LEXINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

Civil War Lexington

In 1847, Abraham Lincoln traveled to Lexington to visit his wife's family. It was a small county seat but a regional economic and cultural center. When the Civil War began in 1861, the railroads that linked Lexington with Cincinnati, Ohio, and Louisville, Kentucky, made the city a strategic transportation hub.

The Union Army maintained a supply depot and hospitals in Lexington. After the Union defeat at the Battle of Richmond (Kentucky) on August 30, 1862, Lexington was captured and briefly occupied by Confederate troops.

As a result of a raid by Confederate Brig. Gen. John Hunt Morgan in 1863, Union authorities built a series of fortifications in central Kentucky, including Fort Clay in Lexington. The fort's artillery fired on General Morgan's cavalry when they again raided the city for supplies in June 1864. This was the last time Confederate forces threatened Lexington.

Barracks and Fort Clay, c. 1865. National Archives and Records Administration.

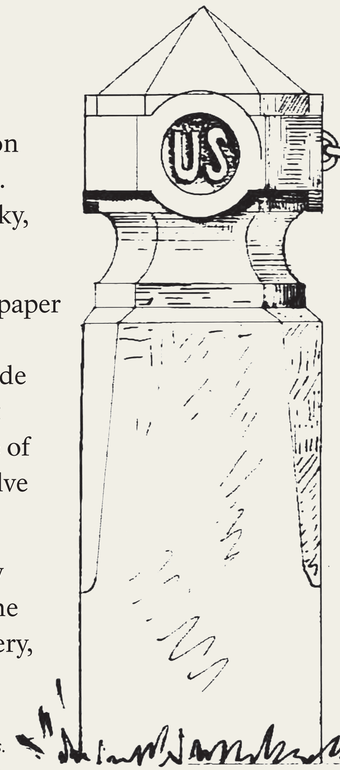
Soldiers' Lot in Lexington City Cemetery, from Brvt. Lt. Col. E. B. Whitman's final report, c. 1869. Whitman used the phrase "Harvest of Death" in his exhaustive report to describe the work of collecting the dead. National Archives and Records Administration.

"Harvest of Death"

Early in 1866, Capt. E. B. Whitman began gathering information in preparation for the reinterment of Union soldiers buried in the Military Division of Tennessee. This huge district included Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

Captain Whitman, later lieutenant colonel, placed newspaper notices seeking locations of Union graves. Citizens, chaplains, soldiers, and officers replied. Whitman made three major expeditions across the region, stopping at hundreds of battlefields and engagement sites. Because of his work, thousands of Union dead were moved to twelve new national cemeteries.

In May 1869, Whitman submitted a detailed summary of this difficult project to the quartermaster general. The report contained sketches and site plans of each cemetery, and data on interments and service affiliations.



Drawing of cemetery boundary markers, 1870s. National Archives and Records Administration.

National Cemetery

Prior to 1869, ten federally established or public cemeteries in Kentucky contained the remains of Union soldiers. The work of reinterring the dead was almost complete when the army changed its plan and reduced the number of cemeteries to six.

Union soldiers who died in Lexington's army hospitals during the war were buried in the City Cemetery. Dead from battlefields at Mount Sterling and Cynthiana, and blockhouses and fortifications along the Kentucky Central Railroad, were also interred here. The 0.75-acre lot became Lexington National Cemetery in 1868. By 1874 it contained 929 burials, including 105 unknowns.

Undated postcard of Lexington National Cemetery. Postcard Collection, University of Kentucky Special Collections Research Center.

White marble posts inscribed with 'U.S.' mark the national cemetery boundary. The U.S. Army Quartermaster General's Office also installed a gun monument and flagstaff. Planted with trees and flowering shrubs, the landscape is typical of a rural-style cemetery. An army inspector described it as "a very pretty cemetery, and . . . kept in fine order."

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