HISTORY & DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is one of three federal agencies responsible for managing national cemeteries in the United States. Its mission includes oversight of most national cemeteries, and the provision of headstones/markers/medallions for qualified Veterans and Presidential Memorial Certificates. NCA was established in 1973 when the U.S. Army transferred all but two of its national cemeteries to the Veterans Administration (VA) along with a mix of soldiers lots and Confederate cemeteries. In addition to NCA and Army, the National Park Service oversees fourteen national cemeteries affiliated with national battlefields in the United States. A fourth federal agency, the American Battle Monuments Commission, oversees 26 American military cemeteries located abroad. The history of all national cemeteries begins with the Civil War and President Abraham Lincoln.

The first national cemeteries were developed at the start of the Civil War (1861-1865) to bury Union dead. The Civil War was the result of passionate and opposing philosophies surrounding slavery and the nation's future. An unprecedented number of men enlisted for federal service and by the early 1870s, more than 350,000 Union dead had been buried in a national cemetery. While originally intended for those who died during the war, Civil War Veterans' argued for the right to be buried next to their compatriots. Since then, criteria for burial in national cemeteries have expanded dramatically in the areas of family eligibility and military service.

The U.S. Army Office of the Quartermaster (AOQM) was responsible for provisioning U.S. troops in life and in death. In September 1861, General Orders No. 75 assigned responsibility for fallen troops to the AOQM, which marked graves with a wood headboard and maintained burial records. Mounting death tolls led Congress on July 17, 1862, to empower President Abraham Lincoln “to purchase cemetery grounds and cause them to be securely enclosed, to be used as a national cemetery for the soldiers who shall die in the service of the country.”
More men died of disease or their wounds than in battle, so the first national cemeteries were established near military hospitals, prison camps, and recruitment and training centers. After the war, the National Cemetery Act of February 22, 1867, was the first legislation to substantively finance and develop national cemeteries. The law appropriated $750,000 to purchase land and to construct superintendents' lodges, perimeter walls and fencing, and acquire headstones. It also provided funds to pay “superintendents”— usually disabled Civil War Veterans hired to oversee the cemeteries.

Immediately after the Confederate surrender on April 9, 1865, the AOQM embarked on an ambitious four-year program to recover the remains of Union troops. The Cemeterial Branch, established 1867, scoured campaign routes, battlefields, former hospitals and prisons, and shorelines in search of temporary graves. Unless friends or family claimed the body for burial elsewhere, remains were relocated to national cemeteries. When the reburial program concluded in 1871, the Army estimated that 300,000 Veterans were reinterred in 73 national cemeteries or in soldiers’ lots located within private cemeteries. This was the first time a country gathered its dead for reburial in cemeteries created to honor their service. Around 42 percent of Civil War dead could not be identified, making them the largest segment of unknown burials in NCA cemeteries.

Concurrent to establishing the national cemetery system, in 1865 the federal government established facilities to care for disabled, indigent Civil War veterans. The nine original National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (NHDVS) campuses included dormitories, hospitals, kitchens, churches, and recreational facilities in a park-like setting. Veterans who died there were buried in Home cemeteries; these eventually become national cemeteries. In addition, far afield from Civil War fighting, cemeteries established in western and southwest territories incorporated older post burials and include the remains of many soldiers killed in conflicts with Native Americans, known as the Indian Wars (1867-1891). As the Army abandoned unneeded posts along settler trails, remains from post cemeteries were moved to national ones. In many cemeteries, by policy or practice, the Army initially identified burial sections to segregate officers from enlisted men, White from Black soldiers, and knowns from unknowns.

The 1870s marked a significant period of improvement for military cemeteries as permanent masonry structures replaced temporary frame construction. Failing wood headboards were replaced with the first durable marble headstones after the Secretary of War approved the design in 1873; unknown graves were marked with small numbered marble blocks. Notably, “Civil War” is not inscribed on headstones and the iconic recessed shield was not part of the original design. The shield, containing raised letters, was introduced by one of the successful
bidders, and by 1888 the design was included in government-headstone specifications. In 1879, Congress authorized the provision of government headstones for Veterans buried in private and municipal cemeteries.

