

MILL SPRINGS NATIONAL CEMETERY



Battle of Mill Springs, January 19, 1862. Our Soldier in the Civil War (1886).

Battle of Mill Springs

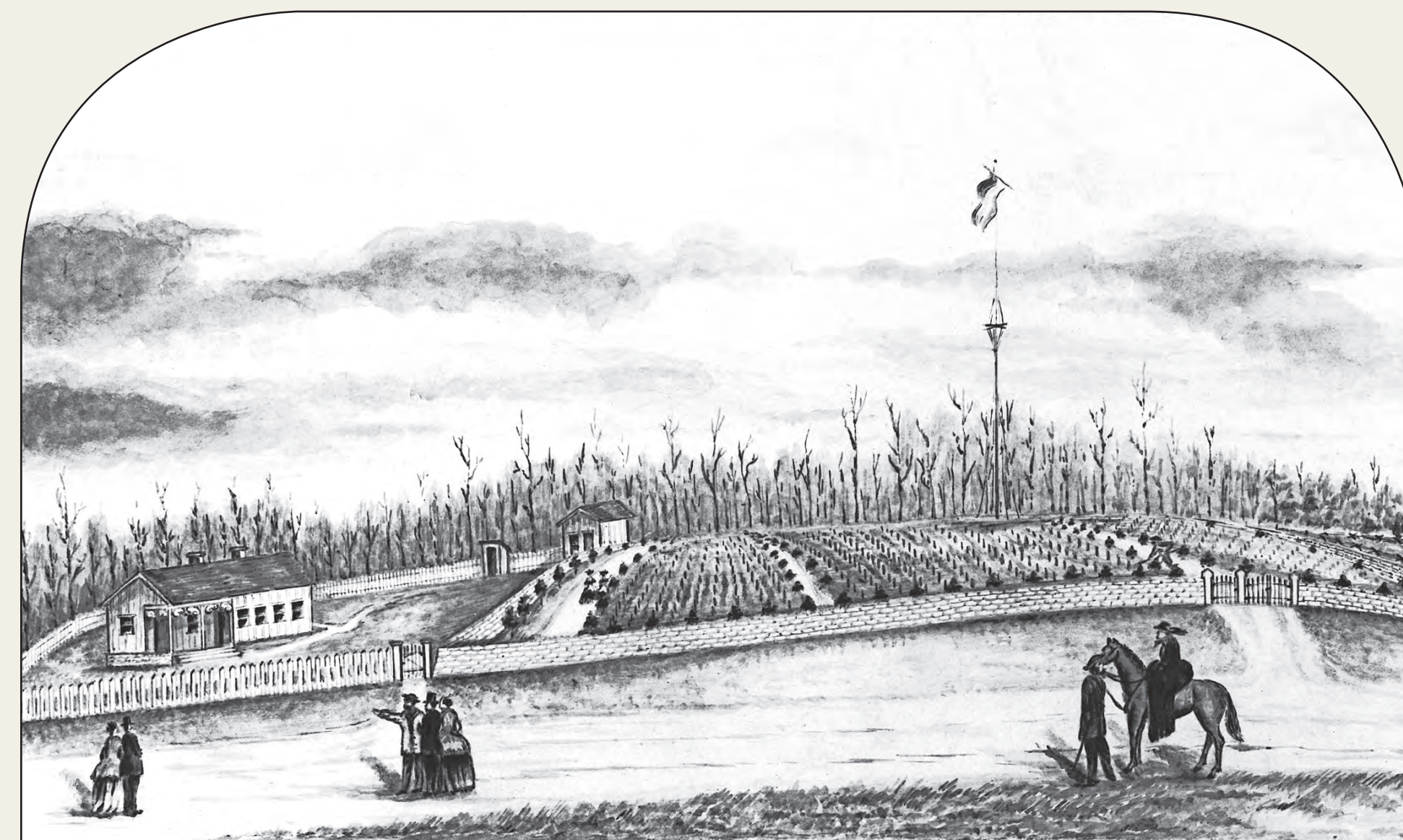
Confederate forces established a defense line across southern Kentucky in fall 1861. Union and Confederate armies fought small-scale actions in the area, but the Battle of Mill Springs was the first major engagement. Confederate troops under Gen. George B. Crittenden faced Union forces led by Brig. Gen. George H. Thomas near Logan’s Crossroads, present-day Nancy. As the Confederates advanced in the early morning of January 19, 1862, they pushed Union soldiers back to a ridge about a mile south of the current national cemetery.

The two sides struggled for hours, sometimes fighting hand to hand. A Union bayonet charge finally broke the enemy line. The Confederates retreated, and that night crossed the Cumberland River—abandoning their encampment, wagons, ammunition, and wounded. Mill Springs was the first major Union victory in the West. Within weeks the Confederate army withdrew from Kentucky.

“Harvest of Death”

Early in 1866, Capt. E. B. Whitman began gathering information in preparation for the reinterment of Union soldiers buried in the Military Division of Tennessee. This huge district included Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

Captain Whitman, later lieutenant colonel, placed newspaper notices seeking the locations of Union graves. Citizens, chaplains, soldiers, and officers replied. Whitman made three major expeditions across the region, stopping at hundreds of battlefields and engagement sites. Because of his tireless work, thousands of Union dead were moved to twelve new national cemeteries.



Mill Springs National Cemetery, from Brvt. Lt. Col. E. B. Whitman’s final report, c. 1869. Whitman used the phrase “Harvest of Death” in his exhaustive report to describe the work of collecting the dead. National Archives and Records Administration.

In May 1869, Whitman submitted a detailed summary of this difficult project to the quartermaster general. The report contained sketches and site plans of each cemetery, and data on interments and service affiliations.



Cemetery entrance, 1904. National Archives and Records Administration.

National Cemetery

Prior to 1869, ten federally established or public cemeteries in Kentucky contained the remains of Union soldiers. The work of reintering the dead was almost complete when the army changed its plan and reduced the number of cemeteries to six.

Captain Whitman chose the site for Mill Springs National Cemetery from lands at Logan’s Crossroads owned by William H. Logan. Remains were recovered from temporary graves on the Mill Springs battlefield and other locations within a 40-mile radius. By 1869, a limestone wall enclosed the 3-acre cemetery. Of the 708 original interments, approximately half were unknown.

By law, the secretary of war appointed a “meritorious and trustworthy” superintendent to manage the cemetery. James Burke, a sergeant in Company K, Veteran Reserve Corps, served as the first superintendent here in 1867. He lived on the grounds in a lodge that burned down in 1916.