

CONFEDERATE BURIALS IN THE NATIONAL CEMETERY

New York City in the Civil War

New York City saw no Civil War battles but many Union soldiers passed through it. Before the war ended, the city housed thousands of Confederate soldiers in its prisons and hospitals. Many soldiers, from both sides, died and are buried here.

Prison facilities including the Toombs, Bedloe's (Liberty) Island, Hart's Island, Fort Lafayette, Governors Island, Fort Schuyler, Riker's Island, Fort Columbus, and Castle Williams all held Confederate soldiers. De Camp General Hospital on David's Island, though not a prison, treated thousands of Confederates wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg. The Hart's Island facility was the last established and the largest of New York City's prisons. At no time during its short operation, April to July 1865, did it hold fewer than 3,000 prisoners.



The Toombs Prison complex occupied an entire city block in lower Manhattan, c. 1896. Library of Congress.

The Confederate Dead

Within the private cemetery of the same name, Cypress Hills National Cemetery was established in 1862 for Union soldiers who died in New York City-area hospitals. It was among the first national cemeteries Congress created. As the number of Confederate prisoners of war increased, so did the casualties. The federal cemetery had sufficient burial space, so the U.S. Army began interring Confederate dead here, too.



Memorial Day, 1899. Brooklyn Museum Archives, Lantern Slide Collection.

Unlike many other national cemeteries where Confederates are buried in separate sections, here they are intermingled among the Union dead. Union or Confederate, soldiers were interred in the order the cemetery caretaker received them. Many Confederates were buried here at the time of their death. Some remains were reinterred here from Hart's Island and David's Island; others came from Rhode Island cemeteries.

In 1908, the Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead discovered that Confederate graves at Cypress Hills National Cemetery were marked with "substantial headstones." It was determined that by "adding the requisite inscriptions they were deemed satisfactory markers." These headstones were replaced with the standard Confederate-style headstones in 1934.

Toward Reconciliation

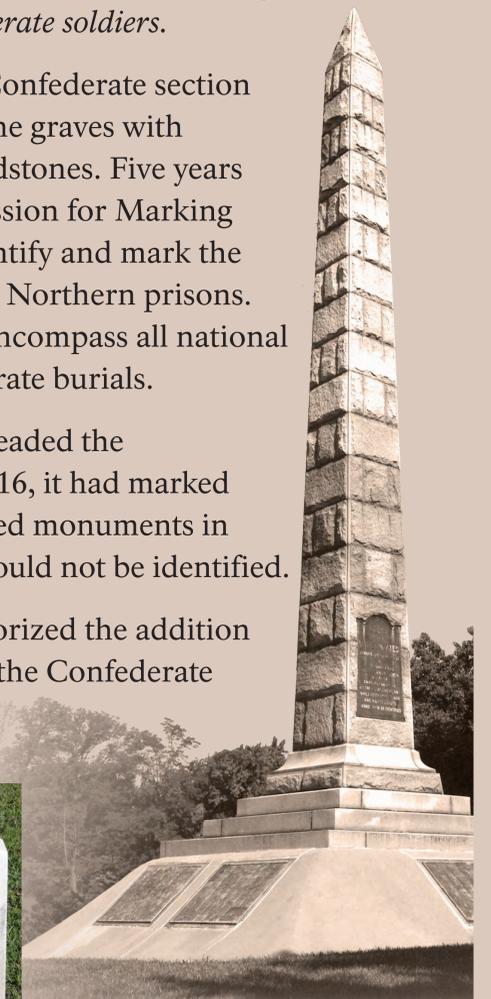
On May 30, 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic decorated Union and Confederate graves at Arlington National Cemetery. Thirty years later President William McKinley proclaimed:

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).



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
National Cemetery Administration

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