

# VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
National Cemetery Administration

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## The National Cemetery Administration

In the summer of 1862, George F. Root was putting the finishing touches on the words and music of the "Battle Cry of Freedom" that would be adopted as a national anthem (in different versions) by both the Union and the Confederacy. It was the second summer of a terrible war that few had believed would last more than several months. Thousands had already died at places like Wilson's Creek, Bull Run, Shiloh, and Fort Donelson.

On July 17 of that year, Congress enacted legislation that authorized the President to purchase "cemetery grounds" to be used as national cemeteries "for soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country." Fourteen cemeteries were established that first year, including one in the sleepy Maryland town of Sharpsburg where 4,476 Union soldiers were laid to rest after the one day of terrible slaughter that was the Battle of Antietam. (By way of comparison, approximately 3,000 Americans, British and Canadians died on June 6, 1944, in the invasion of Normandy).

By 1870, the remains of nearly 300,000 Union dead had been buried in 73 national cemeteries. Most of the cemeteries were located in the southeast, near the battlefields and campgrounds of the Civil War. After the war, Army crews scoured the countryside to locate the remains of soldiers who had died in battle. They were buried with honor in the new national cemeteries, which were enclosed by brick walls and entered by means of ornate gates. Tragically, however, the identities of nearly half of those who died in service to the Union and are buried in national cemeteries are unknown.

The National Cemetery Administration has evolved slowly since the initial period of great challenge associated with the Civil War. All honorably discharged Veterans became eligible for burial in 1873. Cemeteries associated with military posts on the western frontier, such as Fort McPherson, Nebraska, were added to the system in the late 19th century.

In the 1930s, new national cemeteries were established to serve Veterans living in major metropolitan areas such as New York, Baltimore, Minneapolis, San Diego, San Francisco, and San Antonio. Several, closely associated with battlefields such as Gettysburg, were transferred to the National Park Service because of their value in interpreting the historical significance of the battles. In 1973, Public Law 93-43 authorized the transfer of 82 national cemeteries from the Department of the Army to the Veterans Administration, now the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Joining with 21 VA Veterans cemeteries located at hospitals and nursing homes, the National Cemetery System comprised 103 cemeteries after the transfer.

On Nov. 11, 1998, the President signed the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 changing the name of the National Cemetery System (NCS) to the National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

In 1999 and 2003, Congress passed two laws directing VA to establish 12 new national cemeteries: One in Oklahoma; two in Pennsylvania; one in Michigan; one in Georgia; one in Alabama; one in South Carolina; two in California; and three in Florida.

In 2011, Congress passed another law directing VA to establish five more new national cemeteries; two in Florida, one in Colorado, one in Nebraska, and one in New York.

In March 2017, the Dept. of Army transferred 10 cemeteries to NCA pursuant to Executive Order 13781 renaming them VA national cemeteries.

Today, there are 166 national cemeteries in all. The VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA) administers 153 of them, 82 of which are open to all interments, and an additional 20 which are open to interments of cremated remains only. Two national cemeteries – Arlington and the United States Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery – are administered by the Army. Fourteen national cemeteries are maintained by the Department of the Interior.

Nearly 4.9 million people, including Veterans of every war and conflict – from the Revolutionary War to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan – are honored by burial in VA's national cemeteries. More than 22,000 acres of land from Hawaii to Maine, and from Alaska to Puerto Rico are devoted to memorializing those who served this nation. More than 350 recipients of the Medal of Honor are buried in VA's national cemeteries.

In addition to providing a gravesite and a graveliner, VA opens and closes the grave, provides a headstone or marker, a Presidential Memorial Certificate, a U.S. Flag, and perpetually cares for the grave at no cost to the Veteran's family.

Today, there are more than 22 million living Veterans who have earned the honor of burial in a national cemetery. Veterans who have met minimum active duty service requirements, as applicable, and with discharges other than dishonorable, and their spouses and dependent children may be eligible for burial in a VA national cemetery. Those who die on active duty may also be buried in a national cemetery. Reservist who are called to active duty and fulfill the term of service for which they were called and those who retire with pensions are also eligible.