The cemetery lodge – a residence and office for the superintendent – was the most prominent building at early cemeteries. More than 50 fashionable French Second Empire-style lodges were erected, and about half survive today. Other standard nineteenth-century features included a flagpole, enclosure walls with metal gates, and rostrums as the locus of Decoration (later Memorial) Day activities. Abundant trees and ornamental plantings, pedestrian and vehicular paths, decorative “gun monuments,” and signs created a solemn but verdant setting for visitors. Beyond the neat, formal arrangement of standard marble headstones that set national cemeteries apart from other burial grounds, they emulated popular American cemetery trends: the garden-like Rural (1831-1870s) and pastoral Lawn Park (1855-1920s) styles. The grounds also reflect the vision of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted who, in 1870, recommended national cemeteries be simple with “permanent dignity and tranquility...a sacred grove.”

Members of the U.S. military have died in service abroad from the earliest days of the republic. The general practice from the late eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries was to bury those who died abroad in a plot near their place of death or at sea. For instance, many soldiers killed in the Mexican-American War (1846-1847) were buried in a group grave in Mexico City. This practice changed beginning with the Spanish-American War and other conflicts in the Philippines and the Far East (1898-1902). War dead from these events were repatriated for burial in private plots or national cemeteries. On June 11, 1899, burial policy was further extended to Veterans of those conflicts. Government-issued headstones used the same Civil War design but with the conflict name inscribed below the shield.

Transformations Between World Wars
More than 116,000 service members died during World War I (1914-1918). But the efficiency of the War Department’s Graves Registration Service combined with new identification “dog tags” vastly reduced the number of unknown burials to 3.5 percent. World War I also marked a major advance in burial eligibility and memorial products in national cemeteries. Legislation enacted in April 1920, ensured that anyone who served in any war in which “the United States has been or hereafter be engaged” and U.S. citizens who “served in the Army or Navy of any government at war with Germany or Austria” during World War I who died in service or are honorably discharged, may be buried in any national cemetery.
To honor the sacrifice and scale of World War I, government officials created a larger, new marble upright headstone to distinguish these Veterans from service in nineteenth-century conflicts. Notably, it features an optional “emblem of belief” – initially a Latin cross for Christian faith and Star of David for Jewish faith. This “General” upright headstone was produced beginning in the 1920s and it has been in continuous use for all conflicts since, though the number of emblems and inscription elements has changed.

As Army officials were creating the General headstone for domestic graves, plans were underway to honor the American Expeditionary Forces who were buried abroad in a new kind of cemetery. On March 4, 1923, Congress created the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) to oversee these military cemeteries and monuments. The Army operated eight World War I cemeteries in Europe until 1934 when they were transferred to ABMC; subsequently, fourteen World War II cemeteries in Europe, Africa, and the Philippines would become part of ABMC. Akin to emblems of belief, ABMC graves are marked with marble headstones in the form of a Latin cross or Star of David.

The third decade of the twentieth century saw major changes regarding national cemeteries: development of new ones where the largest populations of Veterans lived, reassignment of federal responsibility, and the introduction of flat markers. And, setting the stage for later consolidation, Congress in 1930 established the Veteran’s Administration (VA) which assumed responsibility for NHDVS and their cemeteries.

Until the early 1930s, national cemeteries were operated by the Army. In the first major system expansion since the Civil War, even as World War II loomed, it planned seven new cemeteries for the Veterans of past conflicts. For the first time, national demographic data determined the placement of “inter world war” cemeteries, 1934-1939, in or near urban centers. Some encompassed existing cemeteries. All were much larger than predecessors with building complexes designed to reflect regional or “federal” architecture. Some construction was supported by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, including the Works Progress Administration.

While the Army was providing new burial space for current generations of Veterans, the number of cemeteries it oversaw decreased. Some of the most significant battle-related Civil War cemeteries were transferred to the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, for interpretation and historic preservation. NPS manages fourteen national cemeteries today; only Andersonville National Cemetery, Georgia, is open for burials.
Until the 1930s, the Federal government only provided upright marble headstones for Veterans’ graves. Between 1936 and 1940 flat markers produced in marble, granite, and bronze were introduced. These unobtrusive rectangular markers were key elements of suburban Memorial Park-style (1917-present) cemeteries. Initially produced for private cemeteries that did not allow uprights, they were first used in national cemeteries built by the Army after World War II, notably in Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Nine national cemeteries use flats exclusively and seventy-eight use them along with separate sections using upright headstones.

