The Diary of Newell Burch: How a Man of Resources Survived the Civil War and 21 Months as a Prisoner of War

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The Diary of Newell Burch: How a Man of Resources Survived the Civil War and 21 Months as a Prisoner of War

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This thesis is about Civil War veteran Newell Burch. During his time in the Civil War, that consisted of travels through Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg, Burch documented his travels in a diary and memoir on which this thesis is based. A member of the 154th N. Y. Regiment, Burch marched to Gettysburg where he was captured and later imprisoned at Belle Isle and Andersonville. The focus of this thesis is largely around the sickness in the Andersonville prison, and how Burch was able to use his intelligence to work in the prison hospital. His resourcefulness to understand how to stay in good health while imprisoned is what makes Burch a person of interest. Many firsthand accounts are known from this time period, but none as unique as Burch’s. His selflessness and self-reliance helped him to survive 21 months as a prisoner of war is what makes his account one of interest to historians.
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Introduction: Understanding Newell Burch & His Diary

Newell Burch was born January 16, 1842 in Chautauqua County, New York. His father, Oliver Burch, was a farmer married to Mary, Burch’s mother. Burch was one of nine children, this included six boys (four of whom fought for the Union Army during the Civil War). Before enlisting in the war, Burch worked on the farm with his father, like many boys of the era. He also attended the Westfield Academy, but in 1862 decided to enlist in the 154th New York Volunteers. Burch enlisted as a private in August of 1862, earned rank to Corporal the following month.¹

The 154th was mustered in Jamestown, New York and enlistees hailed from Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties. Company E, in which Burch enlisted, was primarily recruited from the area near Burch’s home. On October 2nd the 154th was mustered into service as part of the 1st Brigade, 2nd Division, 11th Corps, Army of the Potomac. With his regiment Burch marched through Virginia, missed the battle of Fredericksburg, participated in the January 1863 Mud March and first battle of Chancellorsville, and was captured at Gettysburg.

His capture at Gettysburg is what made Burch’s Civil War life so interesting. He was imprisoned for 21 months at two different prisoner of war (POW) camps, Belle Isle and Andersonville. Since Burch’s incarceration was on the first night of Gettysburg he saw conditions slowly fade and disintegrate in both prisons. At both Belle Isle and Andersonville, Burch was imprisoned in their first months as a prisoner of war. During

¹ Newell Burch Diary and Related Sources of Corporal Newell Burch 154th New York Volunteers Covering the Period August 25, 1862 to April 21, 1865, ed. John Quinn Imholte, unpublished typescript, Dunn County Historical Society, 10 (hereafter cited as Burch Diary).
his time at both prisons Burch would see conditions worsen the longer he was at each camp. Upon leaving the overcrowded Belle Isle, he entered in the early months of Andersonville. Overcrowding, malnutrition, and sickness hampered Burch’s time inside the prison.

It was here Burch learned how to treat the wounds he had sustained due to the lack of medical care that Union soldiers received in POW camps. It was Burch’s resourceful nature that pushed him to learn how to take care of himself physically. This led to a breakthrough for Burch, he began to help out his fellow soldiers by working as a nurse in the hospital of Andersonville. This was quite a feat for a farm boy who volunteered to join the army. It is astounding Burch had the understanding of what it would take to survive such an ordeal.

This story would be untold if Burch had not documented his life while in the military. Newell Burch wrote a diary in two separate memoranda books that spanned from August 1862 to November 1863. Author James E. Young explains a diary as, “any written work is born of a specific moment in time, it might be regarded quite naturally as a fragment or artifact of the particular age that produced it.” Burch’s diary entries stopped toward the end of Burch’s time in Belle Isle, because he no longer had access to paper. The entries Burch made in his diary were day-to-day accounts of his life, written eloquently in order to truly understand the life he was leading at the time.

Once moving to Menomonie, Wisconsin, Burch retrospectively filled in the gaps in a memoir from December 1863 to his release on April 21, 1865. In this portion, Burch

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wrote in much detail about his time in Andersonville and what it was like trying to survive the harsh conditions. No longer were day-to-day entries used, now entries were rich in detail about what he remembered from his incarceration. James Young studied the importance of memoirs to the Holocaust, which can be compared to those from the Civil War as well. Burch’s narratives focus is on his diaries and memoir which bring the incidents that occurred I prisoner of war camps to the forefront of this thesis. He states, “To sustain an awareness of both the need for unmediated facts in this literature and the simultaneous incapacity in narrative to document these facts. Once we understand the literary and phenomenological origins.” James continues, “To deliver evidence of events, we can accept this need even as we look beyond it.”3 Even though a memoir is not written during the event itself, a memoir creates a narrative by a man who lived through the event and has added context after the fact.

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![Photo Courtesy of the Dunn County Historical Society](image-url)
Burch’s original diary was donated to the Minnesota Historical Society. In 1959 John Imholte transcribed the diary. During this time Imholte fact checked certain parts of Burch’s day-to-day experiences. Imholte did not focus on the second section written by Burch on his time in Andersonville, beyond transcription. In 2005, Imholte’s work was re-typed by Jan Tarbet who tried to maintain as much of the original paging as possible. Newell Burch’s diary has been read by few and used for research by even fewer. I use his work to show how important Burch was through his time in the Civil War but more over his time in Andersonville with a focus on health, food, condition, and his time working in the hospital.

In Chapter One I have chosen multiple secondary sources from historians who have written on the conditions that plagued Andersonville. Their focus lies largely on the physical condition that harmed the men, starvation, the sickness and disease many suffered from, and the hospital located at the prison. These publications are used to provide context and background of Burch’s time in Andersonville. Chapter Two is based around Burch’s diary, from the time he began to write to his last page while imprisoned at Belle Isle. In order to understand the triumph of Burch’s Andersonville journey, one needs to understand how he got there and the man he was.

Lastly, Chapter Three is focused on his time in Andersonville, he was one of the first captives to arrive and wrote on the influx of prisoners brought inside the gates. Overcrowding led to many problem for the men in the prison, primarily disease. Burch himself suffered from an infection that he and others believed to be gangrene. The germ theory had yet to be understood during the Civil War, it is quite possible Burch had an infection, possibly staph, which he attempted to cure. Burch was able to use provisions
made available to the prisoners to improve the wound on his arm. Andersonville doctors took notice and made him a figure in the hospital.
Chapter 1: Historiography on Prisoner of War Camps: Sickness, Causes, and Hospitals

To understand the story Newell Burch told in the pages of his diary and memoir, one must understand the over-arching history of this time period. The Civil War lasted from 1861-1865 and from the beginnings prisoner of war camps were created to hold captured soldiers. As the war began to drag on and more men were enlisted and captured, these prisons began to fill. No prison was filled beyond capacity more than Camp Sumter in Andersonville, Georgia. Here, Newell Burch was imprisoned for 13 months and throughout his time there he witnessed death, fell ill, and most importantly was able to survive the ordeal.

Many historians, after the fact, have written about the hardships of the men who were incarcerated at this prison. A focus is made on the conditions of the prison in which one would have had to survive, the many diseases that these men carried, lack of food, unsanitary water supply, and the prison hospital. Understanding these subjects will help understand the true importance of the life Burch led while incarcerated. I began my research with Ovid Futch as he had a direct focus of the subjects mentioned above.

The Prison

*History of Andersonville Prison*, written by Ovid L. Futch, (originally written in 1968) focused on the narrative of the problems that led to the Andersonville prison to be seen as notorious. Futch made no comparisons between other prisons or regions, instead he focused on the important factors that led to such a brutal history at this camp. Civil
War historian William Hesseltine states, “This study by Ovid L. Futch is probably the first objective approach to the conditions which prevailed at Andersonville.”⁴ Futch, looked at policy factors and social dynamics between the different inmates. *History of Andersonville Prison* is the perfect starting point when studying the impact this prison had on the overall history of prisoner of war camps during the Civil War.

Prison conditions were the beginnings of the sickness that infected many of the inmates throughout the prison. Once the hospital was moved outside the stockade, the stockade was extended, but still was unable to hold the 30,000 inmates that were held in the prison. Futch found it, “shocking to imagine the discomfort and actual suffering caused by lack of shelter. Many hundreds of prisoners were completely without shelter of any kind to protect them from rain, sun, heat, and cold.”⁵ The lack of shelter harmed the men even worse since many of them did not have sufficient clothing to wear. Beyond shelter and clothing protection, food was also unhealthy and scarce. Rations were slowly becoming smaller and food was becoming more contaminated. By August 1864 Confederate authorities decided to issue uncooked rations to the inmates.⁶ The lack of a pure water source, led to the increase of insects which began to wear on the men inside the prison walls. Futch notes, “The whole stockade reeked with an overpowering stench.

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⁴Futch’s original work is dated in 1968, this revised edition added an extra introduction, and the rest remained unchanged from the original print date. Futch, Ovid L. *History of Andersonville Prison. Revised Edition.* (Tallahassee: Board of Commissioners of the State Institutions of Florida, 2011). XV.


⁶ A crew of prisoners was send out each day to cut wood. At first the wood cutting gang consisted of about twenty men; but as the stockade’s population increased the wood was becoming used up. The wood that was used was for cooking was pitch pine which created black smoke that effected clothes, food, and skin. Futch, *History of Andersonville Prison*, 36.
In the absence of prison discipline, prisoners were very careless of sanitary practices, and men suffering from chronic diarrhea and others too sick to get to the latrines deposited human wastes all over the stockade."

Futch used many primary sources to understand just how poor the conditions were at the prison. Conditions, which will be spoken about in greater detail throughout this chapter, caused problems with many of those imprisoned. The more men that became sick, the more men that needed to be treated. Andersonville lacked supplies and proper treatment for many of the ailments these men suffered from.

The high mortality rate at Andersonville, according to Futch, was caused by lack of care and treatment provided for the sick. Smallpox required vaccinations for many of the men which would often become infected due to the open sore the needle would leave on the skin. This often led to gangrene, also a symptom of infection, affecting the area and causing more harm. This disease, along with scurvy and diarrhea, were at the root of the high mortality rate in the prison.

Men were placed two to a bunk, if a bunk was even available, or else men were laid on the ground under a poorly constructed tent. It is obvious that a lack of supplies plagued the surgeons but since there was a lack of nurses, "nearly all of the hospital stewards were paroled prisoners, but contrary to what might be expected, they were

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extremely negligent in providing for their sick comrades even those meager comforts which adverse circumstance would have permitted.”

Upon the arrival of Chief Surgeon Stevenson, of the Confederate army in August 1864, he condemned the use of prisoners in the hospital and wanted them replaced with wounded Confederate soldiers. Stevenson also focused on the unsanitary conditions and lack of space for the hospital and knew this must change. Following this, Surgeon Joseph Jones led an investigation that focused on the sanitary issues of the men in the prison.

This investigation was looked at in great detail but author James O. Breeden (written about in this chapter), but Futch knew in order to create a concise history of Andersonville this investigation could not be left out. By the time Stevenson’s plans

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8 Futch, History of Andersonville Prison, 100.
became a reality towards the end of 1864, mortality rates continued to rise remarkably in October of that year. Of the 3,913 received treatment in the hospital, 1,560 died.\footnote{Futch, \textit{History of Andersonville Prison}, 110.} The numbers rose astronomically because the sick became sicker and healthy men were becoming unhealthy.

\textbf{Civil War Medicine}

In James O. Breeden’s article, “Andersonville: A Southern Surgeon’s Story”, focuses heavily on the history of southern surgeons in regard to working at the Andersonville prison. Breeden looked at both sides of the argument that Northerners and Southerners made for the death toll in Andersonville. Northerners felt it was a conspiracy to kill innocent prisoners while the Confederates, even though minimal, feel the prison system was doomed from the start. Breeden’s article begins with the statement, “The haggard, distressed countenances of these miserable, complaining, dejected living skeletons crying for medicine and food . . . formed a picture of helpless, hopeless misery, which it would be impossible to portray by words or by the brush.”\footnote{Breeden, James O., “Andersonville: A Southern Surgeons Story.” \textit{Bulletin of the History of Medicine.} Dec. 1973, Vol. 47 Issue 6, 317.} Here, the focus is on Dr. Joseph Jones’ firsthand accounts of his investigation of the prison. Jones was quoted, “the causes of the great mortality amongst the Federal prisoners” would reveal “the best methods of remedying existing evils.”\footnote{Joseph Jones’ research and investigations were noted in the United States Sanitary Commission, \textit{Sanitary Memoirs of the War of the Rebellion}. The report consists of three large handwritten volumes and}
Jones received his M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania and originally showed patriotism towards the South during the Civil War until he accepted a full surgeon position. After six months, Jones opted out of being a war time doctor and decided to undertake investigating military prison hospitals. Breeden noted, “Despite wartime conditions, Jones was able to undertake detailed studies of such diseases as tetanus, gangrene, typhoid fever, malaria, smallpox, scurvy, diarrhea, dysentery, and pneumonia. An avid microscopist, he saw the bacilli of gangrene and typhoid fever but, bound to the contemporary miasmatic theory of disease, failed to see their causal relationship to the latter.”12 With the rising mortality rate in 1864, Jones’ orders authorized him to research disease that affected so many men. The cause, at the time, was said to be focused on climate and prison life circumstances.

