

Women and VA National Cemeteries

Beginning in the 1860s, women were buried in what are now VA's national cemeteries. They were soldiers and spies, wives and government employees. Yet their presence can be elusive because the military did not always provide interred women with a headstone, or only inscribed a name with no other details. Such is the grave of Vivian Thomas in the officers' circle at [Fort Gibson National Cemetery](#) (OK).



Headstone, Fort Gibson National Cemetery;



The Great Western as Landlady by Samuel E. Chamberlain, ca. 1846 (out of copyright)

Women in Military Service

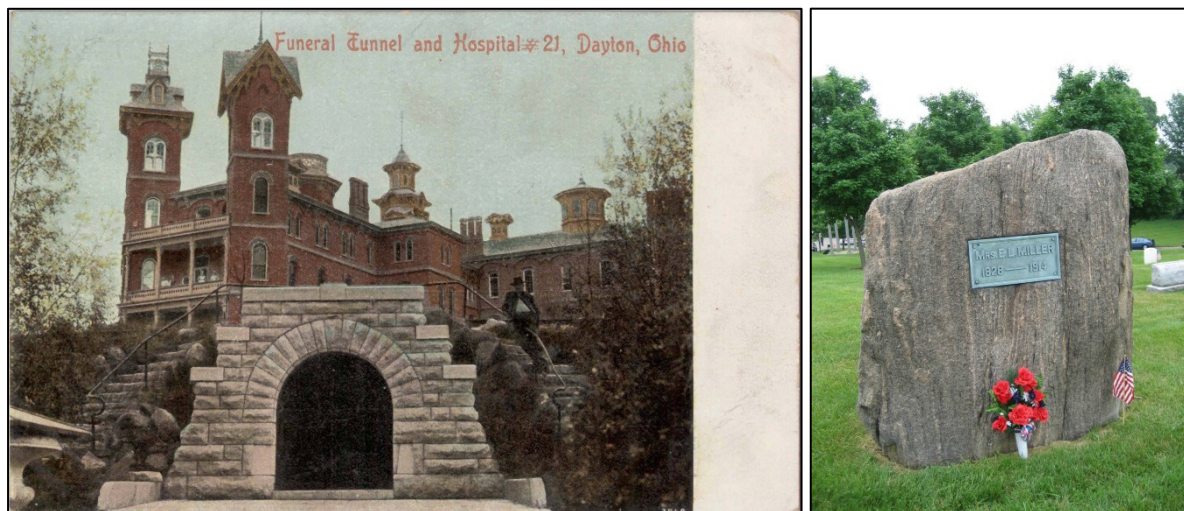
Folklore often surrounds women who disguised themselves as men to enlist in the army. Sarah Bowman, a camp follower and fighter during the U.S.-Mexican War period, is buried in [San Francisco National Cemetery](#) (CA). Florena Budwin's gender was discovered while she was a Confederate prisoner of war in the Civil War. Budwin was the only woman interred at [Florence National Cemetery](#) (SC) for many years. The post-war years saw P. T. Barnum cultivate a personality show around Pauline Cushman, who had spied for the Union. Her fame faded and she died in poverty, but the Grand Army of the Republic assured she was buried with military honors at San Francisco National Cemetery. These nineteenth-century women challenged social expectations and led the way for later generations to serve as full-time military personnel.

The twentieth century saw the permanent integration of women into the armed forces. Early leaders include Army nurse Annie Fox whose bravery during the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 resulted in Fox becoming the first female recipient of the Purple Heart. On the home front, women filled key positions during the war. Evelyn (Urich) Einfeldt, for example, enlisted in the Navy's WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) in 1943, and she assembled top-secret decoding machines. Mary Jean (Barnes) Sturdevant was a pilot and instructor with the Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASP) program. Lillian Keil flew 425 combat missions during World War II and in Korea, and became one of the most decorated flight nurses in U.S. military history.

Women as Caregivers and Stewards

The influence of women over national cemeteries has been felt since the 1860s. They helped to establish the first Memorial Day observances and regularly placed flowers at veterans' gravesites. Two women donated monuments in honor of the men they had cared for during the Civil War. Dorothea Dix served as superintendent of the Office of Army Nurses, established in 1861. She also was an early sponsor of a commemorative monument, a large obelisk erected in [Hampton National Cemetery](#) (VA). Eliza Potter did the same at [Beaufort National Cemetery](#) (SC). Ladies auxiliaries and memorial associations followed their example and donated monuments throughout the national cemetery system.

Women's roles as caretakers of the ailing and as custodians of memory extended to early stewardship of the cemeteries. Following the Civil War, the new National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (NHDVS) were built to care for veterans who needed medical care and a residence. The NHDVS needed hospital workers. In 1867, Emma Miller became the first matron of the hospital at the Central Branch - NHDVS in Ohio. She is buried there, at what became [Dayton National Cemetery](#).



(L) Historic postcard, Central Branch – NHDVS; (R) Headstone for Emma Miller, Dayton National Cemetery.

Female involvement in national cemetery management, like other professions at the time, is not typically documented or was unofficial. But at least one woman assumed superintendent duty in national cemeteries. After Civil War veteran Peter McKenna died in 1895, his widow Margaret McKenna managed Kentucky's [Mill Springs](#) and [Lebanon](#) national cemeteries for six months. As a spouse, she was eligible for burial aside her husband in Mills Springs upon on her death in 1924.

The Army's evolving headstone-inscription regulations contributes to spouses' anonymity. Only after the mid twentieth century were wives' names allowed to be inscribed on the back of the veteran's headstone. Educator Sara Wiltse, for example, was buried in [Chattanooga National Cemetery](#) (TN) in 1932 with her Civil War veteran brother. His name appears on the front of their headstone; hers is not inscribed. Clara Nelson, a beloved entertainer, and Patsy Mink, the first woman of color elected to Congress, are buried in the [National Cemetery of the Pacific](#) (HI) as spouses of veterans. Their names are inscribed on the flat grave markers, reflecting a shift in permitted inscriptions. At the same time as spouses were becoming more visible, more women serve in our military today, earning the same burial benefits in their own right as their male counterparts. For more information, visit <https://www.cem.va.gov/>.



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