history. But there is also the National Prisoner of War Museum that's been established just ahead of the site. The National Prisoner of War Museum does not just interpret the experience at Andersonville, and indeed, not just the experience of civil war prisoners across the US, but American prisoners of war from the earliest colonial period and revolutionary period up to the modern day. There are monuments on the site where civil war prisoners languished and died, to airmen from World War Two held in German prisons. The site therefore becomes a story, not just of these specific men and those specific events, but a place that calls to mind a broader story of sacrifice, service and ultimately, sometimes, the greatest level of devotion to one's country.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:48

There are so many stories that one can tell in these very rich sites and so I guess my question is, what spoke most to visitors and what spoke most to you?

Brandon McGrath-Neely 05:15

One of the things that stuck out to me is that when you're interpreting at a battlefield, if you're at Gettysburg, Antietam, Bull Run, you're often telling stories of action. These are stories of battle, and ideally, if you're doing it well, you're also describing the context that leads up to it and the consequences to follow. But the centerpiece, the reason you're standing on the hill that you're standing on, is because a battle was fought there, that men and women chose to do something, and did so in a way that we have to remember, and that we consider for a long time, places like Andersonville or Libby Prison. You're considering survival narratives. If this were a fictionalized account, it would not be some great action film. It would be this long endurance tale. When you're there, you're really thinking about what happens to these people, in this case, to these men, what what do they have to do to survive? And further, what survives of them? Not just what letters do they leave behind, or do they make it out of the war, but much more so, what do they have to do to survive in this environment? Who do they become by the time that they're leaving these prison gates. In the same way that the battle can harden someone can terrify them that soldiers can come

home with what we would now understand to be PTSD because of what they experienced. A place like a prison, a place like Andersonville is a place where these men have to, day by day, make decisions that encourage their survival. This was a remarkably devastating place, in terms of the population. Thirty-three thousand people passed through these walls, and over a 1000 of them are buried in the cemetery. Not everyone makes it out, and of those who make it out, many are starved, many are sick, many are permanently scarred, physically or mentally by what they've seen, but not in the period of two days of intense fighting. This is over a period of sometimes up to 13 months that something has happened here. Whenever you look at these narratives, I always find it fascinating to think, what did these men do while they were waiting? What parts of themselves did they retain? And if you can, if there's enough source material to look at, what do you see before they went in that you don't see when they come out? Vice versa, what emerges during their time here? What do they find within themselves or produce for themselves that they didn't have when they went in?

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:15

So, I gather that the best way to connect visitors with what happened on that site is to talk about surviving stories of people who experienced Andersonville and the suffering there. Was Frederick Augustus James one of the people's stories that you talked about?

Brandon McGrath-Neely 07:33

Yes, Frederick Augustus James is not necessarily the main voice that we use to describe when I was there but contributes to a chorus of men who are describing their experience, and he appears oftentimes in the research. We find that his entries are just detailed enough that you can use them and understand them, and particularly for names or when things happen, can find it. He also speaks to a lot of the broader trends that happen at the prison. If you're interested in sanitation and how these men took care of yourself, Frederick Augustus James often writes about what he's washing or when he's going to clean himself. If you're interested in the weather, he begins every journal entry with typically pleasant, sometimes rainstorm, but he describes the weather. And so, if you're looking for that, what was it like to be there in terms of the weather you have that in addition. He also writes about the major events in the camp. He writes about the stockade wall. He writes about the

raiders, who are a fascinating group of individuals who he describes only in a very limited sense, but were a group of six men and then a gang of men underneath them who, in order to survive, rather than doing what Frederick Augustus James did, which was form intimate bonds with other men around him and rely on each other, not just to send messages to family or to speak to each other, but also to take care of each other, to provide medicine when possible, to wash each other's clothes. These men become thieves and robbers. They're attacking and assaulting and, in two cases, possibly murdering other prisoners in order to gain the materials that they have or the money which could be traded within the prison stockade. He writes about them as well. Frederick Augustus James is a great person with which to interpret these other pieces or to provide the details you need to fill in those gaps.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:08
So, you've listened to the episode that we recorded with Elaine Heavey and Evan Kutzler. What would you add to our discussion from that episode?