Upon arrival, there were more than 5,000 sick Union soldiers in the stockade and prison hospital, and deaths ranged from 90 to 130 daily. Almost 10,000 deaths had occurred in the seven months between the establishment of the prison and his visit, nearly one-third of the prison population.13 In the two week time frame in Andersonville, Jones would utilize his expertise in studying living and dead for certain diseases. Post-Civil War the United States Sanitary Commission included his study in the first volume of its Sanitary Memoirs of the War of the Rebellion.

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Breeden also focuses on the Jones examination to show the importance his investigation has meant in the field of history, particularly with these camps. Jones’ report began with the topography of Andersonville and the abundance of vermin and insects that were present. Overcrowding forced the men to perform all parts of life in a specific area (washing, cooking, sleeping, and defecating) which caused the spread of disease. As researched throughout many sources, along with Breeden, spoke to the atrocious smell from filth that plagued the grounds.

Upon the creation of the hospital the stockade was already too full so many of the prisoners would use the hospital as a place to live, along with receiving treatment. The hospital was doomed at the start as “Pits designed to serve as latrines had been dug within a few feet of the lower floor but were seldom used because of neglect and the debilitating effects of scurvy, diarrhea, and dysentery.”\(^{14}\) Over 2,000 men would inhabit the hospital at a single time, which created the same problems as seen in the stockade. Jones put together that disease and dying were a major problem in the facility.

There was also a chronic shortage of medical officer due to the plight of the sick. It was almost impossible to bring in surgeons from the outside. Several important factors were responsible – the absence of necessary facilities, with the ensuing unsatisfactory results of practice, and distressing nature of the duty, the remoteness of the area, and the pressing medical problems in other parts of Georgia.\(^{15}\) In order to compensate for the

\(^{14}\) The hospital was originally build to be a stockade so it had two separate floors. Breeden, “Andersonville”, 328.

\(^{15}\) Breeden, “Andersonville”, 329.
shortage of personnel, surgeons would have to place healthy prisoners from the stockade to work as nurses and attendants. Many were unable to perform these duties sufficiently.

Jones also broke the diseases down into three categories: climate, poison, and poor diet. Exposure diseases included pneumonia and bronchitis, pneumonia killed almost 50% of all men it affected.\textsuperscript{16} Between the months of March and August 1864, almost 1,000 men died of typhoid fever, smallpox, and measles.\textsuperscript{17} Jones attributed the worst mortality rate to scurvy, diarrhea, dysentery, and gangrene. Almost 4,500 people between the months of March-August 1864 died of diarrhea and dysentery due to the lack of a sustainable food source.\textsuperscript{18} Breeden notes that Jones' main research project focused on gangrene. Jones states to Surgeon Samuel P. Moore,

"More than thirty thousand men crowded upon twenty-seven acres of land, with little or no shelter from the intense heat of a southern summer, or from the rain and dew; with coarse corn bread, from which the husk had not been removed; with scant supplies of fresh meat and vegetables; with little or no attention to hygiene; with festering masses of filth at the very doors of their rude dens and huts; with the greater portion of the banks of the stream flowing through the stockade a filthy quagmire of human excrement alive with working maggots, generated by their own filthy exhalations and excretions an atmosphere that so deteriorated and contaminated their solids and fluids that the slightest scratch of the surface, even the bites of small insects, were frequently followed by such rapid and extensive gangrene, as to destroy extremities, and lift itself."\textsuperscript{19}

Due to the lack of records, Jones was unable to accurately portray the amount of victims of gangrene. There were 267 cases with 25 deaths and only found records

\textsuperscript{16} Breeden, "Andersonville", 330.

\textsuperscript{17} Breeden, "Andersonville", 334.

\textsuperscript{18} Breeden, "Andersonville", 337.

\textsuperscript{19} Breeden, "Andersonville", 340.
of 67 amputations for gangrene on record. Jones stated, “After careful inquiry, and personal examinations of the wards and patients, I was convinced that the number of amputations for hospital gangrene reached and perhaps exceeded, one hundred.”\textsuperscript{20} It seemed an uphill battle for surgeons as there was a lack of blankets and proper bandages. Most of these rags were also previously soiled from other patients. With so many prisoners suffering from this disease, it would be quite a revelation for any doctor inside the prison to believe a prisoner was able to find a cure.

Breeden chose to focus on the disease aspect of the report made by Jones in order to show how the Confederates were unable to care and provide for Union prisoners. To show the causes of death and figures attributed to many of these diseases would go hand and hand with Newell Burch’s story. Burch was faced with an infection on several occasions (which he believed was gangrene). Breeden’s article truly helps put Burch’s notes from his time as a nurse at the Andersonville prison into context.

For Lonnie Speer’s \textit{Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War}, Speer’s thesis is focused on military prison life, that prisons were meant to hold soldiers captive and not kill them. Speer writes, “The whole purpose of taking prisoners of war is to allow them to live while depriving the opposing force of their service. For many in the Civil War’s prisons, though, to have been killed on the battlefield might have been more

\textsuperscript{20} Amputations often led to worse infections and gangrene to re-occur in many. Breeden, “Andersonville”, 341.
humane. Those who were captured found that their most intense battle was simply to survive until the end of the war. For over one-eighth of the total fighting force, it became the cruelest struggle of the entire conflict.”

Speer often uses the comparison of the Prisoner of War camp located in Elmira, NY used by the Union with Andersonville that was used by the Confederates. Speer states, “The second facility to be established by the Confederacy in 1864 was the infamous Andersonville Prison, which became nothing more than a concentration camp. Like Elmira in the North, Andersonville Prison was, from day one, one of the most wretched places of confinement that words would describe.” With so many prisoners coming from Belle Isle that were already infested with diseases from smallpox to scurvy to diarrhea, it is no wonder why the death toll in Andersonville was so high. As mentioned throughout, a major problem for prisoners and their sickness was the lack of proper shelter provided. Many lived in tents, lean-tos, or out in the open under scraps of blankets or rags. The addition to the prison created an extra ten acres to hold 10,000 prisoners, rose to 29,000 prisoners in a matter of weeks.

Speer notes that death became a common place in Andersonville, beyond guards and raiders, disease was a leading cause. The main causes of death were scurvy, diarrhea, dysentery, typhoid, smallpox, and hospital gangrene. Diarrhea and Dysentery,

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22 Within months of the prison’s establishment, prisoners reported entering the front gates and literally doubling over and vomiting upon their first sight and smell of the interior. Speer, *Portals to Hell,* 259.

by themselves, were responsible for 4,529 deaths between March 1 and August 31, 1864.\textsuperscript{24} The number of sick men in the camp became enormous, when it became time to move, many of the prisoners they were too weak to leave. Between the months of October and December there were roughly 6,500 deaths at the prison. Death became such common place, Speer quotes John Ransom an imprisoned Union Soldier, “The dead are being gathered up, the bodies are stripped of their clothing in most cases as soon as the breath leaves, and in some cases before, and the row of dead presents a sickening appearance. Legs drawn up and in all shapes. They are black from pitch pine smoke and laying in the sun.

Without a solution in Andersonville, so many people (such as Newell Burch), would not have had to endure such harsh climate, food shortages, and unsanitary conditions. Speer states, “There was no substantial excuse for what happened at Andersonville that is certain. If there was an ability to put up stockade walls two rows thick (and in some places three rows were used); if areas could be expanded from sixteen and a half acres to twenty-six and a half when the authorities decided to do so; and when more than ten thousand men could be quickly evacuated then it would seem that adequate food and shelter could have been provided as well, had there been a sincere effort.”\textsuperscript{25} To learn the problematic circumstances that plagued Andersonville help understand the life Burch had to lead while incarcerated there.

\textsuperscript{24} Speer, Portals to Hell, 264.

\textsuperscript{25} Speer, Portals to Hell, 293.
A Catastrophic Time

Edward F. Roberts' *Andersonville Journey: The Civil War's Greatest Tragedy*, focuses on everything that would lead to such a catastrophe during the Civil War. There is a strong focus on who was in charge of Andersonville, particularly General John Winder and how the beginning problems were irreversible which led to the overall problems that plagued Andersonville. Roberts’ book can be summed up in the last paragraph of the introduction,

"Due to local politics, the prison was located in an unhealthy spot, without an adequate water supply, proper drainage, or waste disposal. The Confederate guard force was ill equipped, poorly trained, and totally undisciplined. All this was combined with the shortages of food, medicines, clothing and tools, caused by the Union blockade and the Confederate railroad system. What resulted from this mixture of events was a time and place where the greatest tragedy of the Civil War occurred."26

Roberts began with the conception of these camps and how they came to fruition. The Union and Confederacy had regulations on the humane treatment prisoners of war. Roberts states, “United States Army Regulations that dated before the war specified that prisoners were to be sent to the rear, and the care of wounded prisoners of war was to be the same as the care given the wounded of the rest of the army.”27 It is quite obvious by 1864 when Andersonville was constructed these regulations were no longer followed.

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27 Along with this, prisoners were to obey the necessary orders given them and were to receive rations without regard to rank. A prisoner's horse could be taken for the capturing army, but his personal property was to be respected. Roberts, *Andersonville Journey*, 14.
General John Winder was in charge of the construction and location of the Andersonville prison and felt the small town was perfect due to its isolation, closeness to the railroad, and trees to build a stockade. As Roberts’s notes, “Winder felt that the small creek could supply enough water for the six thousand men he expected to be imprisoned at the site.”

Little would Winder know, Andersonville would hold over 30,000 prisoners in the latter half of 1864. The beginnings of malnutrition was beyond the cornmeal that Roberts focused on, that meat availability was low due to the low prices confederates were willing to pay local farmers. This led to the purchasing of “sow belly” pork that was of poor quality. Richard Winder, John Winder’s son, noted that it was more fat and sinew than meat and was often rancid. Upon arrival of the first prisoners the cookhouse was unfinished, along with the stockade and hospital, which would cause many to eat raw food or cook their own meals.

Beyond food, the lack of proper water and drainage was a cause for a majority of disease in many of the prisoners. The Confederate guard’s camp along with the cookhouse was placed above the stream. Rain water had pushed the sewage and cooking grease into the water source. Roberts writes, “Prisoners reported that the water had a thick, green grease scum on it, and men who drank freely would get terribly sick with their faces swelling up to a point where they couldn’t see.” Clean drinking water was so scarce that men would dig holes in order to trap rainwater. Also, men sick with


\(29\) The Confederates were unable to get the prime cuts of meat for the inmates. The “sow belly” was one step above what was given to the slave in the south. Southern farmers also would not sell their prime corn to the prison which would lead to the poor cornmeal. Roberts, *Andersonville Journey*, 25.

\(30\) Roberts, *Andersonville Journey*, 63.
diarrhea who could not make it to the sinks (toilets) and would dig their own all over the camp. These man made latrines would get rained out and swept into the stream. Roberts states, "When the water receded, the muddy swamp was covered with large gobs of offal that was feast on by swarms of large green and black blowflies which laid eggs that later would become a sea of maggots."\(^{31}\) Due to these harsh conditions, Roberts was able continue his argument on the beginnings of the problems at Andersonville, he would also focus on the problems with the hospital.

Upon the prisoners building the stockade there is a possibility of a medical emergency, which meant there was an importance to a surgeon and hospital. General Winder brought in friend, Isaiah White from VA, to be the chief surgeon. Roberts writes, "Chief Surgeon White quickly established a small hospital on high ground in the extreme northeast corner of the stockade. It began with only a single white army tent and a bed of pine straw. This would be Andersonville's first hospital."\(^{32}\) The cavalrymen would be buried quickly on a higher ground north of the stockade. The little attention given to these important aspects of the prison was a grave mistake in the construction of the prison.