After the Army opened a few final post-World War II properties it maintained a non-expansion cemetery policy until the 1960s. This was also the last era of cemeteries with housing for superintendents, who were no longer required to live on site. On March 18, 1968, a report initiated by President Lyndon Johnson to evaluate all Veteran programs was submitted to Congress. As a result of these findings, the National Cemeteries Act of 1973 (PL 93-43) was signed into law in June 18, 1973. Foremost, it transferred 82 national cemeteries from the Army to VA. The Army retained responsibility for Arlington National Cemetery and Soldiers’ & Sailor’s Home National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

National Cemetery System / National Cemetery Administration
The Veterans Administration became steward of the 112-year-old National Cemetery System on September 1, 1973. VA re-designated its existing twenty-one burial grounds at the same time to create an organization of 103 national cemeteries composed of more than 4,000 acres; 64 percent of this acreage was developed, but gravesites at the oldest properties were depleted or close to it. The 1973 act also transferred responsibility to VA for issuing government headstones/markers to eligible veterans and family members. It authorized VA to acquire land to develop cemeteries and establish uniform burial-eligibility criteria, it established a permanent Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials to consult with the VA administrator, and it directed VA to study criteria for operating the cemetery network.

Among other findings, the 1974 VA study evaluated the placement of cemeteries in ten Standard Federal Regions, introduced a grant program to expand state-run Veterans' cemeteries (authorized in 1978), and proposed the introduction of columbaria to meet the growing popularity of cremation.

In the National Cemetery System’s first decade under VA management, six regional national cemeteries opened, and some closed cemeteries re-opened using adjacent land. The expansive new cemeteries boasted manicured burial sections and tree-lined roads; columbaria for cremated remains became regular features, and funeral services were held in committal
shelters. In the late 1980s, memorial walkways were added to connect the numerous standard commemorative monuments that Veteran groups continue to donate to national cemeteries.

In 1989, VA was elevated to the Department of Veterans Affairs, a cabinet-level agency. On November 11, 1998, the National Cemetery System was re-designated as the National Cemetery Administration, and the NCA principal was elevated from Director to Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Memorial Affairs.

Between 1997 and 2010, seventeen new national cemeteries opened to serve Veterans of twentieth-century conflicts and the more recent Global War on Terror. By acreage, it was the greatest expansion since the Civil War era. Sites were selected through a series of demographic studies in 1987, 1994, 1999, and 2003, with the goal of providing a 75-mile or less drive from a Veterans’ home to a cemetery. To ensure burial access for Veterans living in remote locales, NCA’s Rural Initiative plans for eight smaller cemeteries, such as the one in Fargo, North Dakota, that opened in 2019.

Complementing that objective, an Urban Initiative underway since 2011 will result in five all-columbaria national cemeteries in large cities. Most recently, in 2019-2020 the Army transferred ten small historic post cemeteries and one World War II enemy POW cemetery to NCA per Executive Order 13781 (2017) in the cause of increased federal efficiency. The NCA system—more than 150 national cemeteries and associated monuments and soldiers’ lots that are fully operational, under construction, or closed to new burials—exceeds 23,000 acres.

NCA has continued to introduce memorial products to honor Veterans’ service, such as a bronze medallion that can be affixed to private headstones in private cemeteries, and memorial walls to remember Veterans whose cremains are scattered or deposited in a garden or ossuary. In addition to the perpetual care of grave sites in its cemeteries, VA opens and closes the grave, and provides a headstone/marker, U.S. flag, and Presidential Memorial Certificates at no cost to the Veteran’s family.

Nearly 4.9 million individuals including Veterans of every conflict—from the Revolutionary War to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—are honored by burial in VA national cemeteries. Each year about 15 percent of all eligible Veterans who die are interred in a VA national cemetery, while about 5 percent opt for a State, Territorial or Tribal Veterans Cemetery. VA’s memorial landscapes convey critical stories about American history—patriotic and partisan service, racial and gender equality, and religious beliefs. VA cemeteries contain more than 350 recipients of the Medal of Honor, in excess of 1,400 military memorial monuments from the antebellum
period to present, and the remains of President Zachary Taylor and his family. In addition to Federal service members, more than a thousand World War I and World War II enemy POWs, and approximately 12,000 Confederate POWs, are buried or memorialized in VA cemeteries consistent with U.S. law and recognized rules of war (set out in the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and the Additional Protocols of 1977, Hague Conventions 1899-1907, and customary international law). Another thousand ally foreign nationals are buried in these cemeteries. Approximately one-quarter of NCA’s cemeteries no longer offer burial space and are preserved as historic resources.

National cemeteries, as determined by NPS as “exceptionally significant as a result of their Congressional designation as nationally significant places of burial and commemoration,” are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. More than a hundred NCA properties are listed, and several are part of National Historic Landmark districts.

Revised March 2021