

DOCUMENTING THE DEAD

SHERARD EDINGTON

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

From 1861 to 1864, the United States was not very united. It was locked in a civil war. During this war, approximately three million soldiers were mobilized. Of these three million, as many as 750,000—25%—lost their lives.

One young man who enlisted was Dorence Atwater. He was a native of Terryville, Connecticut, and in August 1861, he signed up to fight for the Union. He lied about his age. He was only 16 years old. For two years, he served with the Second New York Cavalry as a soldier and a scout and a courier. In this time, he also fought in numerous battles and engagements.

However, two years later, in July 1863, his unit was in Maryland, and Atwater was out exercising his horse when he was captured by two Confederate soldiers who were dressed in Union uniforms. He was now a prisoner of war and was shipped to Belle Isle Prison. Belle Isle was an island in the James River, near Richmond, Virginia. The prison itself was an open-air stockade with no structures except for tents. At its most crowded, 10,000 soldiers were housed within a measly six acres. It was a vile place. The commandant of Belle Isle was Captain Henry Wirz.

In February 1864, Belle Isle was closed and the prisoners were transferred to a new prison in Georgia called Camp Sumter. It is better known to us today as Andersonville. Dorence Atwater survived at Belle Isle for seven long months before he became part of the first wave of prisoners sent down to Andersonville.

From the start, conditions at Andersonville were horrific. The camp itself covered 26 acres and was enclosed by a 15-foot-high wooden stockade. At its most crowded, Andersonville held 32,000 prisoners. The size of the camp allowed each prisoner a space of just 35 square feet. Now, my arms are about 6 feet from fingertip to fingertip. At Andersonville, my personal space would be this. Think about an apartment with 1000 square feet. At Andersonville, 28 people would live there.

Of the 45,000 prisoners who were received at Andersonville during the eighteen months it was in operation, 13,000 of them died. Mostly, the deaths were due to disease, malnutrition, and exposure. The prison had few structures. Men were lucky to have a tent to stay in. Mostly they dug what they called gopher holes to lie in. The camp's only water was a stream that ran through the middle. This created a marsh that served as a water source as well as a latrine. The stench was

overwhelming. The residents of Macon, Georgia, 60 miles away, complained of the odor.¹

While imprisoned at Belle Isle, Atwater took a job as a clerk in the prison office. Before joining the army, back in Connecticut he had worked as a clerk in a store. He had a good head for numbers and excellent penmanship. In this prison office, he observed massive corruption and mismanagement. Later, after the war, he would testify before Congress of the ongoing theft of clothing, supplies, food, and money from the Union prisoners by the Confederate guards. He testified that he had seen a Confederate officer with \$50,000 that he had taken out of packages sent to prisoners by their families.²

At Andersonville, Atwater volunteered to work in the camp hospital as a clerk. He became one of several prisoners assigned with maintaining the death registry of the dozens of soldiers dying each day. The dead were buried in trenches. Atwater believed this registry to be crucial to the story of the horrors of Andersonville. However, he eventually came to suspect that the registry would never see the light of day—that the Confederates would do everything in their power to cover it up. It was his opinion that the inhumane conditions at the camp were intentional. He believed the Confederates wanted to maim or kill Union soldiers rendering them unfit to fight again.

In August 1864, after having been at Andersonville for six months, Atwater began to create a second, secret list of the deaths—his own private registry. Over the months, he successfully recorded the names of almost all who perished at Andersonville. Each day, he smuggled pages from the hospital to his tent.

This act by took incredible courage. Remember, at this time, Atwater was only 19 years old. If he had been discovered, he would surely have been killed. The camp's commandant was Captain Wirz—the same Wirz that had been at Belle Isle. He was given command of Andersonville when Belle Isle closed. After the war, Wirz was the only Confederate tried for war crimes. He was found guilty of the cruel treatment of prisoners under his command at Andersonville. He was hanged in front of the U.S. capitol in Washington.

In February 1865, as the war coming to a close, Andersonville was shut down and Atwater and the rest of the prisoners were released into Union hands. Atwater was able to cross enemy lines with his precious list tucked deep in his bag.

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/44752816-Andersonville-prison-the-history-of-the-civil-war-s-most-notorious-pris>

² https://www.nps.gov/people/dorence_atwater.htm

He returned home to Connecticut. His mother had died while he was imprisoned and now his father was dying as well. Atwater cared for his father for the next month until his death. During this time, Atwater was himself seriously ill.

If Dorence Atwater's life had been unusual to this point, it was now about to venture into the surreal, all because of his incredible list and the efforts of the government to suppress it.