On March 3, 1864, Chief Surgeon White diagnosed a Tennessee prisoner with smallpox. He knew that the disease would spread like wildfire if it was not quickly contained. He immediately ordered that a second hospital be built on the edge of the wood south of the stockade, far removed from the other prisoners. All prisoners who

\(^{31}\) Roberts, Andersonville Journey, 64.

\(^{32}\) Roberts, Andersonville Journey, 27.
showed any sign of the disease were quickly moved to the hospital. This led to multiple vaccinations of prisoners with small pox, but many of these became infected due to the unsanitary conditions. The result of this would lead to multiple cases of gangrene which would lead to multiple amputations. Many patients would have their arms, legs, fingers, and toes removed after being infected with this disease. Gangrene is an incurable disease and even after amputation took place, infections would commonly arise as proper sanitation techniques were not used. Curing this disease would be quite difficult with little knowledge of germs and cures. The lack of knowledge and proper care were problems that plagued the Andersonville prison throughout its existence.

Upon the moving of the hospital, Chief Surgeon Isaiah White placed it where men we able to gain access to the hospital easily. Each large tent in the hospital was able to hold between eight to ten men. As one could imagine, surgery at Andersonville was a tough task with little to no antibiotics. Roberts writes on the arrival of medicine to Andersonville, “The medicines for the hospital at Andersonville arrived by train from a laboratory in Macon. A month’s supply of drugs might last ten days, if it was used very sparingly. After the medicine was gone, no more would be available until the next shipment.”

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34 The hospital was about four acres in size, surrounded by a pine board fence that was six feet high. The men had no beds so they had to lie on the ground on top of a thick bed of hay. Roberts, *Andersonville Journey*, 155.

35 As with most physicians of the time period, Surgeon White had a great deal of knowledge of home remedies and folk medicines. The woods around the prison were filled with types of plants, berries, and trees that he would use to help give relief to patients. Roberts, *Andersonville Journey*, 162.
Roberts' book is a portrayal of the hardships men had to endure when it came to their health. It was not only the hardships of the prisoners, but also that of the men who would take care of them. *Andersonville Journey* really speaks to the role Newell Burch played during his stint in Andersonville. Not only was he able to cure his own gangrene, but he would use the knowledge he had to help others. Much like Surgeon White knowing the importance of clean water, Burch noticed the importance of clean bandages in order to prevent infections.

**Causes**

In David F. Cross' 2003 article "Why Did the Yankees Die at Andersonville?" on how twenty first century historian try to understand why the death rate was high in prisoner of war camps. Then, why was Andersonville's conditions and death rate so different even though it was similar to other prisons of the era? Cross states, "What happened was the Federal prisoners were victims of the Law of Unintended Consequences."\(^{36}\) It is because of this that the Andersonville prison was a human disaster.

The average morality rate for POWs, North and South, was about thirteen percent – which was in fact little different from the rate at which Federal and Confederate soldiers died of disease in the field. But the overall mortality rate of Federal prisoners

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held at Andersonville was more than twice that.\textsuperscript{37} From the creation of the prison to its
demise, Andersonville housed roughly 41,000 inmates. It is known that 13,000 men are
buried in the National Cemetery at Andersonville. Cross believes the theory of
incompetence on behalf of the creators of the prison is not enough to conclude why the
prison was so dangerous. Many have apologized for the horrors of the Andersonville
camp, that the men involved did not have the necessary resources to prevent the tragedies
that happened to unfold. Along with the scarcity of proper food, these are all probable
reasons for the way Andersonville was run according to Cross. Cross would argue that
disease was the real cause for the high mortality rate at the prison.

Cross uses the Vermont Brigade of the Army of the Potomac as a test subject to
prove this theory. The Vermont Brigade was free of illness as only nine percent of them
died of disease throughout the war. However, something very different happened to 379
enlisted men captured on June 23, 1864, at the Weldon Railroad south of Petersburg.
Initially sent to Andersonville, 224 died during or as a direct result of their captivity, a
total of fifty-nine percent! This was extreme even for Andersonville.\textsuperscript{38} Cross focused on
Dr. Isaiah H. White (chief surgeon at Andersonville) whose specialty was diseases of the
digestive system, scurvy, and gangrene.

Cross states, “The severe malnutrition at Andersonville produced a nutritional
multiple deficiency state in which scurvy was the more or less prominent feature. The
diet deficient in protein and vitamins, particularly B12 and folic acid (in addition to

\textsuperscript{37} Cross, “Yankees”, 27.

\textsuperscript{38} Cross, “Yankees”, 27.
Vitamin C), produced intestinal malabsorption and diarrhea.” Malnutrition was noted high among older prisoners who have a tougher time digesting the cornmeal as Professor Joseph Jones’ report on Andersonville in September of 1864 had found “9,501 prisoners afflicted with scurvy and concluded this disease of vitamin C deficiency was responsible either directly or indirectly for nine-tenths of inmates’ death.”

Another health problem Cook focused on was the epidemic of the hookworm. Hookworms are contracted from soil and are located in the intestines. These can easily be contracted without proper plumbing and walking around in bare feet. Cook writes, “This larval stage penetrates the human skin, particularly between the toes of bare feet, and is transported by the blood stream to the lungs, where it is coughed-up and swallowed.” When the hookworm has matured it burrows into the small intestine which causes illness. The lack of knowledge and education about this disease, even not mentioned by Professor Jones in his report, primarily led to the spread of this disease. The chronic anemia it produced seldom killed its victims outright, but left them feeling weak and listless. Due to the amount of dysentery that was ravaging the men of Andersonville led to a much larger spread of disease. The soil was tarnished with feces. Cook states, “The mind boggles picturing upward of 30,000 prisoners suffering what

41 Cross, “Yankees”, 29.
must have been near universal diarrhea, and the traffic of 60,000 feet kneading the interior of the stockade into a reeking bog.\textsuperscript{43}

Medical science did not identify the hookworm at this time and would be one of the many diseases that would cause the loss of so much life in Andersonville. Cross notes how Dr. Stevenson wrote in a document from 1876, “that the sufferings at Andersonville were the results of a malignant pestilence.”\textsuperscript{44} It is astounding to believe the not only did Newell Burch survive many of these diseases and was able to overcome and help others through such a troubling time. It is known Burch suffered from chronic diarrhea and with the lack of knowledge in the 1860s it is impossible to know if he suffered from a hookworm or not. This point is minor in retrospect to the many men who suffered an intestinal illness. Like Cook, Charles Sanders Jr. focused on the mistreatment of the captives in Andersonville that led to the outbreak of diseases inside the prison walls.

In Charles W. Sanders Jr.’s \textit{While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War}, Sanders focuses on “All the controversies generated by the American Civil War, few have been as acrimonious or enduring as those that arose over the treatment of prisoners of war. The first accusations of cruel and barbarous treatment of captives were leveled soon after the initial prisoners were taken.”\textsuperscript{45} Of the three millions soldiers who participated in the Civil War over its four years, one out of every seven became a

\textsuperscript{43} Cross, \textit{North & South}, 30.

\textsuperscript{44} Cross, \textit{North & South}, 31.

prisoner of war. The root of Sanders’ argument is that yes, shortages and incompetence led to prisons being horrific, but leaders on both the Union and Confederate sides knew of these problems and allowed it to continue.

Andersonville’s construction began two months late and it was realized that construction was rushed insufficient feed would be sent to prisoners, and the closest physician lived over four miles away. Captain in charge of constructing Andersonville were unable to obtain lumber for the construction of headquarters, hospitals, and cookhouses. Once trees were torn to the ground from the acres of the prison, the hospital and barracks were the last to be constructed. When prisoners arrived they were doomed from the start due to the lack of construction, the prison was “a shell of itself” With the beginning of prisoners arriving and lack of shelter, prisoners (who were often so weak they were unable to do physical work) dragged each other to the stockade and hospital. The minimal surgeons on staff made it almost impossible to take care of even half the prisoners.

In April of 1864, there was no “true” hospital, only tents for the men who had succumbed to scurvy, gangrene, and diarrhea. Shipments of lumber were slow to get to Andersonville to build the prison, Richard Winder (one of the men in charge of construction) told the man who did not bring the lumber that they are “burying the dead without coffins.” Sanders argues that the semi-independent command structure that

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46 Sanders Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 1.
47 Sanders Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 200.
48 Richard Winder also threatened to “report the matter to the authorities at Richmond” if the shipment was not shipped soon. Sanders Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 206.
was used between the different captains of multiple prisons created prisoner
mismanagement which often led to such problems in these prisons, especially in
Andersonville with the rising population.

The dreadful conditions at Andersonville led to 3,000 men dying in the month of
August in 1864, even with the mass amount of death the prison was still filled to
capacity. Belle Isle, Danville, Libby, and Richmond prisons were all filled beyond
capacity of prisoners. Sanders believes that August 1864 was the deadliest throughout all
of the prison systems, it is unimaginable to believe there were enough surgeons to take on
the task of keeping many of the soldiers alive. These men, most of whom were already
sick, were unable to get the treatment they deserved (food and medicine became scarce).
It was not until the Yankees were “safely in charge”49 that the prison system would
achieve a sort of stability before the end of the war. Newell Burch’s story is one that was
placed in Belle Isle and primarily Andersonville, but it is of note that there were many
other prisons and inmates going through the same traumatic experiences. It is quite a
story that Burch was able to use the hospital and sickness as a way of keeping himself
alive during the Civil War.

Continual Factors

Historian Robert Scott Davis’ 2006 release of Ghosts and Shadows of
Andersonville: Essays on the Secret Social Histories of America’s Deadliest Prison

49 Sanders Jr., While in the Hands of the Enemy, 265.
brings a different view on the prison as a whole. Davis sets out to challenge the notion that Andersonville was “America’s Death Camp.” Davis does not set out to pretend what has been written has been inaccurate, but there were a lot of factors that have not been written about in enough detail. The focus of his book was based off multiple primary sources, which he uses to piece together the “untold” stories of Andersonville.

The beginnings of his book speak on the reasons for the conditions and disease that would be in Andersonville and that was the physicality of the camp. Prisoners wanted to leave Belle Isle (much like Burch) to the “new camp” that was Andersonville. Many of the early prisoners, including Burch, remembered better rations and conditions. For example, “inmates first found the climate in Georgia as a pleasant change from the often bitter cold of Richmond.”\(^{50}\)

The population of the prisoners would rise so drastically that statistically Andersonville could have qualified to be the fifth largest city in the Confederacy.\(^{51}\) Due to the lack of protection from the elements, men often died from exposure. Davis notes that in the summer of 1864, “Rain fell every day. Uniforms deteriorated to rags and thousands of the Yankees had to go nearly naked while suffering from the bites of lice, flies, and fleas. Maggots became as numerous as to make the ground appear to move. Survival often meant still having the strength and the will to stay clean from ticks.”\(^{52}\)

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\(^{50}\) Burch, in his first few days agreed with a statement like this as there was no overcrowding and enough shelter for all and plenty of food. Davis, Robert Scoot. *Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville: Essays on the Secret Social History of America’s Deadliest Prison.* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2006) 9.


\(^{52}\) Davis, *Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville,* 22.
Insects were just one of the ways sickness can travel, the marsh located in the center of the stockade, carried a layer of feces from the prisoners defecating in the water. This swamp was noted for the spread of disease as prisoners would skim insects off the creek just to have water to drink. The lack of vitamins and proper nutrients would cause scurvy and diarrhea throughout the prison. Davis would write, “Men without the means of obtaining extra rations by theft, labor detail, packages from home, or trade would starve and die. Survivors would write of individuals losing sixty pounds or more before dying on the little corn meal, beans, rice, and meat rations that the Confederacy provided.”^53

Davis also writes on the accusations of deliberate exterminations and the importance of men working in the hospital. Both of these subjects are of importance because Newell Burch wrote about witnessing disease and his time as a hospital worker. Medicine was scarce, Andersonville was had troubles keeping pace with the amount of sick prisoners inside its walls. The original hospital was one lone tent, when the sick men’s numbers began to increase there was another tent placed outside the walls to create more room. This failed to create enough space for the thousands of prisoners who needed care daily. When Newell Burch worked in the hospital in 1865 the hospital was located in multiple sheds and the whole prison acted as a medical department. Even with the hospital expansion in 1864, men were far too sick to become healthy and too sick to leave for other prisons. Many prisoners were able to leave Andersonville to Salisbury and

^53 Davis, Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville, 24.
Vicksburg, Burch would leave to Vicksburg upon the conclusion of the war. Davis noted James Jennings of the 2th Illinois Infantry on his account of his time in Andersonville,

"Around us on every side lay the poor wretches who had been there six or eight months, men afflicted with all manner of disease; teeth dropping out from the effects of scurvy. Those that were able to walk were mere skeletons. You could almost hear their bones rattle as they walked around and were being eaten alive with gray-backs [ticks]. Some of these poor fellows were so covered with lice and nits that their hair would be matted tight to their heads; and their hands and faces and bodies almost as black as a negro from the dirt and smoke of pitch pine fires as they huddled over to keep warm. [Even] Students and college graduates had become so discouraged by disease and the treatment they received, and the long confinement that they had lost all sense of pride and decency, and certainly it is no wonder."  

