BEAUFORT NATIONAL CEMETERY

Civil War Beaufort

Soon after the Civil War began in April 1861, Confederate troops fortified the city of Beaufort. Fort Walker on Hilton Head Island and Fort Beauregard on St. Phillips Island protected the approach to Port Royal Bay.

On the morning of November 7, 1861, a Union fleet of seventeen gunboats pounded the forts with artillery fire. By late afternoon, the Confederates had abandoned both islands.

Union Hospital No. 7 at Beaufort, c. 1865. Library of Congress.

The Union Navy gained control of one of the best harbors on the Atlantic coast. Its blockading fleet could resupply and repair in protected waters. Beaufort, upriver from the islands, was transformed into a naval station, hospital center, and Union Army headquarters.

Cemetery entrance, 1904, showing the first permanent superintendent lodge, 1881 (right), which replaced the temporary wood lodge, c. 1867 (left). The older building was built across the street from the cemetery (foreground), and later moved inside the cemetery to be used as an outbuilding. National Archives and Records Administration.

National Cemetery

Beaufort National Cemetery was established in 1863. The U.S. Army Quartermaster General's Office laid out the 22 acres in sections that radiate outward from a central plaza to form a half circle. Of the 9,226 interments here in 1874, about half were known. Many of the unknown dead were Union prisoners of war originally buried at Camp Lawton in Georgia.

New construction in the 1870s included a Second Empire-style lodge for the superintendent and a brick wall to enclose the cemetery. The existing Dutch Colonial Revival-style lodge was built in 1934. Although it has grown in size, the cemetery retains many of its original design features.

There are two Civil War monuments. The Union Soldiers Monument, a 20-foot-tall granite obelisk, was erected through the efforts of Mrs. Eliza McGuffin Potter in 1870. The second, a marble tablet on a raised brick base, lists the names of 175 soldiers who Mrs. Potter attended as a nurse in Beaufort hospitals.

U.S. Colored Troops

Beginning in March 1863, the federal government began recruiting black men for the Union Army. A few months later, the War Department created the Bureau of United States Colored Troops (USCT). USCT regiments fought in battles and engagements from Virginia to Texas. There are more than 1,700 USCT soldiers buried here.

In the late 1980s, the remains of nineteen soldiers, determined by archaeologists to be members of the all-black 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, were discovered on Folly Island near Charleston. In 1989, the remains were reinterred with full military honors between Section 56 and the back wall of the cemetery.

USCT reenactor pauses at coffins that contain the remains of black soldiers discovered on Folly Island, South Carolina, prior to reburial on Memorial Day 1989. National Cemetery Administration.