Brandon McGrath-Neely 09:19
One of the things that I find so interesting about Andersonville, and some of the material that we have here relating to it, is that Andersonville, like many other places during the Civil War period, is a place where memory is hotly contested. Andersonville during the period of the Civil War is, of course, a controversial site. The idea that these men are held is controversial, the political situation regarding prisoner exchange during the Civil War has been written about extensively, was a topic of controversy then, and remains a feature in historiographical discussions today. After the war, many of the men who suffered at Andersonville would use their suffering there to emphasize their commitment to the national project, to political unity and loyalty. They would what is called wave the bloody shirt to say, 'I was here. I served. I deserve X, Y or Z, or you should listen to me in this regard.' It also exists as a place of contestation following the period as a prison that the walls are erected by enslaved labor then reused by formerly enslaved African Americans who are trying to educate their children that then those people will go on to celebrate what is called Decoration Day, as well as Emancipation Day, two holidays that are commonly celebrated, or were commonly

celebrated by African Americans in the area who would celebrate, specifically at Andersonville, that this would become a travel destination that to celebrate emancipation were going to the stockyard, that to celebrate these men who died were going to decorate their graves in the entirety. That is not something that just happened, everybody was happy about and then changed over time. There was active white resistance to this, this activity. Dr. Evan Kutzler has written extensively about this idea. And then even today, these graves are places of contestation. The graveyard has many, many, many 1000s of the Civil War graves, some of whom are unknown, some of whom are known, and are laid out more or less as they were laid out following these men's death at the dead house at Andersonville, taken over the graveyard and buried. But so too is a Confederate soldier buried there, who was not buried at the time, but was instead reinterred in the 1900s.

Brandon McGrath-Neely 11:26

There is also modern burials of men who spent time in German prisoner of war prisons, who are placed directly behind these graves. That choice is intentional. The idea that these men can be placed close to one another, that a Confederate soldier can be placed here. How we choose to remember this place is fascinating and extensive, and it is not a simple yes or no. I think the way that we talk about Andersonville is in some ways as insightful, as important, and as in flux as what we say happened at Andersonville. The way that histories can develop over time, the way that our understandings can grow and change. So too can the way that we describe these things. Memory of what happened and description or history of what happened don't always align, and those disjunctures are remarkably valuable. I think of the wood piece that you guys discussed in the primary episode. This strip of wood is supposedly from the deadline in Andersonville. And the idea of collecting that as a relic is fascinating to me. This is, in theory, at least a demarcation of where you will die if you choose to resist beyond this point, not even a line in the sand. It is a deadline. If you go beyond this point, you will lose your life. The idea that somebody would say, I want to keep this sparks a number of thoughts. Are they keeping it as a sign of defiance to say, 'You wouldn't let me cross this line? But here I hold it in my hand.' Are they holding it as a way to remember the suffering that this wood is real is tangible. I can feel the grain under my thumb, and it sparks this memory and encourages you to think about the sensory elements of suffering and of being a

prisoner of war, that that element is kept and retained, not just by the individual who took it, but also the family who retained it, and then ultimately the MHS and our decision to preserve and interpret it reminds us that the memory of this place is important. That piece of the deadline as interesting as it is, doesn't necessarily reveal a sudden new truth about Andersonville. It is not a diary that tells us some secrets. It is not a photo that reveals the layout of the prison. It is a piece of wood. The meaning is not necessarily in what it teaches us about what happened there specifically, but more so about how we feel about what happened there.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 13:39

The issue of memory is clearly one of the key interpretive points that you want visitors to walk away with. And then you come up to the Massachusetts Historical Society, and you find all these relics and remnants of Andersonville in our collections, which gives you a sense of how far reaching the experience of being there, or the resonance of the site was to Americans of the Civil War era, piece of the deadline, items made by prisoners of war who were there, that were collected, that were donated to Historical Society, and the journal and letters of Frederick Augustus James. So, speak about that experience of having worked there and then to see its reach, I guess, the reach of Andersonville in various places, least of all here in Boston.

Brandon McGrath-Neely 14:32

When I was growing up and was very interested in history overall, but Civil War history in specific. I always imagined that this was a history of cannon fire, of blood, of smoke, of charges and counter charges of these great offenses. I always imagined that this was a history of battles, but the history of war, as I've learned, as our materials show, is often a history of waiting, is often a history of transport, is often a history of sitting around. When I asked my great-grandfather, growing up, what his experience of being a US service member was, I anticipated he would tell me something about the great tanks in Germany or being on a ship in Japan. I knew nothing of his service beyond that he served, and I learned very quickly he said, 'It wasn't really much, but we cooked lots of bacon.' My great-grandfather did not serve on a ship, did not roll in a tank in Germany. He was in the US Army. He was in the reserves. He was in the National Guard. He had a lifetime of service and

