

## Frequently Asked Questions

# NATIONAL CEMETERY BURIAL LEDGERS: REPRODUCTION & INDEXING PROJECT

### ELECTRONIC BURIAL LEDGER ACCESS

#### **How can individuals access the burial ledger information?**

The Department of Veterans Affairs, National Cemetery Administration (VA/NCA) cannot offer public access to its computers, however, staff at national cemeteries or regional/medical center libraries can look up burial ledger information for individuals seeking knowledge of ancestors/direct family connections when there is a possibility that the individual is buried in national cemetery (before 1960), as long as such activities do not interfere with administrative or operational duties.

Individuals/groups seeking to use burial ledger information for extensive genealogical research or professional purposes should arrange access to the burial ledger information through personal subscriptions to Ancestry.com or by visiting public facilities:

- The National Archives & Records Administration (NARA) offices offer free access to Ancestry.com; go to <http://www.archives.gov/locations/>.
- Many public libraries subscribe to Ancestry.com and make it available to patrons.

#### **What is the goal of the NCA-Ancestry.com partnership?**

Ancestry.com is a genealogy company and a leader in the market for online family history research. Under the terms of a special agreement with NCA, Ancestry.com indexed the agency's digital ledgers. Indexing allows users to search for names without reading each full page. There was no cost to the government for the index service, and VA and other agencies that oversee national cemeteries will have free access to the data. The collection debuted in early November 2012 to commemorate Veterans Day.

#### **Are there limits on the use of information taken from the digitized burial ledgers?**

Yes. The burial ledgers fall into the public domain, which means they are not copyrighted. However, consult Ancestry's terms and conditions (link at bottom of page on Ancestry.com). Section 3 is a Limited Use License restricting use to "personal or professional family history research" only and prohibiting the use of automated access tools to gather information from its website.

It is always important to properly cite the source so users know where it came from. The citation should include the cemetery name, state, and years covered in the ledger. Ancestry provides two types of source information for all records images on their website: (1) the Ancestry.com database citation and (2) the original records citation provided by the repository that holds the records, such as NARA. All of this information should be included when citing the images.

#### **Will the other U.S. agencies responsible for national cemeteries have access to the online burial ledgers?**

Yes. The National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior (NPS), maintains 14 national cemeteries—most of which are associated with major Civil War battlefields. However, many other NPS units associated with the Civil War provide educational and interpretive programs related to soldiers and events associated with cemeteries managed by NCA. To maximize collaboration on national cemetery heritage during the Civil War sesquicentennial, NCA sought to make this information available to NPS as part of its agreement with Ancestry.com. The U.S. Army, U.S. Department of Defense,

maintains two national cemeteries—Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, and the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home in Washington, D.C.

NARA's original collection contains burial ledgers for many NPS- and Army-run national cemeteries. These were scanned and indexed after NCA's project was underway, but all NARA and NCA ledgers are included in the combined collection that is available on line. Staff at national cemeteries run by NCA, NPS and DOD will have access through Ancestry.com to all indexed burial ledgers.

[\*A list of the digitized and indexed burial ledgers\*](#)

## **BURIAL LEDGER INFORMATION**

### **What are national cemetery burial ledgers?**

Cemetery burial ledgers were the earliest, handwritten books that recorded cemetery interments. Ledgers were initiated in the 1860s and used, in some locations, into the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century by Army and civilian personnel. Because ledgers were sometimes copied by hand to create duplicate volumes or to alphabetize interments, multiple volumes may exist for the same span of years for one cemetery.

### **What information is contained in burial ledgers?**

Name, regimental service and grave location; and sometimes the original location a body was found, cause of death, race, and religious affiliation. Since the grave numbering system at some cemeteries changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, grave numbers in the ledger may differ from current practice. Because of the age of the documents, and the fact that they contain no modern personal identifiable information—such as Social Security numbers—the burial ledgers are considered public records.

