ALEXANDRIA NATIONAL CEMETERY

Civil War Alexandria

Alexandria, Louisiana, served briefly as the headquarters of the Confederate Department of the Trans-Mississippi, a vast area encompassing states and territories west of the Mississippi River.

In spring 1863, the Confederates moved this base north to Shreveport, just before a U.S. Army-Navy operation captured Alexandria on May 7. Union forces abandoned the city by summer.

In spring 1864, Alexandria became the target of Union Gen. Nathaniel Banks' Red River Campaign. In March, a combined land and sea operation captured Fort DeRussy, downriver from the city, and the Union reoccupied the city.

Banks marched west where he was defeated by Confederate troops under Gen. Richard Taylor. He then retreated to Alexandria on April 9, where low river levels trapped the naval fleet. Troops constructed a dam to raise the water level and the gunboats escaped. The Union Army withdrew from Alexandria on May 13, burning part of the city as they departed.

Union gunboats float over the dam at Alexandria. Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (*1894*).

Superintendent's lodge, 1895. National Archives and Records Administration.

National Cemetery

In 1867, the federal government established Alexandria National Cemetery on 8.24 acres seized from a private citizen. By 1874, there were 1,283 interments here. All but twelve graves contained the remains of Union soldiers or sailors. The majority were buried as unknowns.

By 1880, a brick wall surrounded the cemetery. A brick Second Empire-style lodge housed the superintendent and his family. Large artillery pieces flanked the cemetery entrance. Trees planted along the road created a shady avenue from the main gate to the flagstaff at the center of the cemetery. In 1931, the old lodge was razed and the current one was constructed.

Moving the Brownsville Dead

In July 1906, the all-black 25th U.S. Infantry arrived at Fort Brown near Brownsville, Texas, for duty. These soldiers experienced discrimination and physical abuse in the town. On August 13, 1906, unknown persons killed a bartender and wounded a police officer. The soldiers were accused but denied any involvement. The army summarily discharged "without honor" all 167 enlisted men. As a result of the incident, the War Department decided to close the fort and remove the remains from Brownsville National Cemetery. The former post cemetery, established during the Mexican-American War, had been designated a national cemetery in 1867.

Workers remove remains from Brownsville National Cemetery, Texas, c. 1909. Brownsville Historical Society.

In 1909, a contractor, using local labor, exhumed more than 3,000 dead from this cemetery. Five freight-train cars transported the remains to Alexandria. The identified remains were interred along the northwest wall, and the area designated Section B. Unknown remains were placed in a mass grave on the southeast side of the flagpole circle. The federal government erected a group monument on this grave.