CONFEDERATE BURIALS IN THE NATIONAL CEMETERY

The Fort Delaware Prison

The federal government constructed Fort Delaware between 1848 and 1859. Located on Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River, the fort was built to defend Philadelphia.

In the second year of the Civil War, Fort Delaware's role changed. After the Union's March 23, 1862 victory at the Battle of Kernstown, Virginia, 248 prisoners of war arrived at the fort. They were the first of more than 30,000 Confederate soldiers imprisoned at Fort Delaware during the war. The last prisoner was freed in 1866.

Located northwest of the fort, the prison consisted of a barracks and hospital enclosed by a tall plank fence. The 8-acre compound was divided into two areas, the larger for enlisted men and the smaller for officers.

Overcrowding, poor diet, lack of clean drinking water, and swampy ground that bred mosquitos contributed to a high rate of disease. Over a single three-month period, diarrhea, pneumonia, scurvy, typhoid, dysentery and other illnesses claimed more than 12 percent of the prison population.

Confederate prisoners arriving at Fort Delaware, June 1863. Fort Delaware Society.

The prison barracks, c. 1864. Fort Delaware Society.

Burying the Dead

Initially, most prisoners who died at Fort Delaware were buried on the island, quickly filling up the fort cemetery. Pea Patch Island's high water table made it a particularly undesirable location for a permanent cemetery. The U.S. government owned land on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River at Finns Point near the Fort Mott military reservation; in 1863, a new cemetery was established here.

A former Confederate prisoner recalled the burial procedure used: "… the dead were placed in pine boxes and sent in steamboats. Holes were dug, about 6 feet square, and into these we placed as many as possible, usually about 12. Whenever we found names we would mark the spot in some way. It was an awful task." After the war, Pea Patch Island burials were removed to the U.S. cemetery on Finns Point, which was designated a national cemetery in October 1875.

When the Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead traveled to the national cemetery in August 1906, they learned that documentation to mark individual graves was not available. Two years later, the Commission proposed erecting a single monument. The Van Amringe Granite Company of Boston, Massachusetts, completed the nearly 83-foot-tall obelisk in spring 1910.

Toward Reconciliation

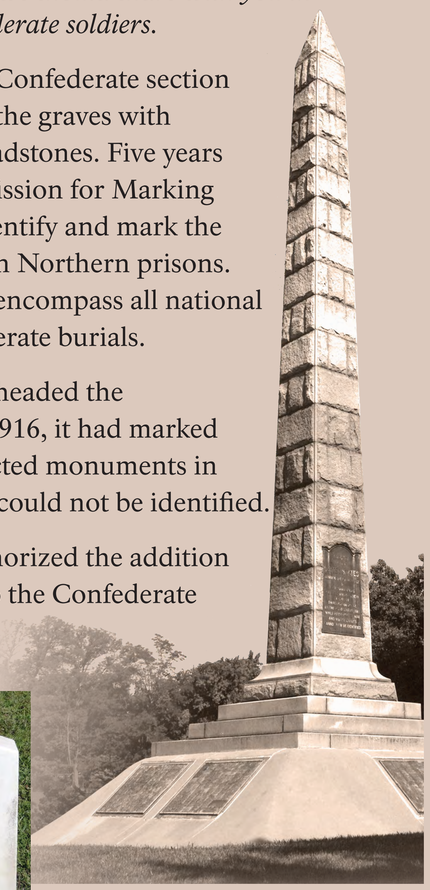
On May 30, 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic decorated Union and Confederate graves at Arlington National Cemetery. Thirty years later President William McKinley proclaimed:

> *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.*

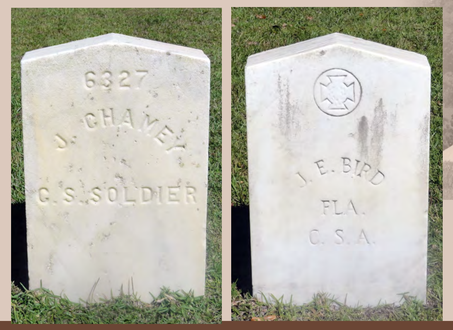
The War Department created the Confederate section at Arlington in 1901, and marked the graves with distinctive pointed-top marble headstones. Five years later, Congress created the Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead to identify and mark the graves of Confederates who died in Northern 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).