

Alpheus Pike (1846-1892)

Alpheus Pike was born to Harrison Wallace Pike and Susan A. Mayberry Pike in Casco, Maine on August 14, 1846.¹ The Pikes moved to Bloomington, Illinois in 1854, when Alpheus was eight years old. The family followed Alpheus's uncle, Meshack Pike, who had previously moved to Bloomington and opened the Pike House Hotel in Downtown Bloomington. The Alpheus's father was a farmer, and Alpheus was the fifth of seven children.²

Alpheus attended school in Normal but left shortly after the start of the Civil War to join the Union Army. He travelled to Chicago and enlisted in Company F of the 39th Illinois Volunteer Infantry on September 9, 1861 just two weeks before his fifteenth birthday.³ Because Pike was underage, his father urged him to return home. Alpheus would not and remained in the Army.⁴ His older brothers Edward and Ivory served in the Union Army as well.⁵ After enlistment, he was sent first to St. Louis, Missouri then to Maryland, and finally to Virginia. At Fredericksburg, VA. he was among 80,000 troops inspected by President Abraham Lincoln and his staff who passed by on horseback.⁶ Soon, Pike was engaged in combat against Confederate troops commanded by General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson.

In early May, 1863 Pike's regiment sailed to a chain of islands near Charleston, South Carolina and began an attack on Fort Wagner.⁷ The 54th Massachusetts Colored Regiment—the first African American troops to fight during the Civil War—served in Pike's division and fired on Charleston from the mainland.⁸ On September 7, 1863 after four months of fighting, Confederate troops abandoned Fort Wagner. Union forces took possession of the stronghold and soon began bombarding the city of Charleston. From mid-November 1863 to mid-April 1864, Pike's regiment was encamped for the winter on Hilton Head Island, SC. where he passed on an opportunity to re-enlist:

[W]hen located here a few weeks an order was given to the effect that all soldiers who would re-enlist for another three years from that time would be rewarded with 30 days furlong and \$400.00 in money. Most of the men thought this a grand opportunity to get a chance to see friends at home and \$400.00 was no mean thing to a poor man. We had been in the field then two years and three months and as the topic was discussed the excitement grew and as each man concluded to accept the offer he was regularly enlisted and sworn in as at first. Although 7/8 of the men re-enlisted the project had no charm on me.

Following winter encampment, Pike moved to Gloister Point, Virginia where his regiment was bolstered by new recruits and veteran soldiers from other theaters of war.

¹ "Death of Former Resident: Mr. Alpheus Pike, Formerly of This City, Expires in Chicago," (*Daily Pantagraph*, November 28, 1892).

² "Susan Augusta Pike Sanders, 1842-1931."

³ "Alpheus Pike," <http://search.ancestry.com>.

⁴ Alpheus Pike, *Prison Life of Alpheus H. Pike*, (1896), 60.

⁵ "Susan Augusta Pike Sanders."

⁶ Pike, *Prison Life*, 6.

⁷ Pike, *Prison Life*, 10-11.

⁸ Pike, *Prison Life*, 14.

In early-May, Pike's contingent moved toward Richmond, VA. and routinely skirmished with Confederates. Following the battle of Drury's Bluff, VA. on May 15, Pike was captured while searching for a new rifle amongst abandoned Confederate equipment.⁹

On June 1, 1864 Pike and dozens of other Union prisoners entered the infamous Andersonville prison, "the worst in the world's history." Located sixty miles south of Macon, Georgia the heavily-fortified prison stood secluded from towns, seaports, and any Union forces.¹⁰ Pike later recalled his first moments in Andersonville: "Being in the center of the Southern Confederacy, enclosed in a stockade, without blankets, without shelter, without much food, exposed to the rain and sun, and there for a time indefinite, and all this then was more than realized before we had been there long." The stark reality of Pike's circumstances struck him and his comrades almost immediately.¹¹

Andersonville, officially named Camp Sumter, was built in late 1863 and early 1864 as another location to hold Union prisoners of war. It was specifically created to lessen crowding in and around Richmond, VA. The camp's initial size—sixteen and a half acres—allowed it to hold a maximum of 10,000 prisoners. Overcrowding existed almost at once and a ten-acre expansion was completed by the early summer of 1864. By August, the prison housed more than 32,000 individuals; on average, 127 prisoners died per day. In the prison's fourteen-month existence, almost 13,000 prisoners died. Over 40 percent of all Union prisoners of war during the Civil War died at Andersonville.¹²

Soon after arriving at Andersonville, Alpheus met his older brother Ivory who had been captured five months earlier. Ivory instructed his younger brother in prison life and immediately provided Alpheus with sound advice: "You must not think of home, of pies and pudding or anything good to eat, but let rest in your mind be the idea that this is the best place on earth, your food of the best and most plenty, and do not hate yourself to death, as this one and that one is doing."¹³ Indeed, psychological factors strongly affected the men's health. Pike noted that "Many died of homesickness, especially new recruits and married men. It was proverbial in camp if a man was married he would be carried out a corpse, he probably having greater grief on account of home and friends. I have known great, hearty men to come in there and be carried out in ten days, there seeming no disease."¹⁴ There appeared to be no shortage of hardships for Pike and other prisoners of war. Ivory's knowledge of how to survive the deprivations in the prison camp probably kept Alpheus alive.

