KNOXVILLE NATIONAL CEMETERY

Civil War Knoxville

In an 1861 referendum, 81 percent of East Tennessee voters rejected secession. Many in Knoxville, the region's largest city, supported the Union. During the Civil War, 30,000 East Tennesseans joined the U.S. Army. When Union Gen. Ambrose Burnside's troops arrived in Knoxville in 1863, they received a hero's welcome.

On November 17, 1863, Confederate forces led by Gen. James Longstreet surrounded Knoxville. The city was encircled by a strong line of earthworks anchored on the Tennessee River.

Longstreet attacked at Fort Sanders on the western edge of the Union line on November 29. The assault lasted less than an hour as Union soldiers inflicted heavy losses on Confederate troops. The Confederates retreated and attempted to lay siege to the city. Longstreet withdrew in December, leaving East Tennessee firmly in Union hands.

Fort Sanders, c. 1863. Surrounded by a ditch 8 feet deep, the fort was located near Clinch Avenue just north of what is today the University of Tennessee campus. Library of Congress.

Lithograph of cemetery, 1864, that emphasizes the Highlander Monument and headstones in Section A. Library of Congress.

National Cemetery

In December 1863, General Burnside ordered Capt. H. S. Chamberlain to prepare a cemetery for casualties of the Knoxville fighting. Three years later, Capt. E. B. Whitman, who was in charge of establishing national cemeteries in the South, described it as:

> *the only burial ground of Union Soldiers . . . originally laid out and constructed to the present time in a manner and on a system that renders it suitable to be converted into a National Cemetery . . .*

By 1874, there were 3,135 interments in the 10-acre tract. Approximately one-third were unknown. Graves were arranged in concentric circles around a central flagstaff. A stone wall enclosed the grounds.

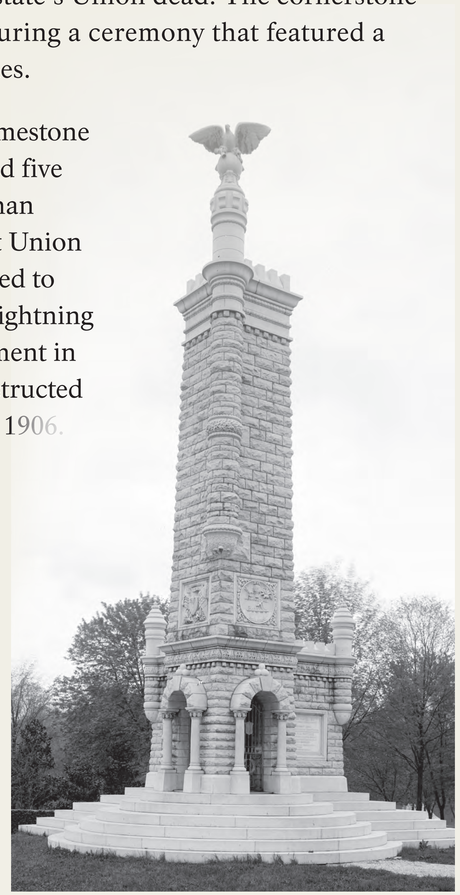
One Civil War Medal of Honor recipient lies here. Pvt. Timothy Spillane, 16th Pennsylvania Cavalry, received the commendation for gallantry at the Battle of Hatcher's Run, Virginia, February 5-7, 1865. He died in Knoxville in 1901 (Section A, Grave 3319).

Monuments

The first monument erected in the cemetery honors the 79th New York Volunteer Infantry known as the "Highlanders." Hugh Young, a stonecutter by trade and member of the regiment, carved this monument and surrounding headstones for his comrades in March 1864.

In 1893, the Tennessee Grand Army of the Republic, a Union veterans' organization, decided to build a monument to the state's Union dead. The cornerstone was laid in 1896 during a ceremony that featured a parade and speeches.

The 60-foot-tall, limestone tower was dedicated five years later. More than 7,000 donors, most Union veterans, contributed to the $11,000 cost. Lightning toppled the monument in 1904. It was reconstructed and rededicated in 1906.



The original Union Soldiers Monument, c. 1902. A statue of a standing soldier replaced the ball and eagle at the top when it was reconstructed four years later. Library of Congress.