The incompetence of the Confederate soldiers to handle the lasting sickness that existed in Andersonville was unfortunate. Newell Burch wrote of these troubling times for himself going through sickness and working with so many men who were experiencing such tough physical conditions, much like what had been written by Davis.

Much like Davis, Roger Pickenpaugh wrote about the life of prisoners in Andersonville (such as other prisons) based off multiple primary documents he found in the national archives. In Pickenpaugh’s book, Captives in Blue: The Civil War Prisons of the Confederacy (2013), there is a focus on the different patterns of life and death inside Andersonville. Pickenpaugh’s writing focused on what it was like to live a daily life as a prisoner at Andersonville. As was with other prisons Pickenpaugh said, “Loneliness was the twin to boredom.” Daily life, as researched in Chapter 2 of my thesis, is a major

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54 Davis, Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville, 55.

hurdle many prisoners had to overcome. Beyond boredom, overcoming one’s own health was just as big of a threat. Newell Burch wrote about many experiences he had while in captivity, much like many of the other primary sources that were written during the time, there was a focus on hunger and sickness. Pickenpaugh, like other historian’s before him, focused on this horrific crisis that plagued many prisons during the Civil War and that was sickness and disease.

With the Andersonville captive population swelling, at roughly 33,000 at its highest point, it was almost impossible to have enough rations for every man. Rations were made up of cornbread and bacon in the beginning of the prison’s origin, to only be replaced with beans and molasses once the population rose. Like everything else in the prison, quality cooking materials were scarce which led to some meals being served raw. Pickenpaugh researched multiple primary and secondary sources to represent the poor food conditions these prisoners suffered through. Some of the meals were “full of dirt, bugs, or worms.” Writings such as these resonate with a lot of what Newell Burch recorded in his diary. Many of the entries Burch wrote involved what his meals poorly consisted of, or if he even got them. The diary of Michael Dougherty remembered the conditions of Andersonville, “I am afraid this is going to be a bad place in hot weather,” he predicted, “in fact it is not any better than Belle Island in my mind.”

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56 Davis, Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville, 27.

57 Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 141.

58 Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 122.
The harsh condition of Andersonville began when the stockade was not completed when prisoners arrived, many slept on the ground and under the sun. Pine trees were cut down but the prisoners and a fifteen acre stockade was constructed that held roughly 12,000 men by May 8th, 1864.59 Of this number over 1,000 were said to be in the hospital. The average death toll could range week by week, often times more than a hundred. It was reported, “That the hospital could comfortably hold 800 patients. In less than a month, however, 1,020 of the worst cases had been crowded in. Many others had to be refused admittance.60 A primary reason for this problem was the lack of a good water source, as stated by Sanders Jr. and Roberts, the small creek that flowed through the camp was often dirty and unsanitary. This poor drainage was one of the many causes that left so many sick in Andersonville.

The prisoner population rose by August of 1864, exceeding over 30,000 thousand inmates. When this number grew rapidly, so did the amount of prisoners who are in need of medical care, the hospital was often known as the “dead house.”61 Facilities for caring for the sick were inadequate, Pickenpaugh uses much of what Dr. Isaiah White’s notes on the harsh condition he had to work through. White noted, “The new hospital soon became crowded well beyond its capacity, with far too few tents to accommodate the patients. Straw for bedding could not be had.”62 Dr. White also began to mention the

59 On June 1st Captain Wirz reported the population was over 18,000 people. Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 125.

60 Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 127.

61 Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 145.

62 Dr. White was able to get pine straw for the sick until the population grew out of control to the point where he was unable to supply enough for the patients. Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 144.
diseases that were plaguing the prisoners. Scurvy was spoken about in his notes, in many Civil War diaries, and in Newell Burch’s accounts. Scurvy, which is caused from lack of Vitamin C, had victims losing teeth and having swollen limbs. Even though these diseases were the leading causes of death in Andersonville, there was detailed attention given to gangrene.

In the Dr. Joseph Jones report of Andersonville, which was heavily researched by Breeden and Cook earlier in this chapter, he identified 266 cases, a number he considered “far below the truth.” Jones was able to determine the cause of this easily, “In the depraved and depressed condition of the systems of these prisoners, in the foul atmosphere of the stockade and hospital, reeking with noxious exhalation, the smallest injury, as a splinter running into a hand or foot, the blistering of the arms or hands in the hot sun, or even the abrasions of the skin in scratching a mosquito bite, were often followed by the most extensive and alarming gangrenous ulceration.”63 Even after amputation, many cases of gangrene would return on the sick prisoner. In August of 1864 Lt. Col. Daniel Chandler arrived in Andersonville with orders to report on the conditions of the prison. When citing the hospital he wrote, “The crowd at these times is so great that only the strongest can get access to the doctors and the weaker ones being unable to force their way through the press.” He further asserted, “The sanitary condition of the prisoners is as wretched as can be.”64

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63 Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 149.
64 Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 147.
Beyond scurvy and gangrene, Pickenpaugh focuses on the effects diarrhea and
dysentery were also common diseases among prisoners. It seemed as though almost
every prisoner in the camp suffered from one or the other of these diseases. Severe
cramps and uncontrollable bowels became a common practice for doctors and nurses to
take care of in the hospital. It became an impossible task as Pickenpaugh explained,

“Hospital overcrowding was a pathetic lottery that took place at the gate
whenever a sick call was accounted. Hundreds or even thousands would
show up, some hobbling or crawling on their own, others assisted by
friends, and many carried on blankets. There they waited in the broiling
sun as the doctors slowly conducted their examinations. Some bore it
quietly, some cried out, begging to be taken to the hospital or at east to
someplace where they could get into the shade.”

Often there were not enough registered doctors and nurses to take care of the amount of
sick prisoners so many healthy prisoners received jobs as serving as hospital nurses.
Pickenpaugh noted from a diary entry by David Kennedy (inmate nurse), “Theire is more
misery heire than could be emagin.” The lack of supplies, food, and space for these
patients wore on those who were tasked to take care of them.

Conclusion

Many of the facts and figures read throughout this chapter may have been
repetitive and for good reason. Historians have written for decades about the Civil War
and Andersonville. Burch’s experiences enforce what historians have written about after

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65 Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 146.

66 David Kennedy would receive extra rations for his time as a nurse, but because of the putrid conditions
inside the hospital he returned to the stockade instead of working. Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 146.
the fact. His journey with the 154th Infantry marching from Virginia to Gettysburg may not be something new, but it all creates a backstory of a man who used his brain to be able to survive over a year at the country’s most notorious prison in the 1860s. While incarcerated in Andersonville, Burch would suffer health issues, malnutrition, lack of shelter, and physical ailments. During this time, Burch used the resources around him to cure his ailments which led to him working in the hospital at the Andersonville Prison.
Chapter 2: Enlistment to Imprisonment at Belle Isle

On August 25, 1862 Newell Burch made his first diary entry. A young man, age 20, from the Westfield Academy in New York realized one day that academics was not his passion, serving the military was. In 1861 Newell had three bothers enlisted in the army and was bound to do the same himself. After a day at home, Newell got on his horse and began to ride away telling his sister, “I am going to Centerville 5 miles to enlist.”67 Being offered five dollars to enlist as not a prerogative of Burch68, he was enlisting to be a part of the war and not for anything else that would come with it.

Burch set out for his future endeavors but it was a difficult time for the country in the midst of the Union and Confederate battle that was taking place. At the camp at Hartfield, here Burch would be placed until he was to be furloughed on September 2nd. Burch wrote, “Started for camp at Jamestown this morning Geddes Hough took me to Salem and from there went over the hills with a load of the boys and got into camp at 5 p.m.”69 In the coming days Burch began his first round of drills, eating of rations, and acquaintance with camp life. His routine would be interrupted on his first Sabbath as Burch recounted, “Heard an episcopal man preach in morning and heard one of the best sermons in afternoon.”70 It was common for Burch to make mention of the Sabbath Day in his diary; he was a religious man.

67 Burch Diary, 12.

68 When Burch made it to Centerville there was a man offering $5 to the first to sign up, Burch was told to take the money but did not want it. Burch Diary, 12.

69 Burch Diary, 14.

70 Burch Diary, 14.
The weather was always a subject of importance to Burch, much like many others who kept diaries during the Civil War. His first days in Jamestown were that of fair, warm weather. On the 11th of September Burch returned home for a short stint until on the 18th of September he spent his first day of being a Corporal of the guard (to keep order and provide guidance to the regiment). He recounted this event stating, “Have to take my turn as Corporal of the guard today and don’t like the business very much” and recounted the following entry, “fun with the boys but not much fun for me.” Burch would show disdain for his positioning on these days he was assigned to be acting corporal of the guard.

Towards the end of September, Burch and company were getting prepared to leave camp and head for Washington. It was during this time he would pass a physical examination given by the General Inspector. The break to Washington came on Sept. 29th as they passed through Williamsport, Pennsylvania the train stopped and Burch reminisced, “People flocked to the cars with the best eatables for us, the city afforded. I think nearly 1000. Women and Maidens of all ages brought our suppers and a young pretty Miss of 17 or 18 brought me the last good meal I ate for many days thereafter. Burch also alluded to this possibly being the last day such as this for a long while, he was right. Marching began from Elmira, New York (which coincidentally housed a Prisoner of War camp for the North, many would compare to Andersonville) which would take his company through Harrisburg, to Baltimore, and got them to Washington on October 2nd.

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71 Burch Diary, 15-16
72 Burch Diary, 16.
73 Burch Diary, 17.
Here, the 154th was attached to the 1st Brigade, 2nd Division, 11th Corps, Army of Potomac. Before entering Washington, Burch and his company were startled as they stopped to have a “sham battle with the Rebels.” Burch alluded to the harsh nature of being in the military for the first time in his diary. He began to speak of being behind on time, obstacles in the way, and sleeping on the harsh terrain. For the 154th the first day in Virginia was a learning one as the men had to learn how tents were to be set up and cooking food was to be done. Beans and rice would often get burnt, tents would become wet, and water was not always sanitary to drink. This would be the beginning of a downward slope of how life can change during the war.

Through much of October, time was spent getting to Fairfax with the weather becoming troublesome. The regiment had its first death which was about the only thing of importance for the month. Burch began to grow tired of the weather and being stuck at camp. With this newfound boredom he began to think of home, writing, “No letters yet, begin to don’t care much about home.” In the early days of November the march was on as the company passed Centerville, the Bull Run battlefield, and Gainesville. It was also this time, when the company was moving further south, Burch was taking notice of the war that was going on around him. When passing Gainesville and Haymarket he wrote, “Broken cannon and all sorts balls, shells, graves, dead horses etc. People of

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74 Burch Diary, 17.

75 This on October 3rd in which Burch admits he was unable to occupy a tent because he was the Corporal of the Guard and understood what it meant to have that position. Burch Diary, 18.

76 This was written on October 18th and on October 24th Burch would receive his first letter from Rans which seemed nothing out of the ordinary in his writing. Burch Diary, 20.
Haymarket show rebellion, is nearly sacked and mostly burned to day."\(^{77}\) Adding to this day, frustration wore on as the men had to camp with no provisions on account of them not arriving on time. Snow began to fall as the regiment continued to Buckville through the hilly terrain. December would be upon the regiment but still the weather was warm which was good for the brigade.

