GRAFTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

A State Forged from War

On April 17, 1861, just days after President Abraham Lincoln's order to seize Fort Sumter in South Carolina, a convention of Virginia officials met to back a bill that would let Virginians vote on secession from the Union. Many delegates from western Virginia withdrew from the convention and vowed to form a state government loyal to the Union.

After the victory at the Battle of Philippi on June 3, 1861, Union forces occupied northwestern Virginia. Secure from Confederate interference, a new convention met in Wheeling and formed the Restored Government of Virginia, which President Lincoln recognized as the state's legitimate government.

The U.S. Constitution allows for the formation of a new state from an existing one if the original state consents. Since the federal government accepted the Restored Government as Virginia's legal authority, the state granted itself permission. On June 20, 1863, West Virginia was officially created with the provision that slavery would gradually be abolished in the new state.

Battle of Philippi, June 3, 1861. The Soldier in Our Civil War *(1895).*

National Cemetery

Grafton National Cemetery was established in 1867. The site was chosen for its proximity to existing Union burials in the private Maple Avenue Cemetery. Remains were brought here from Wheeling, Rich Mountain, and elsewhere in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky.

Cemetery in 1904. National Archives and Records Administration.

The rugged terrain challenged the Quartermaster General's staff. They terraced the 3.5-acre cemetery into three levels. A central path connected the terraces and a stone wall was built to enclose the grounds.

On June 14, 1868, Union veterans, townspeople, and local and state dignitaries gathered to dedicate the picturesque cemetery. West Virginia's first governor, Arthur Boreman, spoke. The original 1,254 interments were almost equally known and unknown dead. The cemetery contains more than 2,100 burials today.

Memorial Day

Grafton first hosted Memorial Day ceremonies in spring 1869. That year, the mayor asked residents to observe "flower strewing day" alongside Civil War veterans. The program grew over the years. School children still march in a parade to the cemetery carrying flowers and American flags for placement on the graves.

In 1882, local Union veterans formed a chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). "Flower strewing day" officially became Decoration Day (later Memorial Day) when the GAR adopted the formal name. Grafton became known as "Memorial City" as the annual event gained recognition.

Memorial Day parade in Grafton, c. 1900. Private Collection.