At Andersonville, scurvy and diarrhea caused by a poor diet and impure drinking water afflicted a majority of the prisoners. In addition, the rations could not satiate Pike's hunger. He described the rations as "sufficient to keep one from going hungry" for the first few weeks. After that however, he was "hungry all of the time."¹⁵ Captives were

⁹ Pike, *Prison Life*, 17-24.

¹⁰ Pike, *Prison Life*, 25-26.

¹¹ Pike, *Prison Life*, 28.

¹² "Andersonville National Historic Site," National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/ande/historyculture/places.htm>.

¹³ Pike, *Prison Life*, 29.

¹⁴ "A McLean County Boy in Andersonville," in *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume 1*, 485.

¹⁵ "McLean County Boy," 486.

fed unseasoned cornbread, tainted or rotten ham, yellowed bacon, and bug-infested peas.¹⁶ Four-fifths of Andersonville deaths stemmed from diarrhea.

Shelter at the prison camp also left much to be desired and was primarily composed of homemade shelters. Very few proper tents existed; most were made from blankets or bits of cloth. Some men dug shelters in the earth only to have them washed out or collapse when rain came. Other prisoners made mud huts or had no shelter at all. On top of these conditions, the prison was overcrowded and crawled with vermin, particularly lice.¹⁷

In the fall of 1864, General William T. Sherman captured Atlanta, Georgia and threatened the security at Andersonville. So, on September 8, prison authorities transferred the Pike brothers and thousands of other prisoners to camps in Charleston and Florence, SC. and Savannah, GA.¹⁸ Pike stayed at Milan Prison near Savannah. By the time he arrived there, both his three-year term of service and eighteenth birthday had passed.¹⁹ Pike's stay at Milan Prison lasted less than two months. On November 1, 1864 the Confederates released him and several others onto a Union steamer off the coast of Savannah. By November 23, he landed in Annapolis, MD. Pike, having heard of the Union's refusal to trade prisoners of war, harbored feelings of resentment toward the United States government and the President.²⁰ Pike wrote, "No, thanks to our government we had done our duty and deserved our release."²¹ His long captivity had jaded him.

After two months in Annapolis, Pike stayed in a soldier's home in Springfield, IL for another two weeks. There he received his discharge and his pay which included money for clothing, unused rations, wages, and a bounty.²² Pike was mustered out of the Army on February 25, 1865; he had served for three years, five months, and fifteen days, including three months at Andersonville. His physical health, which had never been robust, failed to recover after his war experience.

After his discharge, Pike led a quiet life. He returned to Bloomington and finished his education.²³ Following graduation he worked as a conductor on the Chicago & Alton Railroad (C&A). On October 27, 1870 he married Alice Churchill.²⁴ They never had any children. After his time on the C&A, Pike entered the lumber business in Chenoa, IL with his brothers Noah H. and Edward Pike. In 1877, Alpheus moved to Chicago and joined the wholesale confectionary trade. A decade later he wrote a lengthy account of his time as a soldier, a portion of which was published in Volume I of the *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society*. Shortly afterwards, on April 1, 1889, Alice died.²⁵ Alpheus followed her three years later, on November 24, 1892 at the

¹⁶ "County History Can Match Incidents in 'Best Seller,'" (*The Daily Pantagraph*, July 29, 1956), 13.

¹⁷ "McLean County Boy, 490.

¹⁸ Pike, *Prison Life*, 49-50; Raymond F. Baker, "Andersonville: The Story of a Civil War Prison Camp," (Washington, D.C.: Office of Publications, 2007), 12-13.

¹⁹ Pike, *Prison Life*, 48.

²⁰ Pike, *Prison Life*, 55.

²¹ Pike, *Prison Life*, 59.

²² Pike, *Prison Life*, 58-60.

²³ Pike, *Prison Life*, 60.

²⁴ *Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, McLean County Cemeteries*, Vol. 19, (Normal: McLean County Genealogical Society, 2001), 362.

²⁵ "Illinois Statewide Marriage Index, 1763-1900," State of Illinois, <http://www.ilsos.gov/GenealogyMWeb/MarriageSearchServlet>.

age of 46 while still in Chicago.²⁶ His death was attributed to his long struggle with partial blindness and heart disease caused by military service and prison life.²⁷ Alpheus was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in the Pike family plot.

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²⁶ Pike, *Prison Life*, 2.

²⁷ "Death of Former Resident."