On December 10\(^{th}\) the 154\(^{th}\) regiment began the march to Fredericksburg where the rebel army was not far away. They arrived in Dumfries, VA on the 12\(^{th}\) which "the rebel cavalry just evacuated."\(^{78}\) Throughout much of their marches to this point the regiment was having troubles finding satisfactory eatables and the ground was becoming thick with mud due to the frost melting away as the day wore on. Plans would again change for Burch and the regiment when trying to reach Fredericksburg as he wrote, "Bad news from the front. Fredericksburg evacuated. Lie in camp all day, get rigged well for spending the night, and am ordered to strike tents. Make various maneuvers before midnight and do not get only 1 ½ miles from camp."\(^{79}\) For Christmas, Burch took a leave from drills, bought an extra three pounds of extra tack for food, and cut his hair for the first time in Virginia. Little things still made Burch seem human even though many of his basic needs and necessities were gone due to the war. For roughly three weeks life went unchanged for Burch, as days of washing, laying, drilling, fire building,

\(^{77}\) *Burch Diary*, 21

\(^{78}\) Burch begins to point out the notion that Rebel forces are slowly getting closer and closer to their regiment. He also speaks of Dumfries as the 2\(^{nd}\) oldest town in VA. The 100 year old gravestones and pine trees that are 30 inches in diameter. *Burch Diary*, 28.

\(^{79}\) The next day the men could see the outskirts of the city for the first time and the days began growing much colder. *Burch Diary*, 27.
and occasionally eat would fill up lines in his diary. Through this Burch’s personality would not falter as on January 16th he wrote, “This chick is 21 today.”

Marching began again in the middle of January which usually ended up with the men walking 7-8 miles per day. During this time the men were building and repairing roads and bridges surrounding the Rappahannock River. It was difficult for the men to keep the regiment moving at this time with the continuous rain. The mission was to cross the Rappahannock River over a pontoon (rowboats strung together with a plank road on top) bridge but the weather made this impossible. Burch recounts this day, “Went back three miles to the pontoon bridges and halted. Heard an order read from Burnside that we were to once more meet the enemy, cold today. At dusk start on behind the pontoons for the river, went about 1 ½ miles and halted in the drizzly rain.” Knee deep mud and constant rain made life difficult for the men, as it continued this way until early spring.

From January 23rd to the middle of April, Burch’s diary entries became shorter as many of his day were spent in camp, stagnant due to weather. Burch began to realize that there was more than just fighting for the North when it came to enlisting in the military. A high spot on January 31st when Burch received two letters from home and “Sixteen & 45/100 from Uncle Sam the first time since out.” Burch and his men built a log cabin at

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80 Burch Diary, 31.

81 Burch Diary, 31.

82 Burch’s two different letters he received were from his sister Lucy & Arda Hough along with one from Geddes Hough. The money was the first Burch has received since leaving Jamestown, NY. Burch Diary, 33.
one point; his building skills would later come in use when he became imprisoned at Andersonville.\textsuperscript{83}

**Early Sickness**

In late February Burch was stricken with the fever and spent many of his nights lying in bed and on February 27\textsuperscript{th} by order of Surgeon Dwight W. Day he “was excused from duty for the first time, got some medicine.”\textsuperscript{84} The sickness was felt to be either lung fever or pneumonia which caused his fever to be very high. This was the first time Burch had to deal with a physical illness, it would not be the last, and he was able to work along with the surgeon to help feel better. He seemed to grow tired of the surgeon as he was not progressing as well as he would have liked. March 6\textsuperscript{th} Burch noted, “Have quite a fever, took some medicine but did not have any effect because the surgeon did not know enough to give any directions.”\textsuperscript{85} Two days later Burch placed himself at the regiment’s hospital as he was unable to sleep and was sweating profusely.\textsuperscript{86} To help ease the pain, Burch continuously had a mustard plaster placed upon his chest and side. Burch began to feel better towards the end of March. He always paid close attention to what the doctors

\textsuperscript{83} A log cabin was built six logs high with their tents placed on top and bunks built inside. *Burch Diary*, 34.

\textsuperscript{84} *Burch Diary*, 36.

\textsuperscript{85} *Burch Diary*, 37.

\textsuperscript{86} Burch recounted those days were pretty “blank” in his head and his nearest neighbor was very sick with the measles was gone the next morning when he awoke. It is believed this prisoner had passed. *Burch Diary*, 38.
were doing with him while he was sick. He would later use instances like this when he
became a nurse in the Andersonville prison.

Throughout much of April life had slowed for Burch and his regiment, one day
being reviewed by President Lincoln. The importance of this day to Burch was minimal,
it was almost like it was any other day for him. More important were the entries
following this event, when Burch was sick and given an order to be moved back into the
hospital.\textsuperscript{87} When moved to the hospital, Burch did not want to receive or take medicine
but rather tried to recover from his sickness on his own with rest, water, and food. While
he moved his residence to the hospital, Burch would leave occasionally and still be a
member of his regiment. Soon, life changed at a much faster pace when Burch marched
to Chancellorsville.

\section*{Onward to Fredericksburg}

The march up the Rappahannock River was tough through the mud and the
regiment was feeling the effects as Burch wrote, “The boys say they are all lousy.” On
April 28\textsuperscript{th} the men were ordered to cross the river and open up a pathway for the army,
for the first time Burch felt it was beginning “to look like business.”\textsuperscript{88} Upon crossing the
pathway little had happened, besides seeing a couple of dead their march was still quiet.
This feeling of serenity would be lost quickly as Burch noted on May 1, “I, warm and

\textsuperscript{87} Burch notes that Capt. Fay was the one who told him he looked “too white & weak”. Continuously sick,
Burch used what he learned while being in the hospital to his advantage in Belle Isle and Andersonville.
\textit{Burch Diary}, 41.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Burch Diary}, 43.
pleasant lie in camp this a.m. and at noon hitch up again & go about 10 rods and return to camp again. Heavy firing the whole day and firing close by in evening. Shells flying in all directions.”

The following day their regiment was attacked by confederate forces which led to the men being driven back over a half mile. In this skirmish half of the men were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Burch was slightly wounded in his back. With this little gain in productivity for Burch’s regiment, he was noticed by a captain and colonel with a promise of a promotion.90

The fight pushed Burch and the regiment towards Fredericksburg, there were heavy troops and trains moving throughout the night to make the push. Throughout the coming days, Burch would “lay low” with his men, still reeling from the loss from days earlier as Burch wrote on May 6th, “Chancellorsville a grand fizzle with no end of loss of life, suffering, etc.”91 Of the 65 men in the 154th regiment Company E only 32 of 65 remained. Fourteen days after the battle, Burch went to the Division Hospital to see the sick and wounded from Chancellorsville. The wounded were doing well. It may have been his duty at this point to check up on his fallen men but Burch never tired of going to the hospital.

Considering how important Burch’s diary/Memoranda book are to this topic, it is of importance to note that on May 22nd Burch sent his old memoranda book “home with

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89 Burch Diary, 44.

90 First promotion that was given in the regiment. Burch Diary, 45.

91 Burch Diary, 14.
strict instructions not to open until after I came or was sure I was dead (to Lucy).”

Burch’s personal diary which was written in during his time in the Civil War was in two separate memoranda books. The regiment continued to march 10 to 20 miles per day under the hot sun. By mid-June the regiment had returned to Bull Run, close to Centerville, now the marching and weather were beginning to take its effect on Burch. June 14th Burch wrote, “Travel near and along the Railroad most of the day and camp on Bull Run Creek or river, ran on to some Yankee pickets before we halted at night and scared them very much more. Made over 20 miles and my feet are one mass of blisters and sit with them in the creek a long time tonight.” Reports had been leaked that a mass army of rebel forces were possibly marching down the Rappahannock River near their regiment.

The 154th moved from Goose Creek to the Potomac River, staying close to the water source and following it through Virginia. Burch notes on marching to South Mountain on June 27, “Cloudy. Went on picket on the top of South Mountain and where a battle was fought September 14. 1862. Climbed the steep and rocky south side and find a fine field of oats on top and farther on plenty of evidences of a battle the previous September. Rocks, trees, fences all show where shot and shell did their work and numerous graves tell the old story of brave Confederates who were buried where they

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92 On June 1st Burch would get his new Memoranda book which he noted was very cheap. The first book was sent home to Lucy. Lucy was also often sent his check’s and cash as well. Burch Diary, 48.

93 Burch Diary, 50.
fell."\textsuperscript{94} The hardships of the Civil War were starting to surround Burch, both physically and mentally. Soon, Burch would be one of the first prisoners to be taken at Gettysburg.

**Gettysburg**

The Battle of Gettysburg lasted from July 1-3, 1863 and is touted as the bloodiest battle of the Civil War. General Lee, fresh off his success at Chancellorsville, attempted to ravage the Union infantry. On the first day Lee’s forces assaulted the front lines of the Union’s brigade, Newell Burch was one of the many soldiers assaulted and captured on this beginning insurgency.

Upon arrival in Gettysburg, Burch was ill with diarrhea and lagged behind his regiment when he heard the artillery fire. The 154\textsuperscript{th} New York marched into the heart of the village and Burch remembers his capture,

"On our right who were soon repulsed and we changed front to the east but the Rebs were soon on forth flanks and in our rear and nearly every man captured and hustled to the rear, I was nearly the last one captured in Regiment and was greatly surprised to find so many of the Reg. when I got back to prison camp. When being taken back a Reb, gave me a basket of cherries which he said he would not need as he was going to the front for some heavy artillery work and some infantry fighting mostly on our right which shows our men having to fall back. Rebs being heavily reinforced every hour."\textsuperscript{95}

On July 2\textsuperscript{nd} at Gettysburg, Lee’s forces continued the assault but the Union would not break their forces. Burch and his regiment were moved from the town, but he

\textsuperscript{94} Burch Diary, 52.

\textsuperscript{95} The losses suffered by the 154\textsuperscript{th} at Gettysburg included 1 enlisted man killed, 20 wounded and 169 captured or missing, and 1 officer wounded and 9 captured or missing. Burch Diary, 53.
remembered plenty of fighting and felt the Union soldier had been pushed back. 96 Finally, on July 3rd of the Battle of Gettysburg, the Confederate army was pushed to Cemetery Hill (or Ridge) but were met with heavily artillery fire from the Union, which caused severe casualties (roughly 17,000) for the Confederate army and Lee was forced to retreat. On this day Burch thought he might be paroled, and also remembered heavy fighting that lasted only couple hours but believed “our forces hold their own” 97 On Independence Day, Burch was officially a prisoner of the Confederate forces. The next week was filled with marching in the rain and through the mud, up to Waterloo with minimal food and shelter. July 10th, about 4000 men were on their way to Richmond, VA and feeling the effects of hunger as Burch notes, “All as hungry as bear and pay any price for anything to eat.” 98 Burch would eventually feel what true hunger felt like once imprisoned in a POW camp.

Belle Isle

July 11th, Burch marched to Bunker Hill, then the following day to Winchester, to Newtown, and to Richmond, Virginia. Each day marching roughly fifteen miles. Rations were becoming less and the men captured had their tents and blankets taken away by the Rebels. 99 On July 23rd Burch remembered, “I am somewhat dilapidated by hard

96 Burch remembered the fighting becoming heavy from 4pm until dusk, noticed the Union was still held up on Cemetery hill. Burch Diary, 54.

97 Burch Diary, 54.

98 A majority of the food given to the prisoners during the march to Richmond was flour and meat, portions depended on the day. Burch Diary, 56.

99 Burch Diary, 56.
usage and hard feed this morning. Go to the depot again this morning where the first of
the Rebs is to gobble our canteens...Boarded the cars. Passed through Waynesborough,
through the tunnels of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Charlottesville, Gordonville, and
arrived in Richmond in morning.100 Upon arrival to Richmond, the men were met with
the hot July sun for multiple days while waiting for a train to taken them to Belle Isle. At
this point, Richmond was a growing economic city for the Confederates with metal
buildings and was a perfect middle point for prisoners to march to Belle Isle.

On July 24th Burch and his men arrived at Richmond and he remembered it being
"dirty, ragged, and [the men] were ravenously hungry, we arrived at the Confederate
capital. Emerged from a dirty box car to a hot, dirty, dusty street along which we are
marched without any very enchanting smiles from the gaping, impudent looking
rebels.101 Once arriving, there was not enough room for any of Burch and the men that
were with him. People gathered throughout the town to gawk at the prisoners as they
began their march across the bridge over the James River to enter Belle Isle.

