KEOKUK NATIONAL CEMETERY

Civil War Keokuk

Keokuk, Iowa, was a staging and training ground for seven Union regiments. The first soldiers mustered in at Camp Ellsworth in May 1861. Later, camps Rankin, Halleck, and Lincoln prepared Iowa troops for deployment south.

Its Mississippi River setting made Keokuk an important Union Army hospital center. The first wounded arrived soon after the Battle of Shiloh in Tennessee, on April 7, 1862. A stream of patients continued throughout the war.

The army set up military hospitals at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Simpson House, Rice's Hardware Store, and the public school. The largest facility was the Estes House, a hotel converted into a U.S. General Hospital. Sick and wounded troops were treated here from April 17, 1862, until October 1, 1865.

Keokuk on the Mississippi River. Barber and Howe, Our Whole Country *(1861). Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection.*

View of the fenced cemetery with lodge, cannon, and rostrum, 1903. Completed for Memorial Day 1873, the rostrum was the first permanent one built in any national cemetery. National Archives and Records Administration.

National Cemetery

Soldiers who died in Keokuk military hospitals were buried in an Oakland Cemetery lot. After the war, the city donated the lot to the federal government, which expanded it to establish Keokuk National Cemetery. By 1871 the 2.5-acre national cemetery contained 627 Union dead, only twenty-seven unknown. Eight Confederate prisoners of war who died in Keokuk are also buried here.

By 1871, an iron fence enclosed the cemetery, upright cannon flanked the entrance, and a Second Empire-style brick lodge to house the superintendent and his family was complete. Four artillery pieces on gun carriages encircled a new flagstaff. A summer house was built to provide visitors a place to rest and contemplate the solemn landscape.

Monuments

In 1912, the Woman's Relief Corps and State of Iowa erected a 30-foot-tall granite pedestal topped with a granite statue of a Union soldier. The state legislature had appropriated $2,000 for this purpose the previous year. The monument is dedicated to unknown soldiers buried in the cemetery.

Sometime after 1929, the cornerstone of the Estes House Hotel was placed in the cemetery. Encased in a metal box with a glass lid, the cornerstone is a memorial to soldiers who died in Keokuk's U.S. General Hospital during the Civil War.

Undated photograph of the Estes House Hotel cornerstone in Keokuk National Cemetery. National Cemetery Administration.

Estes House Hotel, used in the Civil War as a hospital, c. 1920. Keokuk Public Library.