PORT HUDSON NATIONAL CEMETERY

The 1st and 3rd Louisiana Native Guards drill near Port Hudson in 1863. State Library of Louisiana.

Fall of Port Hudson

In May 1863, Union Gen. Nathaniel Banks landed 30,000 soldiers at Bayou Sara north of Port Hudson. A force of 7,500 men commanded by Confederate Gen. Franklin Gardner held the Mississippi River stronghold. General Banks' May 27 assault on Port Hudson failed and nearly 2,000 soldiers died. Among them were 600 men from two black regiments—the 1st and 3rd Louisiana Native Guards. The Port Hudson engagement was among the first opportunities for black soldiers to fight in the Civil War. Their determination proved to the North that they could and would ably serve the Union cause.

Banks then launched a siege operation, building fortifications and bringing up more artillery. On June 14, he began pounding the Confederates. This second failed attack resulted in another 2,000 Union casualties. Banks continued the siege. Finally, on July 9 with the Confederate garrison reduced to eating mules and rats, Port Hudson surrendered. Over the 45-day siege Banks lost approximately 10,000 men, half from disease. The Union gained absolute control of the Mississippi River.

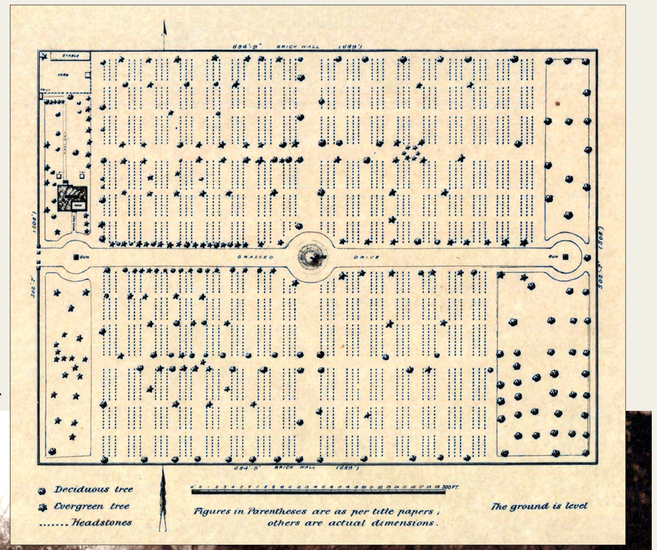
National Cemetery

In August 1866, Lt. A. Rayburn chose this site for Port Hudson National Cemetery. The 8-acre plot was already the final resting place of Union soldiers who died fighting at Port Hudson. The government paid $3,000 for the land.

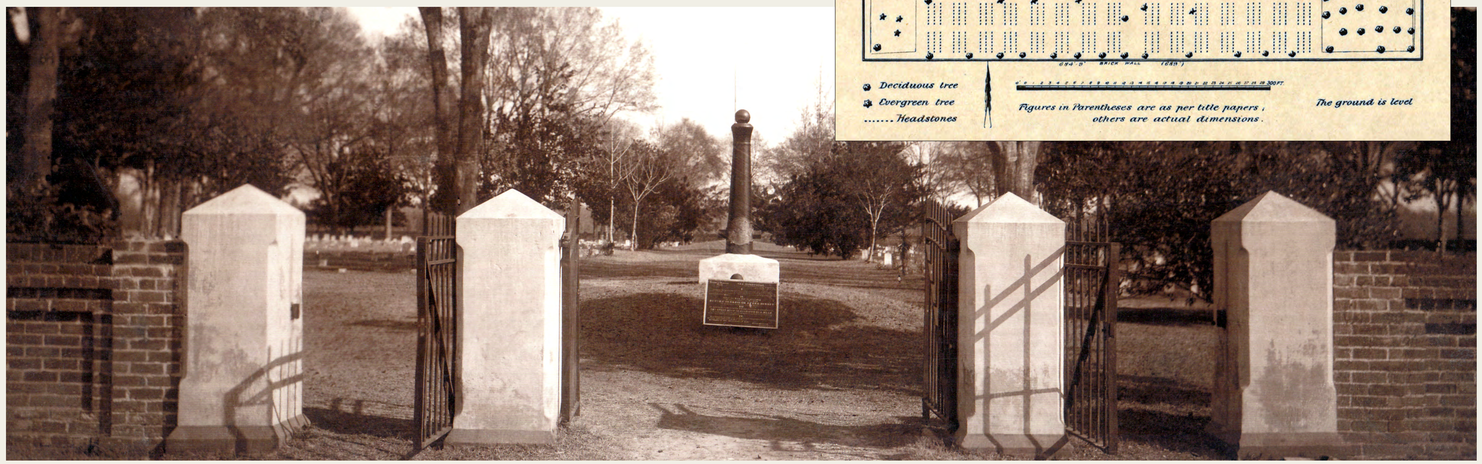
Among those buried here are 256 men who served in the United States Colored Troops (USCT). The first USCT regiments were formed in March 1863, when the federal government began actively recruiting black men for the Union Army. USCT regiments fought in battles and engagements from Virginia to Texas. Eight regiments were engaged at Port Hudson.

By 1875, Port Hudson National Cemetery contained 3,804 graves, most marked as unknowns. Remains from elsewhere in Louisiana, including Morganza village; the Carnes, Dunn's, Haynes, Slaughters, and Wilson's plantations; and Methodist College in West Baton Rouge Parish were reinterred here.

Early improvements included a brick wall to enclose the cemetery and two gun monuments at the entrance road. In 1879, the Quartermaster Department built a brick Second Empire-style lodge for the superintendent and his family. Cast-iron plaques with stanzas from the poem "Bivouac of the Dead" were installed in the 1880s. The cemetery has expanded twice in the twentieth century and now covers almost 20 acres.



Right, cemetery plan, 1892. National Archives and Records Administration.



Cemetery gate and gun monument in 1904. National Archives and Records Administration.