Belle Island was a prisoner of war camp from 1862 to 1865. It was an oblong
tract of land with the dimensions of about one mile in length and less than one fourth of a
mile in width. The island lay between Richmond and Manchester; the channel passed on
the Richmond side which was slightly wider than the island. It was connected to the
Manchester side by one bridge for the Danville Railroad for the convenience of the Old

100 Burch Diary, 58.

101 The battle cry for which the 154th regiment would chant for the year prior to their incarceration was
"On to Richmond". Finally the men had arrived to their goal but not in the way many of them expected.
Burch Diary, 14.
Dominion Iron Works. The prison camp was situated on the lower end of the island, the
ground was low, wet, and flat. The area occupied by the prison was about 4 acres. Burch
remembered entering the prison, “So on down the Island to the lower end where we stood
around in the hot sun and gave our names Cos. Regts. Etc. Here we were searched again
for money, canteens, haversacks, etc. Counted off into squads of nineties and given a
small piece of bread and a little slop and turned into the embankment. We found about
3,000 ahead of us to occupy the tents there and where we camp down in the lousy sand
where so many had been before us without tent or shelter.” 102

This was the beginning of the trouble Burch had while being imprisoned at Belle
Isle. The elements, lack of food, unsanitary conditions, and overcrowding were continual
subjects Burch wrote about during his incarceration. In the early days of his time at Belle
Isle, Burch noticed the elements would be the biggest obstacle to overcome. No tents
were available and the sun was beating down on the men. On July 26 Burch notes, “Hot.
Hotter. Hottest, and over 3000 to help enjoy it and more coming every day.” 103 In Belle
Isle, Burch gained his first job, using his smarts to help make life a little easier at times.

On July 28th there was a call for writers to take names of regiments and Burch got the job
and received an extra-large ration for his help. Beyond this a majority of the days were
spent eating little amounts of food and laying on the sand in the hot sun, watching the
new inmates arrive (roughly 100 every day). In his camp, many of the men were sick.
Burch began helping others with their sickness in Virginia. He helped Truman A. to the

102 Burch Diary, 59.
103 Burch Diary, 60.
St. John Hospital and felt sickness was because, "Many sick but that soup and bugs and slop will kill a hog. Full of little bugs or worms or of weevil nature (at first but now) no skimming off."\textsuperscript{104} Through the month of August, sickness was ravaging the men of Belle Isle. The men went two weeks without meat in their diets.

**Understanding How to Survive**

Like many other prisoners, Burch was no stranger to trading with the guards in order to eat. In many diaries from POW camps, there are stories of guards exchanging rations, tobacco, greenbacks, and more. Since many were starving this became normal practice as Burch notes,

"When captured I did not have a cent in cash and very little in notion line but soon found many of our guards were eager to get Greenbacks, knives, rings or any other novelty we had for barter, such as tobacco, pies, biscuits, etc. $1.00 of our money would then buy $10 or later $20 for $1 confederate and all trade was carried on upon that basis but very few prisoners cared to run the risk of being shot. A few of us who took upon that risk did most of the trading and sometimes did quite a thriving business. I amongst the few, also kept a memoranda of biscuits, etc. furnished to men of our company and a few in other companies who could not write but was an inveterate gambler and who brought about $175 in camp with him with the aid of myself and another trust lad."\textsuperscript{105}

These Greenbacks could also be used to get paroled. Many prisoners would save as much as they could in order to pay a guard to get "bumped" to the front of the line in order to get released. Burch made mention of this in late September stating, "Another lot

\textsuperscript{104} The food was making many of the inmates sick with diarrhea and the fever. *Burch Diary*, 61.

\textsuperscript{105} Burch kept this memoranda book and would still read it occasionally to see his name in the book next to what he owed to other and the debts he had built up. Many debts were left unpaid. *Burch Diary*, 64.
of prisoners came in today to add to our and misery and some sent out. Those who can pay $5 Greenback or $100 Confederate for first chance out for parole.”\textsuperscript{106}

Burch and Eben S. Ely (of his company) had a job of running provisions for the Island from Richmond on a flat boat in order to make extra rations. Burch noted Ely buying from the guards, “I often had him buy pies, biscuits, tobacco, and anything he could get off the guard on the boat or the colored women on the Richmond side, on the sly and I sold them in camp or traded for knives or anything which the new prisoners or “fresh fish” would always bring in.”\textsuperscript{107} Trading amongst captor and captive was just another tactic used by Burch and others to survive the confederate prison system.

Another subject that Burch noted that was quite common in these prisons was that of prison exchange. The prisoner exchange program was a show of humanity between the North and South. Exchanging of prisoners between the two factions from different prison systems was not uncommon. What Burch stated in his diary about this during his stint at Belle Isle was unique as he stated on September 9th, “a few more of the sick and money men get off this P.M. and rumors of an exchange and also of difficulties on account of the nigger.”\textsuperscript{108} The problem Burch was referring to is the buildup of African American soldier that were imprisoned at the camp. This was due to the fact they would rarely be exchanged due to their skin color. Racism was still a major issue in the country.

\textsuperscript{106} Burch Diary, 65.

\textsuperscript{107} Burch and his company saved up a fund of Greenbacks which they felt gave them an advantage over many in the prison. The Captain from Libby (Capt. Fay) sent Ely $80 and Burch $70 Confederate for their days work. This money was used on the sick in their company. Burch rarely used the money on himself; only bought a blanket for himself so he did not have to share with Ely anymore. Burch Diary, 71.

\textsuperscript{108} Burch Diary, 64.
and the exchange of African American was minimal, often times African Americans were used to do the building and upkeep of the prisons. Often times the men exchanged were sick and wounded white soldier.

Another Round of Sickness

At this point there were almost 4,000 inhabitants in Belle Isle as the weather was becoming colder men were becoming sicker. The rotation of prisoners, as the Civil War escalated, was beginning to grow. Many were entering and exiting Belle Isle almost every day. Burch noted on Sept. 27th about 400 prisoners entered the prison and the following day roughly 500 left for City Point.109 On the 30th, over 2,000 men captured at the Battle of Chickamauga entered the prison. The population was rising, which led to many of the men who were being moved out of the main prison block were often the sick. Even though Burch was growing sick, he was never to be moved from the main prison to the town (next to the island which held the sick).

By October 20, Burch had a fever, headache, and diarrhea. Four days later Burch wrote on the problems with having overcrowding in the prison, “1100 more prisoners brought in to add to the suffering. No tents or covering for them and mud only to lie in. Many are dying daily, awful, awful suffering. What is to be our fate? Small pox cases

109 On Sept. 27th Burch also notes how he again went and wrote of the Rebels for a couple hours for the many men who were unable to write. He received an extra-large ration for his work. Burch Diary, 66.
numerous in camp and many being vaccinated.”\textsuperscript{110} It is the beginning of winter at Belle Isle which led many, including Burch, to succumb to sickness.

Just before Burch’s four month anniversary on Belle Isle, one of his Company was discharged due to sickness. Dick Covey, who Burch cared for while he was ill, was exchanged and sent home. Burch wrote on Covey after the fact, “He was taken crazy about the time he reach home and declared they were trying to starve him and he called for me every hour of the day and night. That if Burch were here, he would be all right.”\textsuperscript{111}

“Over 5000 prisoners huddled here in one and a half acres and half famished, a few US uniforms came today and were drawn by lots but luck was against me and got nothing”\textsuperscript{112} noted by Burch on Nov. 5\textsuperscript{th}. Beyond shelter, clothing was a crucial piece of each man’s arsenal in order to stay alive. In mid-November Burch received a heavy coat from the U.S. Sanitary Commission, perfect timing before December’s chill came over the prison. Burch believed he never received more than a $\frac{1}{4}$ of the provisions that were supposed to be sent by the Sanitary Commission.

In December of 1863 Newell Burch ran out of paper in his memoranda book. The last few months of his imprisonment and his time in Andersonville was written after the fact. Before entering Andersonville, Burch notes, “While my comrades were dying and being sent over to city hospital I kept comparatively well and was vaccinated for small

\textsuperscript{110} Burch Diary, 69.

\textsuperscript{111} Burch would remain in contact with Covey’s cousin and brother in law after his release from Andersonville. Covey’s furlough would end after a week of reaching home. Burch Diary, 72.

\textsuperscript{112} Burch Diary, 70.
pox about Dec. 10th and it worked well but did not heal. We were started for
Andersonville about Feb. 24th on one of the coldest nights of 1864 and from Raleigh I
was very sick with lung fever and carried by comrade E. S. Ely in his arms to
Andersonville a good share of the way."

The small pox vaccinations he received would be the beginning of an infection,
which Burch and others believed was gangrene. This infection would eventually help
Burch become a figure in the hospital of Andersonville. It is also of note that Burch was
in poor health while entering the deadliest prison of the Confederacy during the Civil
War. The words written are almost identical to those written while imprisoned, with the
same form and style. In Chapter three, no longer is Burch’s diaries broken into daily
entries. At this point, Burch had run out of paper to properly make daily accounts of his
life. After the fact, Burch wrote a memoir on his 11 month stint at the Andersonville
prison.

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113 Burch Diary, 73.
Chapter 3: Surviving Andersonville with Resourcefulness

Entering Andersonville

The Andersonville Prison was built in February 1864, on 16.5 acres (which expanded ten acres in June of 1864) and was not prepared for the flood of inmates that would cover the grounds in the coming weeks. Early arrival also lead to death as historian Sanders writes, “Many of the men shipped from Belle Isle and Danville were already gravely ill when they arrived; given the lack of shelter, inadequate medical care, and absence of sufficient rations, they succumbed in the dirt where they lay.”114 Once prisoners entered Andersonville in March, many were “shocked” at the better living conditions than that of Belle Isle as Burch noted, “That was a stark improvement over Belle Isle.”115

As stated previously, shelter was unfinished and the first prisoners were able to use the surroundings to try and create livable conditions. On “the second morning the boys had quite a brush shanty built and when I awoke the first thing I noticed particular was the man who lay beside me had been furloughed and gone home and forms one of the first of the 13,000 still sleeping at Andersonville but pine boughs brought me around again and my lungs grew stronger so I could talk aloud and soon I saw the stockade finished by the great gang of negroes.”116 Here, Burch’s living quarters or lack thereof was completed. He had witnessed the African American soldiers building and adding to

114 Sanders Jr., While in the Hands of the Enemy, 205.

115 Burch Diary, 74.

116 Burch Diary, 75.
the stockade of the prison. To be a black prisoner of war was tough, beyond being a prison they were expected to do extra work around the prison as well.

The feeling of Burch and his men was they “fared better when we first went to Andersonville by having a clean camp in the brush and a little better rations for a few days, but it soon got to be the same old story.”\textsuperscript{117} Much like his entry into Belle Isle, Burch was refreshed to see the prison being in “mediocre” condition. Upon construction, “workers cut down the pine trees from the interior of the prison to build the stockade wall, thus depriving the future prisoners of that protection from the elements. Camp officials intended from the beginning to build barracks, but tens of thousands of prisoners would arrive and leave for other camps months before any permanent prisoner housing was constructed.”\textsuperscript{118} Due to the lack of construction and population rising fast, prison conditions would quickly deteriorate.

Men from Richmond, Belle Isle, and Danville prisons continued to arrive every day, which caused Burch and his men to move to the North side of the camp from the swamp and creek. Men from three different prisons would add to the swell of the prison population. Burch remembered creating the new shelter, “Ely and I got a wool blanket up on poles to protect us from the sun and rain. A guard was allowed to take out two men to get wood and brush for bedding and at first I remember this was the day before Easter.”\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{117} Burch Diary, 75.

\textsuperscript{118} Davis, Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville, 7.

\textsuperscript{119} Burch Diary, 75.
Before the population grew out of control, prisoners were able to trade readily and easily with the guards of the prison. As the trains arrived and dropped off more men, guards would be no more than soldiers with a gun. Their training was minimal as Burch noted men being shot for attempting trade, “Many a poor fellow found out in trying to make their acquaintance to strike up a trade of some kind, but I was very careful and soon learned who to talk to and who not when I once found 3 or 4 familiar faces from our first guards were not strong enough for the front; but from now on trading with the guards was about ended.”¹²⁰ As the weeks and months drew on, trading among guards would become minimal as the population grew too large. This made trading difficult for Burch as too many prisoners were attempting to trade.

