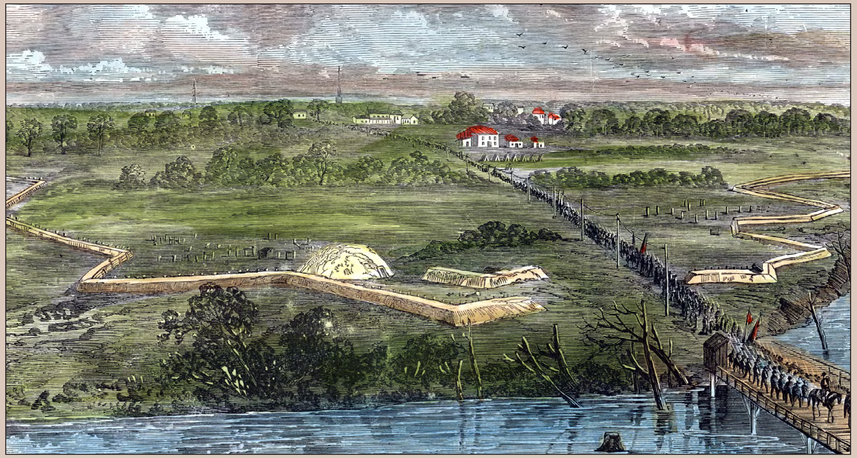
WILMINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

Civil War Wilmington

Wilmington was a minor Atlantic port when the Civil War started and the U.S. Navy did little to secure it. In fall 1862, the Confederate Ordnance Bureau designated it as the port of entry for its blockade runners. At night these vessels would steal into port, eluding the Union Navy. Wilmington gained importance as Union blockades shut off trade with other southern ports including Charleston, South Carolina. By July 1863, it was the most important port in the Confederate supply network. Blockade runners made more than 300 round-trips between the city and Caribbean ports to exchange cotton for military supplies.



Union troops march through Wilmington fortifications after the city fell, March 1865. Frank Leslie's Our Soldier in the Civil War (*1884*).

Strong Confederate defenses protected Wilmington. Forts Fisher and Caswell at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, and a series of forts along its banks guarded the sea approach. Fortifications encircling the city protected the land approach. Fort Fisher, the largest of Wilmington's defenses, protected New Inlet—the preferred route of blockade runners. A combined Union land-and-sea assault took Fort Fisher on January 15, 1865. The Union victory closed the port, and the next month Confederate troops abandoned the city completely.

Postcard view showing the rostrum constructed in 1887 with an open iron roof, c. 1905. Courtesy of Robert Fales Collection, New Hanover County Public Library.

National Cemetery

The U.S. Army Quartermaster General's Office established Wilmington National Cemetery in 1867 on 5 acres purchased from a private citizen. By 1874, the remains of 2,060 Union dead were reinterred here from Fayetteville, Fort Fisher, Fort Johnson, Wilmington, and other North Carolina locales. The 701 known dead represented twenty states.

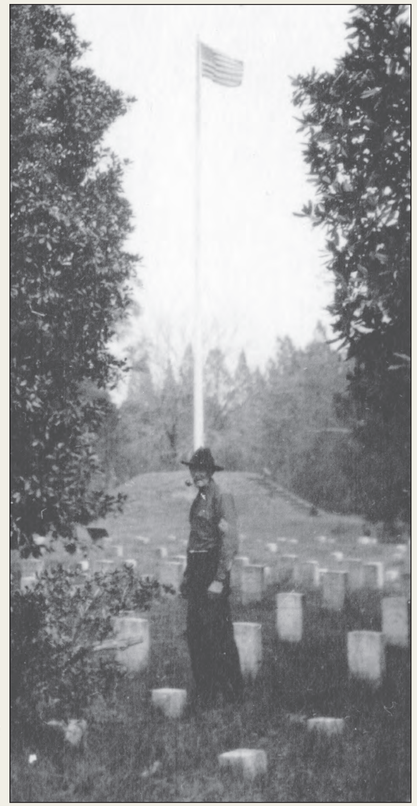
In addition, 557 U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) lie here. Most are buried in the northwest corner of the cemetery.

In March 1863, the federal government had begun to actively recruit black men for the Union Army. A few months later, the War Department created the Bureau of United States Colored Troops. USCT regiments fought in battles and engagements from Virginia to Texas.

Superintendents

An 1867 law directed the secretary of war to appoint a "meritorious and trustworthy" superintendent to manage each national cemetery. To qualify for the position, an individual must have been an army enlisted man disabled in service. A later change to the law loosened these restrictions. Matthew Dillingham, formerly a sergeant in the 6th U.S. Infantry, was appointed to the Wilmington post in October 1867.

In the 1870s, the army built a stone lodge for the superintendent and his family. The cemetery was also enclosed by a brick wall. The current Dutch Revival-style lodge replaced the original lodge in 1934.



Superintendent John S. Hall in the cemetery, 1921. National Archives and Records Administration.