When Atwater returned home to Connecticut, he traveled to Washington with his list to inform the War Department of its existence. The War Department however showed no interest in the list. Atwater then approached Clara Barton. Clara Barton, as you will recall, had become revered as a battlefield nurse during the war. She organized medical supplies for the wounded. In time, she would found the American Red Cross. After the war, however, she opened the Missing Soldiers Office which attempted to create a registry of all Civil War deaths—North and South. Too many families had no idea of the fate of their loved ones. Barton sought to bring them closure.

Atwater told Barton about Andersonville. Barton used her connections to convey this information to the government. At Barton's request, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton ordered an expedition to Andersonville to mark the mass graves. A group which included Atwater and Barton traveled to Georgia and spent two months marking 12,000 graves. Today it is a National Cemetery.

Even with the graves marked, it became clear that the government had no intention of publishing the list or even of notifying the families that their loved were buried at Andersonville. Despite having one and possibly two copies of the list, the government ordered Atwater to bring his copy to Washington. They declared it to be government property and claimed that Atwater intended to make money by publishing the list for profit.

Atwater turned in his list but then apparently took it back. He was arrested and court martialed and sentenced to eighteen months hard labor for theft. According to one historian, the transcript of his trial is “dizzying in its contradictions, confusions, and probable perjury.” Before going to prison, Atwater had hidden his list and kept the location secret. After two months, Clara Barton and others were able to attain Atwater’s release. He carried his copy of the list to Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune. Greeley published a book with the 12,000 names which he sold at cost. No one made money off the list.

The book included an essay by Clara Barton who wrote these words, “For your record of the dead, you are indebted to the forethought, courage, and perseverance of Dorence Atwater, a young man not yet twenty-one years of age; an orphan; four

years a soldier; one-tenth part of his life a prisoner, with broken health and ruined hopes, he seeks to present to your acceptance the sad gift he has in store for you.”³

Today, we remember the saints of the church through this All Saints Day. All Saints Day is not just a time to remember those who have died in the past year. It is a time to honor all the saints of all time. As Presbyterians we don't limit our saints to only those canonized by the Catholic church, but all those people of faith who have gone before—millions upon millions, names that have been long forgotten. It is as if we are standing within a vast stadium with all the seats filled with saints. The stadium extends beyond sight into the sky. This is the cloud of witnesses. As we gather at the Communion Table and repeat Jesus' words—*Do this in remembrance of me*—we know that we are part of the communion of saints—a living faith that continues through this day and continues in to the next.

The wonderful passage from the Book of Hebrews reminds us of events that shape our faith—the crossing of the Red Sea, the fall of the walls of Jericho. The writer then offers a listing some heroes of our faith—saints such as Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. He reminds us of their great deeds. Then he reminds us of those whose names have been lost—those who were tortured, beaten, and humiliated for their beliefs. He tells us the world is not worthy of these people. They wandered alone, they lived in deserts and mountains, they lived in caves and even in holes in the ground. To look at them, one would ask why God had not rewarded them for their works. But their reward is elsewhere. These are the great cloud of witnesses who inspire us to set aside our sins and run the race set before us—a race whose goal is nothing less than our savior who himself suffered the shame of the cross, and who now sits at the right hand of God.

Here, just in this church, we are blessed with 111 years of saints—people of powerful faith who shape who we are today. We may not know them, but their influence remains. They taught, they nurtured, they gave, they sacrificed so that we may have what we enjoy here today. We don't need to make a list of their names. We have a list. It is a great bound book which we keep in a safe place which holds the names of all the members of this congregation from the beginning until now. It is our book of saints.

But names are not enough. We much strive to also document their lives. And we can do this through our own deeds and actions. By living as Christians, we honor those who have gone before—we document their lives.

Dorence Atwater was a hero for documenting the dead at Andersonville. His actions helped ensure that their sacrifice was not forgotten. They are our national saints. They are the veterans who protect us.

³ <https://www.civilwarmed.org/surgeons-call/atwater/>

Dorence Atwater's life after Andersonville may have been surreal, but once his list was published his life became wondrous. Thanks to the influence of Clara Barton and other admirers, Atwater obtained a job at the State Department. In 1871, six years after the war, Atwater was assigned the post of U.S. Consul to the Seychelles Islands. He served there for a while and was then assigned to be Consul to Tahiti. He committed himself to the Tahiti people and worked for their well-being. He became a successful businessman. He purchased several boats. He got into the pearl business. He bought land and farmed vanilla beans. He started a steamship line with his new friend, the writer, Robert Louis Stevenson. In 1875, just five years after arriving in Tahiti, Dorence Atwater married a princess. Yes, he married into the Tahiti royal family. He died in 1910, a brave man who had done good things, a man wealthy in many ways. The Tahitians honored him with a state funeral—the first non-Tahitian to be recognized in this manner.

On this day of All Saints, let us lift up and cherish those believers who have gone before. May our lives always be a living document of their faith.

Amen.