### **How does this information relate to the NCA Nationwide Gravesite Locator (NGL)?**

Hand-written burial ledgers were the first permanent and official record of interments in the national cemeteries. Starting in 1865, Army personnel used loose paper forms to record the soldiers who perished throughout the theaters of the Civil War; once remains were reinterred in “new” national cemeteries, the service and burial information was documented in a bound ledger.

Handwritten ledgers were used up to the 1960s in some places. They were replaced by printed sheets that could be used in a typewriter and placed in a binder. About the same time, individual forms called *Report/Record of Interment (ROI)* or *Interment Control Cards (ICC)* were used to track single burials. Produced in triplicate, quadruplicate or quintuplicate, the cemetery retained one copy and the others were mailed to the Office of the Quartermaster General. Early forms were simple and contain the same information typically found in the ledgers, but over time more details were added.

In the early 1990's, the typed versions of burial records for NCA-administered national cemeteries were used to populate NCA's electronic Burial Operations Support System (BOSS) database. In 2004, NCA debuted the publically accessible Nationwide Gravesite Locator (NGL), a Web-based program (<http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/>) that provides information about burial locations of veterans and their family members in VA national cemeteries, state veterans cemeteries, various other military and NPS cemeteries, and for veterans buried in private cemeteries when the grave is marked with a government grave marker.

Like any documentation, with each transcription of a burial record there is opportunity for information to be misinterpreted, changed or reduced in some way. As a result of the government's evolving system of burial records since 1865, it is likely that original ledgers and versions of the ICCs and ROIs contain more information than is found in the NGL.

### **What if information found in NCA's NGL and Ancestry.com's "U.S. Burial Registers, Military Posts and National Cemeteries, 1862-1960" does not match?**

Discrepancies occur because at some time between the creation of the first Army record of a Civil War soldier's death and the 1990s, when VA burial records became electronic, the soldier's information was recorded inaccurately. Additional research into other primary records may clarify the individual's service. If primary supporting records are found to substantiate differing military service information about a Civil War burial in an NCA-administered cemetery, the information can be submitted to the cemetery director. The director will initiate an NCA review to verify the information and potentially amend the BOSS record.

## **CORRECTING HEADSTONE - POLICY**

### **If the inscription on a headstone over 50 years old is incorrect, according to an original ledger or other primary record, will NCA replace the headstone?**

No. The Army marked graves using the information available at the time, and today it is understood that 19<sup>th</sup> century headstones may be inaccurate. In 2004 NCA initiated a historic preservation policy that ended a practice of correcting and replacing historic (50 years or older) headstones in order to preserve the original cemetery landscapes and the oldest grave markers installed in the decades that followed the Civil War-era establishment of national cemeteries. Most NCA cemeteries are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

### **Is there any way NCA can provide accurate historic information about a veteran whose headstone inscription contains errors?**

Yes. In the near future, NCA will be able to capture additional information—such as alternate name spellings, alias names, and additional military affiliations—to its electronic burial record system, BOSS. Alternate spellings will be cross-referenced so that when a search is conducted in the NGL, the grave will be found regardless of the spelling on the headstone. NCA cannot change the primary record in BOSS because the system must reflect what is inscribed on the headstone. Inquiries about records provided to NCA for this purpose should be directed to the appropriate cemetery director.

## **BURIAL LEDGER BACKGROUND**

### **Burial Ledger Origins**

Public Law 37 - An Act to Establish and to Protect National Cemeteries, enacted on February 22, 1867, is the first legislative reference to burial ledgers:

“...the number of the grave inscribed...in a register of burials [is] to be kept at each cemetery, and at the office of the quartermaster general, which shall set forth the name, rank, company, regiment, and date of death of the officer or soldier....”

Although the Army created and maintained Civil War death and burial records starting in 1861, ledgers were one of several requirements introduced with this law to fully develop the first generation of national cemeteries.

