Civil War Dead

An estimated 700,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died in the Civil War (1861-1865). As the death toll rose, the U.S. government struggled with the urgent but unplanned need to bury fallen Union troops. This propelled the creation of a national cemetery system.

On September 11, 1861, the War Department directed officers to keep “accurate and permanent records of deceased soldiers.” Federal authority to create military burial grounds came in an Omnibus Act of July 17, 1862. Cemetery sites were chosen where troops were concentrated: camps, hospitals, battlefields, railroad hubs. By 1872, 74 national cemeteries and several soldiers’ lots contained 305,492 remains. About 45 percent were unknown.

The U.S. government established soldiers’ lots at private cemeteries in northern states. National cemeteries, in contrast, were built throughout the South where most Civil War action occurred. While the army reported dozens of lots containing Union dead in the 1870s, the National Cemetery Administration maintains only fifteen. The number of graves ranges from less than ten to nearly 400 in these lots.

Soldiers’ Lot

Albany Rural Cemetery was an early pastoral burial ground established in 1844. In June 1862, the Albany Cemetery Association donated a small parcel in Lot 7, Section 75, to the U.S. government for the burial of Union dead. By 1868, it contained the remains of 126 soldiers and two sailors. Most had died in city hospitals, others were removed from southern battlefields or hospitals. Today 149 men lie in this lot, the last one buried in 1897.

In the 1870s, a Civil War monument was gradually erected here. On Decoration (Memorial) Day 1872, the Grand Army of the Republic Lew Benedict Post No. 5 dedicated a granite pedestal and bust of President Abraham Lincoln. Four bronze plaques, cast from melted cannon, name the “648 brave souls from the county of Albany who gave their lives that the country might live.” By 1875, the monument featured a bas-relief medallion of Lincoln, and a bronze figure of a Union soldier had replaced the bust.