dedication to the country and his experience, even though it spanned periods like the Korean War, did not include these great narratives that I expected. They were rather simple. He was just a guy doing what he had to do. When I think of the things that have spread from Andersonville, I of course, think of these wonderful, these large, these historic moments. There are raiders being hanged in the prison yard 26,000 men watching, possibly the most witnessed execution in American history, that the deadline is this stark symbol of life and death, that even a piece of wood is worth holding on to. But reading the diary of Frederick Augustus James, you also see that it's a lot of waiting around that much of his time is not spent clamoring for freedom or yelling against his captors. He's sitting and reading the Testament or hymns. Whenever I see these materials spread out, it reminds me on both sides, first, that these materials have meaning beyond just the location that they happened, and beyond the time that they happened, that his journal is retained. You guys discussed in the primary episode all of the ways that it moved from person to person to place, that it was lost and rediscovered and lost and rediscovered, that it was donated and received, that we would keep on to this means that it's valuable, means that we care about it, and that it spreads so far that it traveled all the way from Boston to Georgia back to Boston, speaks to its importance and what we consider important, that we feel it's important, is just as important as the fact that it's important, important, important, important. At the same time, the small things are really interesting to me. One of the passages from his journal reminds me of this split existence in particular.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:11

So, you're holding the printed version here. Have you looked at, held the actual primary...

Brandon McGrath-Neely 17:16

Yes, I have. This is incredible.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:18

And the story of how it came to us?

Brandon McGrath-Neely 17:20

Yes, one of the things that has been mentioned before, but is worth mentioning again, that strikes me about this first is that he begins to write tighter and more cramped. And you understand that he realizes I'm going to be here longer than I expected and expects to go that long and to be there to fill out this whole journal. And also, the fact that it becomes empty very quickly that that he sees this long period of time where he needs to conserve every piece of paper and writes smaller signifies his expectation that he'll be a prisoner for a long time. And then the fact that that cramped writing suddenly stops, rather abruptly, even though he describes his sickness, his final entry is not, 'I'm so ill, I feel terrible.' It's actually somewhat of an upswing, and then it is over. That finality is visually even on the page. If you're not to read a single word, but you know the context, and you're just looking at the way the pages are filled, you can feel what this man is going through. And the moment those words stop you feel that too.

Brandon McGrath-Neely 18:18

On Saturday, July 16th, Frederick Augustus James recounts what has happened over the past week in the camp, and he includes mention of these raiders who are maybe the single biggest event that happens in the prison yard. If there's if there were a prison newspaper, we could go back and read, this would be the thing that's described most often. He starts off with this description, but he ends with a note I really appreciate. He describes, 'Six of the raiders who have been on trial for their lives by a jury of our own men were hung at 5pm today. Their names were,' and he leaves a blank space meaning that he didn't know what their names were, even though the entire prison was aware of what was happening. It makes me think of the way that rumors and information might have been spreading at the time, and also the fact that he thought he would go back and fill these names in. The fact that he didn't is another quick reminder of his mortality and of how quickly things change for Frederick Augustus James while he's there. He continues, 'They were hung upon one gallows all at the same time near the southwestern gate. They were executed by our own men, having been delivered up to their disposal after their trial was over by the CS commander at this post. I did not go near the gallows having no relish for such scenes, and only saw them from the other side of the

camp after they were dead. The remainder of the gang who were not acquitted, were sentenced to ball and chain for several months and then washed out my underclothes.'

Brandon McGrath-Neely 20:34

Frederick Augustus James has this entry where he is mentioning this really fascinating idea. It's something that appears heavily in the film *Andersonville*, based on the prison. It's something that has been subject to debate. It's often what people are most interested on the tour. At the end of this journal entry, he simply says, 'I washed out my underclothes.' To me when I think about this journal in this place that captures everything I'm thinking about, that Frederick Augustus James is witness to things that are horrific, that are ideally something we will never experience, or even come close to experiencing, that what he is going through and seeing and participating in to a certain extent, is something worth remembering, whether because we want to keep that memory alive, or if we believe that by learning about it, we can prevent it or prevent some part of it, that that what he's writing about here means something to us, and also what he is experiencing are the small things that these stories of survival that we described, that this day to day existence, and that what we remember is also these little things, these, these tiny things it takes to make it through. There are a lot of materials at the Massachusetts Historical Society. You can and people have spent entire careers here and still not seen everything and of what they've seen still not figured out or chased down every rabbit hole. There are lots of things, like Frederick Augustus James journals that bring us into these places in time, these places in space that are telling, that are haunting, that stick with us. And these things were also produced by individual people, like the person reading it, like you or I or whoever's in the reading room that day. Those small things make it human, and the big things make it memorable.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:20

[Outro music fades in] The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Brandon McGrath-Neely, library assistant at the MHS and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS.

Cassie Cloutier 21:47

Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Chad Crouch. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.