DANVILLE NATIONAL CEMETERY

Confederate Military Prison at Danville, Virginia, c. 1865. Library of Congress.

Danville Military Prison

Civil War prisoner-of-war facilities in Richmond, the Confederate capital, were overflowing by mid-1863. To alleviate the situation, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee ordered a new prison established in Danville.

In November, 4,000 Union prisoners arrived at the facility—six brick warehouses in the city's business district. Prisoners were forbidden to look out windows, or use the first floor or the grounds, and could use the latrine only in groups of six. A small pox epidemic in winter 1863-64 killed many prisoners.

A Confederate inspector reported in January 1865:

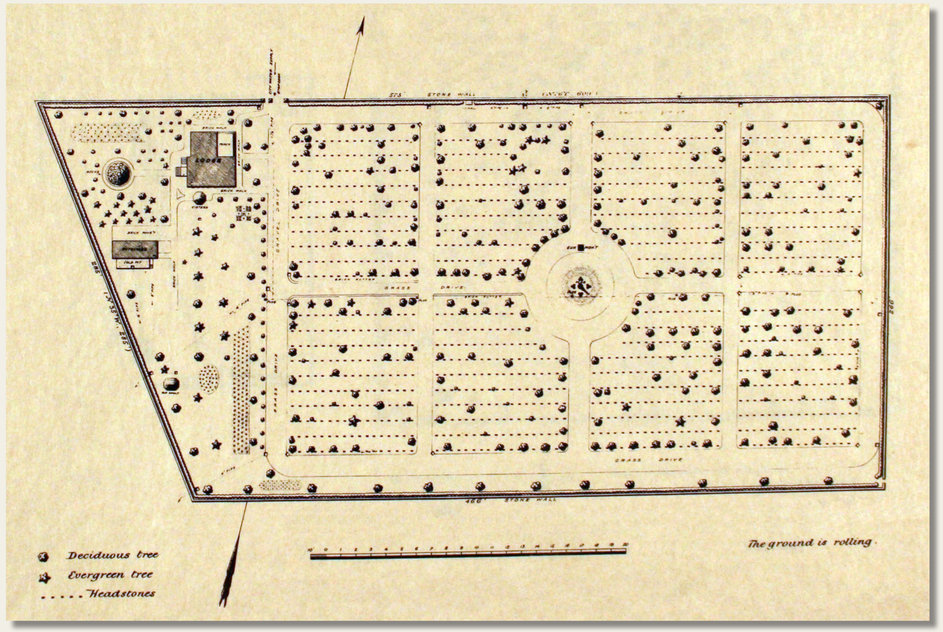
> *The prisons at this post are in a very bad condition, dirty, filled with vermin, little or no ventilation. . .The mortality at the prison, about five per day, is caused, no doubt, by the insufficiency of food (the ration entire being only a pound and a half of corn bread a day). . . This state of things is truly horrible, and demands the immediate attention of higher authorities.*

National Cemetery

Danville National Cemetery was established in 1866 on 3.5 acres adjacent to Greenhill Cemetery. Almost all burials were Union prisoners who died in the Danville military prison. According to an 1868 army inspection report, the cemetery contained 1,312 interments—only 147 were unknown.

In 1873, the cemetery land was formally deeded to the United States by the City of Danville and resident Thomas D. Stokes. The following year, the federal government built a stone superintendent's lodge and enclosed the cemetery with a stone wall. A central flagstaff and gun monument were installed before 1892. The existing Dutch Colonial Revival-style lodge was built in 1928 to replace the original.

Cemetery tool house and well house, prior to 1934. National Archives and Records Administration.



Cemetery plan, 1892. National Archives and Records Administration.

Cemetery Superintendent

By law, the secretary of war appointed a "meritorious and trustworthy" superintendent to manage the cemetery. To qualify for the position, the individual had to have been an enlisted man disabled in service. These restrictions were loosened in 1872 to allow any man honorably discharged from U.S. service to serve as a cemetery superintendent.

This employment was one way the federal government assisted injured veterans who faced an uncertain future after the Civil War. Many lived with their families in the lodges. Francis O'Donohoe, formerly a sergeant in the 5th New York Infantry, was appointed the first superintendent here.