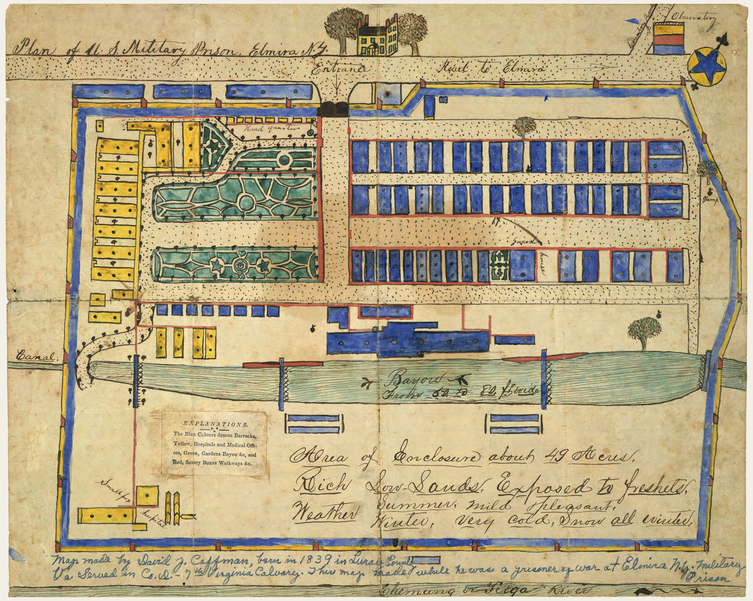
CONFEDERATE BURIALS IN THE NATIONAL CEMETERY

Elmira Prison Camp

Overcrowding at the military prison at Point Lookout, Maryland, led the U.S. Army to establish Elmira Military Prison in May 1864. Elmira, New York, initially a rendezvous point for enlisting Union soldiers, had barracks, hospitals, storehouses and stables. The first prisoners arrived on July 6, and by fall 1864, more than 9,000 prisoners occupied Elmira. Most lived in small canvas tents, as barracks would not be completed until New Year's Day 1865, too late for many prisoners.

More than 12,000 prisoners passed through the gates of the prison during the year it operated. Almost 3,000 men died, rendering Elmira's mortality rate the highest of any Union military prison. Most of the deaths were attributed to the harsh winter of 1864-1865.



Plan by Pvt. David J. Coffman, Co. D, 7th Virginia Cavalry, drawn while incarcerated at the U.S. military prison at Elmira, c. 1864. Library of Congress.

Wooden headboards mark the graves, c. 1875. National Archives and Records Administration.

The Cemetery

Almost immediately, the U.S. Army leased a half acre of land from Woodlawn Cemetery for the interment of Confederate prisoners and Union soldiers. The prison commandant hired John W. Jones, an escaped slave and caretaker of Woodlawn Cemetery, to bury the Confederates. When a prisoner died, his body was taken to the "dead house" and placed in a coffin. His name, rank, company, regiment, date of death, and grave number were written on the lid. At the cemetery, the coffin was placed in a trench and covered. Wooden headboards, painted with the information copied from the coffin lid, marked each grave. On a single day, Jones buried forty-eight men; he kept records on every burial.

In 1874, the federal government purchased two acres containing the graves of Union and Confederate dead to establish Woodlawn National Cemetery. The Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead visited the cemetery in 1906. The Commission clerk spent a month documenting prison burials and wrote to Southern states asking for further information. Finally, a list of more than 2,000 names was compiled. In 1908, the Commission placed Confederate-style headstones inscribed with the deceased's name and regiment on the graves.

Toward Reconciliation

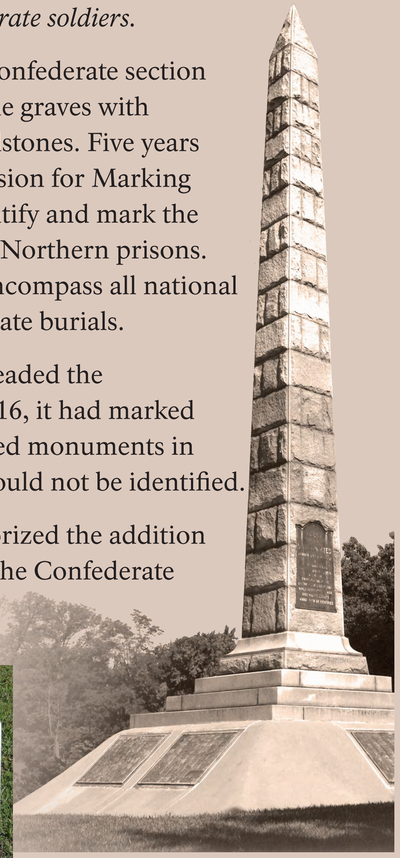
On May 30, 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic decorated Union and Confederate graves at Arlington National Cemetery. Thirty years later President William McKinley proclaimed:

> *The Union is once more the common altar of our love and loyalty, our devotion and sacrifice . . . Every soldier's grave made during our unfortunate Civil War is a tribute to American valor . . . in the spirit of fraternity we should share with you in the care of the graves of the Confederate soldiers.*

The War Department created the Confederate section at Arlington in 1901, and marked the graves with distinctive pointed-top marble headstones. Five years later, Congress created the Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead to identify and mark the graves of Confederates who died in Northern prisons. Its mission was later expanded to encompass all national cemeteries that contained Confederate burials.

Four former Confederate officers headed the Commission over its lifetime. By 1916, it had marked in excess of 25,500 graves and erected monuments in locations where individual graves could not be identified.

In 1930, the War Department authorized the addition of the Southern Cross of Honor to the Confederate headstone.



North Alton Confederate Cemetery Monument, 1909, Alton, Ill.

Original Commission headstone (left) and headstone with Southern Cross of Honor (right).