

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

ALEXANDRIA NATIONAL CEMETERY, ROSTRUM

HALS No. VA-2-C

Location: 1450 Wilkes Street, Alexandria, Independent City, Virginia

The Alexandria National Cemetery rostrum is located at latitude 30.801558, longitude -77.078392 (North American Datum of 1983). The coordinate represents the structure's southeast corner.

Present owner: National Cemetery Administration,
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Construction date: 1945

Builder / Contractor: possibly the Standard Art Marble and Tile Company,
Washington, D.C.

Description: The Alexandria rostrum is a stepped speaker's platform 10'-5" wide x 7'-6" deep x 1'-6" high surmounted by a marble lectern and backdrop wall. The backdrop wall, 10'-6" high x 6'-2" wide x 1'-9" deep, is the rostrum's most prominent feature. Sparely neoclassical in style, it takes the form of a funerary stela, with front and rear inset panels bordered by shallow corner pilasters with simple cavetto capstones. The side blocks between the pilasters are fluted, but the low-sloping pediment is devoid of cornice or other projecting moldings. Decoration on the stela is minimal, comprising Greek key and fleur-de-lis decorations and laurel wreaths framing the letters "U.S." on the side walls and a five-pointed star flanked by laurel branches carved into the center of the front tympanum.

The lectern, 3'-8" high x 1'-10" square, is six sided with an angled bookrest on top. The front is carved in the form of an elongated shield, with a five-pointed star and an inset filet as the only decoration.

The rostrum is constructed of approximately 155 marble blocks installed around a concrete structural core atop concrete foundations. A contemporary newspaper report and a Quartermaster Corps maintenance ledger preserved in RG 15 at the National Archives say the marble came from reclaimed headstones. The blocks are fastened together with bronze pins, and the front and rear walls of the stela are anchored together through the structure's concrete core using iron-wire ties between these pins.

The design drawings for this type of rostrum indicate that the inset panel on the front of the rostrum was intended to display a bronze memorial plaque, but there is no evidence in the documentary record nor on the rostrum itself that such a plaque was ever installed on this rostrum.

The rostrum sits in a narrow flagstone-paved precinct flanked by walls about 4'-high made of broken-coursed cut sandstone. The rostrum and its precinct sit at the south end of a 65' long x 30' wide grass lawn that acts as an assembly area for ceremonies where the rostrum is used.

Site context: Alexandria National Cemetery's rectangular tract comprises 5.5 acres. The main gates lie in the middle of one of the rectangle's long sides, and visitors enter along an axial drive that leads past the superintendent's lodge to the cemetery flagstaff. A curving double staircase leads around the flagstaff and down to the northeast corner of the grassy assembly area. The rostrum sits at the opposite end of the assembly area where it commands a view of the lawn and the flagstaff and the staircase connecting the two.

History: This cemetery was established in 1862 to provide burial sites for Union soldiers who died in the camps and hospitals in and around Alexandria during the Civil War. Soldiers killed in action were also buried here. The cemetery was created and maintained by the U.S. Army Quartermaster's Department.

The first rostrum in this cemetery was an octagonal, open-air pavilion 16' in diameter comprising a red-brick base, wrought-iron railing, and tall cast-iron posts supporting a tent-form roof. It was completed March 28, 1890, and was one of seven nearly identical rostrums built for the Quartermaster's Department in certain national cemeteries during the 1889-90 fiscal year. The standard design employed for this rostrum was developed by the quartermaster's department and employed in many cemeteries between 1886 and 1905.¹

The first rostrum was dismantled in 1945, the same year the Memorial Division of the Office of the Quartermaster General contracted for the construction of a new rostrum. Instead of a pavilion-like raised platform with roof, the memorial division specified the construction of an uncovered marble speaker's podium facing a flat, grassy assembly area. The new rostrum's design was based on one worked out by the Memorial Division

¹ The other rostrums constructed in 1889-90 were those in the national cemeteries at Andersonville, Ga., Beaufort, S.C., Corinth, Miss., Fort Smith, Ark., New Bern, N.C., and San Antonio, Tex. The New Bern and San Antonio examples survive. See HALS nos. NC-1-B and TX-6-B.

in 1944; although designated "Standard Rostrum Type A," the design appears to have been built only at Alexandria.

The rostrum was constructed as part of an overall program to improve the cemetery grounds, work that included new circulation drives and a new flagstaff platform with stairs. The contractor for the rostrum may have been the Standard Art Marble & Tile Company of Washington, D.C. The structure was substantially completed in mid to late 1945, and was dedicated on Memorial Day 1946 in ceremonies sponsored by the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans, and the Spanish American War Veterans. An undated clipping from the *Washington Evening Star* in the National Archives notes, "A choir sang during the services, and wreaths were placed on the rostrum by representatives of the veterans' group."²

The costs for the rostrum were:

Grading area	\$2,197
Paving walks	\$4,529
Walls, piers, steps, stone carving	\$7,305
Labor	\$2,676
Total	\$16,712

The cemetery was transferred from the care of the U.S. Army Memorial Affairs Agency to the jurisdiction of the Veterans Administration (now the Department of Veterans Affairs) in 1973. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1995 as part of the Civil War Era National Cemeteries Multiple Property Submission.

Sources:

"Army expands old cemetery in Alexandria." *Washington Post*. June 22, 1945, 7.

Call, Lewis W. *United States Military Reservations, National Cemeteries, and Military Parks. Title, Jurisdiction, etc.* Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1907.

Holt, Dean W. *American Military Cemeteries*. 2nd ed. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2010.

Office of the Quartermaster General. Memorial Division. *Standard Rostrum Type A for U.S. National Cemeteries*, Nov. 22, 1944. Drawing number MC-139 (2 sheets). National Cemetery Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, D.C.

² "Alexandria, Va.," Records of the Veterans Administration, Department of Memorial Affairs, National Cemetery Historical File (Record Group 15/A-1, Entry 25), box 1, folder 4, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

Records of the Veterans Administration, Department of Memorial Affairs, National Cemetery Historical File (Record Group 15/ A-1, Entry 25), National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, General Correspondence and Reports Relating to National and Post Cemeteries (Record Group 92, Entry 576), National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

Sammartino, Therese T. National Register of Historic Places nomination for "Alexandria National Cemetery." Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1995.

U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps. *Outline Description of Military Posts and Reservations in the United States and Alaska and of National Cemeteries*. Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1904.

Historian: Michael R. Harrison, 2012

Project Information: The documentation of lodges and rostrums in the national cemeteries was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), one of the Heritage Documentation Programs of the National Park Service, Richard O'Connor, Chief. The project was sponsored by the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) of the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Sara Amy Leach, Senior Historian. Project planning was coordinated by Catherine Lavoie, Chief of HABS. Historical research was undertaken by HABS Historians Michael R. Harrison and Virginia B. Price. NCA Historian Jennifer M. Perunko provided research and editorial support. Field work for selected sites was carried out and measured drawings produced by HABS Architects Paul Davidson, Ryan Pierce, and Mark Schara.