Burch’s shelter was located near the prison creek that flowed through creek located in the middle of the shelters from North to South. From the conception of the prison in February 1864, the creek was infested with excess waste materials from the prison. North, the guard’s camp lay which was the cause for this filth. Burch remembered, “Water in the creek which ran through the prison was very bad as the Reb camps were upon the creek above us and we commenced digging wells back from the swamp and creek, were allowed few shovels at first for that purpose.”¹²¹ Beyond just attempting to retrieve clean water, Burch noticed his health beginning change. It was retrieving the water with buckets the wound on his arm from small pox shots was not healed and grew worse. Most days a half of a canteen full of water would be achieved, Burch was unable to take credit for this due to his poor health and lack of using an

¹²⁰ Burch Diary, 76.

¹²¹ Burch Diary, 76.
The men in his regiment were doing a majority of the work when retrieving water as Burch was not in good health. Burch’s also suffered from lung troubles, blisters on his body, diarrhea, and scurvy.

Mentally Burch was beginning to break down in April, only 1 month into his incarceration, and noted “that Old Abe had abandoned us and we would surely die.”

Men left the prison and become turncoats in order to escape the condition, this was a rare occurrence. The summer months approached and in May and June the prison population grew exponentially with 5,000 men from Burnsides’ Army that surrendered at Plymouth. These men entered the prison with money in their pockets which led to raiders throughout the prison.

Burch put a small focus on being in the prison while the six raiders were hung in the stockade, which was all sanctioned by Henry Wirz (who was later tried and executed after the war due to his part in murder and conspiracy during his time in charge of the prison). Burch wrote about the situation, “The one quote that I felt should be read about the situation by Burch is, “I of course took no hand in this, to me righteous judgment, being at the time at right angles with scurvy, lung trouble, diarrhea, etc. but always believed it and there were some wild schemes put on foot to make a break by over powering the guards. Also to undermine a portion of stockade and rush out en-masse; but spies were always about and the Rebel fortifications a for and cannon at each corner of

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122 Burch Diary, 76.
123 Burch Diary, 76.
124 Burch Diary, 76.
the stockade were greatly strengthened and guards double and we laughed at, and probably a great slaughter of prisoners postponed to a slower and worse death if possible."\textsuperscript{125} Now that escape was becoming and even less plausible way of exiting the prison, it seemed the only way out was on a death cart (cart that carried the deceased to the grave site).

It was in June of 1864 when Burch’s words would be began to focus on what this thesis is truly about, the hardships of sickness and health while imprisoned in Andersonville. Burch wrote, “In June also as the water grew worse and the numbers of prisoners increased almost daily and the fearful lice, maggots, fleas, and almost incessant rain combined, the death rate or mortality increased to a fearful extent.”\textsuperscript{126} The following month the population was overly crowded to where men were making camps on the swamp. The swamp, infested with insects and bacteria, only helped spread the disease that was running through the camp. Dr. Joseph Jones concluded, “the sandy soil provided a most suitable and healthy habitation for fleas and mosquitoes.”\textsuperscript{127} Insects flock to filth, which was a spread throughout the grounds of the prison. Even with the water supply, turned into a sewage system, Jones blamed the harsh conditions on man-made problems. The lack of thought in the process of construction of the prison is truly what doomed these prisoners. It was noted, “From wall to wall as far as the eye could see there was a churning sea of sullen, suffering humanity. It took only a cursory perusal to

\textsuperscript{125} Burch Diary, 77.

\textsuperscript{126} Burch Diary, 77.

\textsuperscript{127} Jones also notes that the bug bites were so severe on many of the prisoners they looked as if they had a case of the measles. Jones also pointed out how often he was bitten by different flying insects. Breeden, Bulletin of History of Medicine, 323.
spot the physical sources of the incredible misery; they were everywhere apparent – overcrowding, inadequate shelter, and filth.”

The stockade was extended an extra ten acres. These acres were ransacked which Burch noted, “wood was very scarce, every root of every stump having been dug out, and used for fuel and it would be impossible for me or anyone else to describe the onslaught upon the north end of the stockade when told they could have it for wood.” The shelter being destroyed in the hottest months of the year would only attributed to the extended loss of life among many of the men here.

It was in June a man from the 100th New York Infantry entered Andersonville and was brought in by Burch and his 154th Infantry. Upon this man’s arrival “he had been wounded through the forearm and gangrene had got in.” It was moments such as this that began to bring out Burch’s intelligence and will in order to take care of someone else over himself. His arrival at Andersonville was troubled as he had no personal possessions so Ely and Newell gave him something to eat and shelter. In order to fix the gangrene Burch, “bought a piece of Castile soap about 2 inch square for 50 cents greenback and got flaxseed and charcoal and made a poultice for his arm.” Without the right ingredients, Burch was still able to logically think to help take care of his fellow man. In July the man’s conditioned weakened and the ability to get him to the hospital

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129 *Burch Diary*, 77.

130 *Burch Diary*, 77.

131 *Burch Diary*, 77.
was difficult. The hospital was over-crowded and to have access to the right proper personnel was tough. The hole in his arm had the gangrene worked into the bone and on August 11th he had died.\textsuperscript{132} Burch believed he could cure gangrene, if this man in fact had gangrene, it proved Burch’s methods were unable to cure the disease.

Ovid Futch used the words of Chief Surgeon Isaiah H. White, “The hospital, upon removal to the outside of the stockade, had only 209 small tents, poorly adapted to hospital use. No more than 800 patients be comfortably accommodated, 1,020 seriously sick were crowded into these deficient lodgings; of the 2,665 sick in the stockade, many had been refused admission only because of congestion in the hospital. Out of 8,583 patients admitted during the month of May, 708 died; in June 1, 201 cases terminated fatally out of 7,968 admissions.”\textsuperscript{133} It was a selfless act that a young man with zero medical training would begin to go out of his way to help others with an ailment that he was dealing with himself.

“In July and August the filth crowded condition of the prison excessive heat, and no food that a dog would hardly eat. Told at a fearful rate over 100 a day dying regularly and the wagons with the dead would roll out of the south gate heaped up as long as any would stay on and carted out to the cemetery and of course the name, company, regiment, date of death etc. if pinned onto any rags that might have been left upon the corpse were generally torn off and so “unknown” is marked upon the record book.”\textsuperscript{134} For Burch and others imprisoned in Andersonville, death was just a part of life. The water supply was

\textsuperscript{132} Burch Diary, 77.

\textsuperscript{133} The patient-doctor ratio was over two hundred to one. Futch, History of Andersonville Prison, 97.

\textsuperscript{134} Burch Diary, 77-78.
contaminated but Burch remembers on August 10\textsuperscript{th} 1864, "After one of the heaviest rain storms imaginable, there was a great commotion near the dead line (men inhabiting the southern portion of the prison) south of the north gate by seeing quite a stream of pure clear cool water coming out of the ground from under some roots and the dead line. Soon Providence Spring was unearthed and we got a small supply of good water by waiting our turn long enough but I was sick and drawn out of shape by scurvy and gangrene in my arm."\textsuperscript{135}

Due to his sickness, Burch and close friend E. S. Ely moved to the South side of the stockade where the hospital was located. Burch, knowing he must try and do what he could to stay healthy left many of his regiment which would be the last time he would see a majority of the men he had spent such a long time with. Feeling his sickness, Burch was able to steal sacks that held raw corn meal in order to fashion himself a pair of pants. A sergeant of 100\textsuperscript{th} regiment also loaned him sacks for these pants, Burch wore these for 9 months.\textsuperscript{136} Without shelter, clothing was often the only shelter one’s body had to get away from the elements. During many of the prisoner’s time at Andersonville their articles of clothing would deteriorate away leaving many almost or completely nude. While many were starving, growing more unhealthy, and dying Burch was doing all he could to stay alive. These are stories of resiliency and intelligence of a man able to survive 13 months as a prisoner of war.

\textsuperscript{135} Burch Diary, 78.

\textsuperscript{136} Burch Diary, 78.
Sickness was growing, shelter was scarce, water was putrid, and the prison was becoming overcrowded. Up until this point these aspects of life were much of what Newell Burch had written in his last section of his diary. These are all topics touched upon in the historiography in Chapter 1, but the main themes of food, starvation, and Burch’s health were needing to be addressed. In August of 1864, Burch’s memory would focus on these main themes during the rest of his time in Andersonville.

![Figure 3](image_url)

The plate that Newell Burch had with him throughout his time in the Civil War and in POW Camps. It Reads: “This tin plate is what I ate my breakfast dinner and supper on for nearly three years, 1862 to 1865 (when I could get any to eat). It was at Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg, was a prisoner with me from July 1/63 to April 21st 1865. Was 7 months on Belle Island, 13 months in Andersonville and a short time badly scattered, especially with Howard at Andersonville.”

-N. Burch

**Dietary Restrictions**

After Capt. Wirz took over at Andersonville rations had improved from Belle Isle as Burch remembered his food from his previous prison stay, “we did not get any more of that pea soup and bugs which we forgot so often to skim off while on the island.”

In the beginning Burch noted the food he would eat on a daily basis, “A majority of the food
served was corn bread partly cooked, a little beef and sometime a little rice and sorghum, and not more than \( \frac{1}{4} \) had dishes to draw sorghum in and not \( \frac{1}{2} \) to draw rice in. The rice was always cooked and was brought in a wagon box and scooped out into rub blankets or anything that would hold what 100 prisoners were entitled to."\(^{138}\) It wasn’t long until the food began to disappear as they were unable to feed the 30,000 people that lived inside the stockade. As so many others did, Burch noted on the raw corn meal many were fed, “most of us drew ur corn meal raw and of course not sifted and it looked to us to be ground cob and all and no way to sift it, and not \( \frac{1}{2} \) had anything to bake it in or boil it in or wood to cook it.”\(^{139}\) The low quality food, primarily the corn meal with husks intact, were probable reasons for bowel problems. The physicians and nurses at Andersonville understood the inmate’s diet was unhealthy. Dr. R. Randolph Stevenson was quoted, “The bread was made from cornmeal...[that] produced diarrhea, and hence laid the foundation of all those symptoms resulting from defective nutrients.”\(^{140}\)

As usual for Burch, he noticed the poor quality of food was not up to standards so a different remedy was set to be figured out. Ely and Burch were lucky enough to have a skillet upon their arrival to Andersonville, one of the few positives for being one of the first people to arrive at the prison. With a little salt and corn they were able to create a more edible meal than most of the prisoners in the prison. Burch noted the importance of the skillet, “Words could not tell its importance to us and not only us but all our friends for it was in constant use from day light to dark and often for half the night when there

\(^{138}\) Burch Diary, 78.

\(^{139}\) Burch Diary, 78.

\(^{140}\) Cross, North and South, 27.
was any wood to be got and if any of you wish to know how we enjoyed our rice just let him go home and get his wife to cook." To show the true horror of the diet in which many were forced to become accustomed to, Burch turned back to the 5,000 prisoners that were captured at Plymouth, NC.

These men were captured and were re-enlisted men which meant they had "deep pockets" upon entering the prison. They were able to keep a large amount of their belongings due to their surrender, so when they were imprisoned they were unable to cope with their surroundings. Once the money began to run out for many of these men, they would use what they had left to become a parole or else they wouldn’t be able to survive. Burch wrote, "They disdained the Rebel diet and as long as their money lasted lived very well but when that was gone, they were simply heart broken and of that 5,000, I do not think 2,000 ever saw the U.S. Flag again." Burch continued, "They gave up and when any man gave up in a rebel prison he was dead already and they lie buried in unknown graves at Anderson, Millen, Florence, Savannah, etc. and help to make up the 20,000 and over who died in the prisons I was in while I was a prisoner."

Starvation often times led to mental instability which would lead to many feeling their life was over in these prisons. Through all of this Burch as able to stay strong, while still helping his fellow man in the process. By this time Burch’s health was taking a

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141 Burch Diary, 78.

142 Burch Diary, 78.

143 Burch Diary, 79.
dramatic turn for the worse and something had to change, he was not like many of the others who would be buried on the grounds where they were once held captive.

**Working in the Hospital**

In September 1864 Newell Burch arrived in the Andersonville hospital after holding off entering the hospital as long as possible. Burch remembered his physical well-being at this point, “I had just the strength enough to crawl around one leg and a stick, and one leg and arm drawn up in this way (at right angles at knee and elbow).”\(^{144}\) Upon entering the hospital, Burch resorted to who he trusted and that was himself. For his knee he took Blue Mass and rubbed turpentine on his joint. Blue Mass was a mercury based pill which was used to relieve body pains. Today, it is understood that mercury is a toxic chemical, during the Civil War the problems exposure to mercury could cause were unknown. Turpentine is an oil based organic liquid primarily used as a solvent. Burch used this as a medicine to relieve the pain in his knee as it has been known to treat sclerosis (the hardening of tissue in the body). Burch wrote on this process, “All told me it would spoil the joint for life but I rubbed the cords (there was not much else to rub) with it a few times and I thought it began to let up a little and I kept on and knew it helped me and then began on my elbow and arm.”\(^{145}\)

The wound on Burch’s arm first began in Belle Isle, shortly thereafter it became infected. Like so many others, his infection case was due to the lack of care given to the

\(^{144}\) *Burch Diary*, 79.