### **How accurate is the information in the burial ledgers?**

Ledger content is considered *primary documentation*, captured to the best of the ability of Army personnel during the chaotic years of the Civil War and immediately afterward. However, errors and omissions may be found in the ledger entries. The lack of permanent grave markers contributed to the loss of veteran information. NCA does not endorse and has not verified the content of the historic

ledgers, but they are a valuable source of primary information for use by genealogists and researchers. The files contain documentation about organizational discrepancies found in the original ledgers.

### How should the ledger information be used?

A single ledger is single source of information. It should be used in concert with other credible sources—including other ledgers, Compiled Military Service Records, and pension files—to fully explore a Civil War veteran’s record.

### Where are NCA’s handwritten burial ledgers now?

NCA transferred the handwritten ledgers to NARA in Washington, D.C. as the official repository for historic U.S. government documents, per title 44, chapter 31, of the United States Code (<http://www.archives.gov/about/laws/fed-agencies.html>). Once the burial ledgers are available online, NARA will no longer retrieve the original documents for researchers. (An exception may be made if something is blurry or unreadable.)

### How many national cemetery burial ledgers exist?

No one knows how many ledgers existed historically. Prior to accepting NCA’s ledgers in 2011-2012, NARA was already the steward of more than 156 ledgers documenting interments at more than 146 military facilities, including post, barrack, fort and national cemeteries. Regional NARA branches contain some ledgers that have not been digitized.

NPS and DOD oversee 16 national cemeteries, collectively. They may have burial ledgers for their properties. It is also possible ledgers fell into private hands or collections outside the federal government. However, burial registers associated with national cemeteries remain the legal property of the United States. Anyone knowing of such ledgers should contact NARA.

## BURIAL LEDGER REPRODUCTION & DIGITIZATION

### How were the paper burial ledgers reproduced into an electronic format?

A contractor qualified to handle historic documents, Dodge-Chrome Inc., carefully photographed or scanned each page. Each page was stored as a high-resolution .tiff file in a 300 ppi and 24-bit color format. The TIFF files were converted to PDF format and saved as a single file per ledger. Unused pages were not digitized. The PDFs contain documentation about discrepancies found in the original ledgers. Ancestry.com was responsible for photographing ledgers already housed at NARA.

### How did Ancestry.com personnel index NCA’s burial ledger files?

It took an estimated 610 hours for Ancestry.com personnel to index NCA’s ledgers, character by character.

#### By the numbers: Project Statistics

| Agency       | # cemeteries | #ledgers         | # images      | #individuals indexed |
|--------------|--------------|------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| NCA          | 36           | 60               | 9,344         | 113,097              |
| NARA         | 146+*        | 156 (or boxes)** | 36,595        | 442,937              |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>---</b>   | <b>216+**</b>    | <b>45,939</b> | <b>556,034</b>       |

\* The existing Army collection at NARA contained ledgers for 146 named cemeteries and 10 ledgers for “miscellaneous” cemeteries.

\*\* Some Army collection ledgers, or boxes, at NARA contain multiple cemeteries; some cemeteries no longer exist, or the cemetery names have changed.

**How does Ancestry.com assure the transcribed burial ledger index data is accurate?**

Personnel manually transcribed the characters, not words, from the ledgers. The information is compared to known data sets of names, dates and locations in existing Ancestry.com databases. Ancestry.com implements a robust quality assurance program to monitor accuracy.

**How popular are Civil War documents posted on Ancestry.com?**

The Civil War, along with World War I and World War II, are the three most popular conflicts documented by records on Ancestry.com. The most popular Civil War records used are the: Civil War Pension Index, Civil War Soldiers list, Civil War draft registrations, "U.S. Veterans Gravesites, ca.1775-2006" (NGL data) and Confederate Service Records.

*Funding assistance for the ledger duplication project came from the Department of Veterans Affairs Historic Preservation Office. This project achieves historic preservation and outreach goals identified as part of NCA's commemoration of the Civil War sesquicentennial (2011-15).*