

A NATIONAL CEMETERY SYSTEM

Civil War Dead

An estimated 700,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died in the Civil War between April 1861 and April 1865. As the death toll rose, the U.S. government struggled with the urgent but unplanned need to bury fallen Union troops. This propelled the creation of a national cemetery system.

On September 11, 1861, the War Department directed commanding officers to keep "accurate and permanent records of deceased soldiers." It also required the U.S. Army Quartermaster General, the office responsible for administering to the needs of troops in life and in death, to mark each grave with a headboard. A few months later, the department mandated interment of the dead in graves marked with numbered headboards, recorded in a register.



Soldiers' graves near General Hospital, City Point, Va., c. 1861. Library of Congress

Creating National Cemeteries

The authority to create military burial grounds came in an Omnibus Act of July 17, 1862. It directed the president to purchase land to be used as "a national cemetery for the soldiers who shall die in the service of the country." Fourteen national cemeteries were established by 1862.

When hostilities ended, a grim task began. In October 1865, Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs directed officers to survey lands in the Civil War theater to find Union dead and plan to reinter them in new national cemeteries. Cemetery sites were chosen where troops were concentrated: camps, hospitals, battlefields, railroad hubs. By 1872, 74 national cemeteries and several soldiers' lots contained 305,492 remains; about 45 percent were unknown.



Remains were exhumed after the siege of Vicksburg and reinterred at the Soldiers' Home in 1863. Cemetery plan, 1862. National Archives and Records Administration

Most cemeteries were less than 10 acres, and layouts varied. In the Act to Establish and to Protect National Cemeteries of February 23, 1862, Congress funded new permanent walls or fences, grave markers, and lodges for cemetery superintendents.



Lodge at City Point, Va., Jan. 1863. The first floor contained a cemetery office, and living rooms and kitchen for the superintendent's family. West Baltimore area, National Archives

At first only soldiers and sailors who died during the Civil War were buried in national cemeteries. In 1873, eligibility was expanded to all honorably discharged Union veterans, and Congress appropriated \$1 million to mark the graves. Upright marble headstones honor individuals whose names were known; 6-inch-square blocks mark unknowns.

By 1873, military post cemeteries on the Western frontier joined the national cemetery system. The National Cemeteries Act of 1873 transferred 82 Army cemeteries, including 12 of the original 14, to what is now the National Cemetery Administration.

Reflection and Memorialization

The country reflected upon the Civil War's human toll—2 percent of the U.S. population died. Memorials honoring war service were built in national cemeteries. Most were donated by regimental units, state governments and veterans' organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic. Decoration Day, later Memorial Day, was a popular patriotic spring event that started in 1868. Visitors placed flowers on

graves and monuments, and gathered around rostrums to hear speeches. Construction of Civil War monuments peaked in the 1890s. By 1920, as the number of aging veterans was dwindling, more than 120 monuments had been placed in the national cemeteries.

National cemetery monuments: left to right, Massachusetts Monument, Washington, D.C., 1893; Maryland Line Monument, Lincoln Park, Baltimore, Md., 1894; and Pioneer Regt./Grand Central Army of the Republic Monument in the Jefferson Davis, Grant Hill, Arlington, Md., 1898



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