\(^{145}\) *Burch Diary*, 79.
individuals in these camps. It was at this time, Burch was able to now only cure his knee but also what he believed was gangrene in his arm.

Gangrene is caused by a lack in blood supply to a part of the body due to tissue dying in that area. Limbs that were infected with gangrene were amputated at the nearest joint above the infection. Most patients had to have toes, feet, or legs, removed because they were the body parts that most often came in contact with the filthy, disease-ridden floor of the stockade.\textsuperscript{146} During the Civil War the germ theory was unknown. It was not surprising that Burch believed he had gangrene in his arm. Before the extreme could happen, Burch was able to cure his infection himself.

Nitric acid is a highly corrosive material, if sparked can create a quick flame. To cure his infection Burch used nitric acid and “poured it into the sore and burned it out, time and time again. After the third time I got it all out.”\textsuperscript{147} An infection could easily be cured with soap and water but gangrene could not because the tissue has become dead. Even though Burch’s infection subsided for a time, it was still an open wound in need of healing. His infection would return, but without its return Burch would never have gotten his job in the hospital.

In early September the Confederates made a large prisoner exchange, many of the sick were going to be taken to the hospital. Burch was present during this exchange and would be able to get his infection cured by a professional. The prisoners would be loaded in train cars and taken to the hospital and the men on the train were placed in the camp.

\textsuperscript{146} Roberts, \textit{Andersonville Journey}, 161.

\textsuperscript{147} Burch Diary, 79.
At this point the hospital was located beyond the walls and the inmates walked to the depot. It was here Capt. Wirz told Burch, “Here you Yank. You go back to that last car with the balance of sick and lame and you will not be so crowded and will have one doctor with you.” It was believed if one was in the back car, death was close for the men placed there. Burch felt “9/10” of them did die. By being the back car for Burch, it was a life-saving moment. Here, Nitric Acid and care were abundant which helped him survive.

On his travels and entrance into the prison hospital, Burch continued applying acid and turpentine to his injuries in order to regain full strength. His arm was beginning to heal as Burch used “flax seed poultices and using my own soap and bandages.” Using soap and clean bandages was another procedure Burch did try to cure himself. In October, Burch’s arm was almost fully healed so he showed Dr. Bates of the 12th Ward who told Burch, “He was surprised and looked at me in wonder, and said how you did it?” Burch continued, “I had my own Castile soap and let no one else use it, also cloths instead of letting the hospital steward dress it with the same soap and rags he used on others and in that way carried gangrene to those who had not had it at all.” From this, Dr. Bates waited only one day to let Burch know he was onto something that could truly help the hospital out for the better. A man with little education was able to understand how to use the provisions made available to try and cure himself, would lead to him

148 Burch Diary, 79.

149 Burch Diary, 79.

150 Burch Diary, 79.

151 Dr. Calvin Bates was one of the doctors who later testified against Capt. Wirz. Burch Diary, 79.
becoming a nurse for other patients with this ailment. It is also of note that Dr. Bates accepted the idea that Burch had cured a disease that was incurable by the practices that Burch was using.

Burch remembers that Dr. Bates “wanted me to take all the gangrene cases in the ward and he would give me soap and clothes for each; We had ‘A’ tents large enough to hold 8 men, 4 bunks of two each. A row of 8 or 10 tents made a ward.”\textsuperscript{152} As the population would rise the surgeons had to take care of more prisoners, along with bringing in Union soldiers to help as nurses. These nurses would help lighten the load for the surgeons and would be paid in extra rations. A priority for Surgeon White’s hospital to work was to have clean drinking water, so a well was dug.\textsuperscript{153}

In a matter of days, Burch was no longer just another prisoner, he had a commitment to help the suffering men around him. The ward in which Burch was placed, over half of the men admitted there had gangrene. Soon, this ward would be full of gangrene patients for Burch to attend to as Burch remembered, “Tended to each one as much as I was able and cheered them up with news from Sherman and soon had several cases healing.”\textsuperscript{154} Once healthy, Burch became the Hospital Steward and Ward Master for which he was paid with larger rations. As men in his company were dying and being discharged, Burch was hard at work helping others in all regiments. Burch’s absence even led to the thought he had died in the prison, going so far as his brother Horace

\textsuperscript{152} Burch Diary, 80.
\textsuperscript{153} Roberts, Andersonville Journey, 156.
\textsuperscript{154} Burch Diary, 80.
learning of his death from the Cattaraugus Company. In late 1864 Burch reunited with Chas Pecor of 112th N.Y. who was a stockade mate with Burch, this was the first interaction Burch had with any of his fellow men since becoming Ward Master. Little did any of his men know the good work he was doing during his time in prison.

Beyond gangrene, Burch wanted to understand another disease in order to advance in helping the men in his ward. Burch began taking scurvy patients and was looking into the causes of this disease. Scurvy was an awful disease as Pickenpaugh noted from one inmate, “The ravages of this disease are terrible. Many going about the camp with bleeding mouths and teeth actually dropping out, legs swollen and turning black and blue.” Burch wrote about his own remedy to treat scurvy, “The result was I took a large sorghum Bbl. And the ration of sorghum from the men suffering from diarrhea and go the sittings from the corn meal our bread was made of. In a few days had a bbl. Of pretty good beer and I gave each man who had the scurvy a pint to start on and I kept it up until I went out of the hospital.” Sorghum was useful for Burch as it is high in anti-oxidant properties which the men in the prison were lacking. This was used to help calm the bowels of the men in order to help ease the suffering. There is no proof this was a cure, but it seemed to help. Burch’s selflessness did not end with helping others with their ailments, but also traded his belongings with guards for tobacco in order to bring ease to the men in his ward.

155 Burch Diary, 79.
156 Pickenpaugh, Captives in Blue, 145.
157 Burch Diary, 80.
158 Burch Diary, 80.
Burch continued this work throughout the winter months, in March 1865 Burch had another stroke of luck. Due to his inventive ideas and help in the hospital, Dr. Bates wanted Burch to watch over his home while his wife was away. Burch was a trusted man and the feeling was the war was about to be over so this would not be a long commitment. There were three cabins to be attended, with Burch and two others had to take care of the shanties. Burch remembered “we had free air and no guards, pick up wood enough to keep a good fire and cook our ration and traded some with Tom and George. Got lots of nice sweet potatoes and yams and lived pretty well and I sent all I could into the hospital by doctor but took most of my extra to the game and sent for Pecor and he divided it to those I knew.”159 While being able to live the non-prison life for a short term, it never deterred Burch from remembering those who were less fortunate. To risk a penalty by sneaking in food for those he cared for is a true selfless act. It was also at this point Burch had the freedom to visit the cemetery at Andersonville, here he was able to see the graves of the 13,000 men who were victims of the Civil War.

Parole

Towards the end of March, the war was concluding in the favor of the Union and many men were beginning to be paroled from Andersonville. On March 24, 1865 Burch, along with Dr. Bates, left Andersonville to take care of parolees in the South. From Andersonville the men went through Chattahoochee, Montgomery, Selma, to Meridian Mississippi. Here Burch noted, “We were put into a stockade and prison with mud and

159 Burch Diary, 81.
water from 6 in to 2 feet deep. Bunks and sleeping accommodations for about half of us and if possible the nastiest hole of its size I ever saw."\textsuperscript{160} The parole journey for Burch was not one without its obstacles as it was a rough and treacherous trek for him and many of the men.

From here the march went from Jackson, Mississippi to Vicksburg along the Big Black River. On this journey many of the men were physically broken, collapsing along the river. Freedom was near but the years of the Civil War had taken its toll on many. On Big Black River, Burch and the men around him were able to see Old Glory across the bank which was neutral ground for the two sides. Burch remembered the feeling of joy for this moment, "Our boys had managed to construct some red, white, and blue out of something into the semblance of a little flash and fastened it to a pole and the minute were on the pontoon bridge across the river – up went the flag. And such a shout went up from the poor, tired, weak mortals can only be imagined. Tears were in the eyes of ¾ of that ragged hungry shattered crowd of humanity."\textsuperscript{161} Through this journey Burch’s health was relatively positive, unlike many of the men. It was during this time he had departed with the overcoat he had gotten from the Sanitary Commission, he used the trade to help buy provisions to keep himself in good health and spirits. Even knowing freedom was on the horizon, Burch was always thinking of what he must do to stay alive.

In Vicksburg, Burch remembered leaving camp, "I left camp and came out into the deep RR Cut back of Vicksburg where it is a kind of soap stone clay which does not

\textsuperscript{160} Burch Diary, 81.

\textsuperscript{161} Burch Diary, 81.
wash and where there was thousands of names cut into the bank 15 to 25 feet high."
Burch continued, "I had a knife and went to work and cut my way up to that root for a 
hold and the cut 'N. Burch' in letters over a foot high."162 It was here Burch was able to 
cement his life, legacy, and survival of his Civil War years. The ability to survive 21 
months in Confederate Prisons is extraordinary. One April 21st 1865 New Burch was 
officially discharged, taken up to St. Louis to relish his newfound freedom post-Civil 
War.

162 Burch Diary, 81.
Conclusion: A Remarkable Man

Life after War

In 1869 Newell Burch married his wife, Susan, in Cincinnati and shortly thereafter moved to Menomonie, WI. While in Menomonie, Burch became a figure throughout the town. He opened “Burch’s Mercantile Co.” which was located on what is now Menomonie’s Historic Main Street. He was also very influential in being one of the men who helped put together the first committee to bring electric light to the city. The first electric light was used by the Knapp, Stout and Company Co., where Burch worked as a clerk. Newell and Susan had 6 children together, in 1908 Burch passed away in Menomonie. His burial site is located at the Evergreen Cemetery in Menomonie.

Astonishing Survival

Newell Burch began as a volunteer in the army with very minimal education. When reading his diary and understanding the man, you learn that he is a young guy (only 20) who is just doing what he feels is right. What he felt was right was the one thing he knew would give him a future, enlisting in the army.

Even though Burch was a Union soldier fighting for the north, rarely do his emotions takeover when he writes about his time before his capture. It is a straightforward look on the world that was happening around him. Burch suffered through many trials and tribulations when it came to surviving such an ordeal as being a prisoner of war.
The truly astonishing fact was that Burch was able to survive such a long period of time in Belle Isle and Andersonville prisons. Reflecting on his words, one can make generalizations of the man he really was. He did not have to be the biggest or strongest man, he only needed to be the most resourceful. Burch had the ability to make friends by selfless acts that would help the men around him. Due to this he befriended E.S. Ely who helped him tremendously while Burch was sick and in pain. He also did what he had to do to survive, not by being rude or selfish, but by using his brain.

He understood in order to survive one must stay healthy, which is why he focused so hard on figuring out a cure for his ailments. By overcoming these obstacles he was able to do something just remarkable, become a Ward Master in the hospital. This was an act of intelligence to better his life when it seemed it was almost over. The talent he possessed was appreciated and noticed by those in charge which showed the true conviction Newell Burch had. In a world where resources were limited, Burch was able to overcome the odds.

The last remarkable act this man did was write this diary. During his time he did the world a huge favor by documenting the world he was temporarily living in. Even though he was a man of little education, he had the ability to read and write. It is a biography of a man who survived a time where many men had died. It also gives us a glimpse beyond life during the war, but life in prison. A first-hand account of the horrors of being a prisoner of war is something historians can all appreciate. Once the paper had ended in his memoranda book, Burch knew he needed to fill in the gap after the fact. His writing only changed in the form daily entries to one summary, it reads as if Burch is still
imprisoned in Andersonville. It is a story heard by few, hopefully with this it can be heard by many more in the future.

Figure 4
Newell Burch headstone located in Menomonie, Wisconsin.
Photo Courtesy of Evergreen Cemetery

Figure 5
Possibly the only known photo of Newell Burch circa 1962.
Photo Courtesy of Jan Tarbet
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


