

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

ALTON NATIONAL CEMETERY, ROSTRUM

HALS No. IL-1-A

Location: 600 Pearl Street, Alton, Madison County, Illinois

The Alton National Cemetery rostrum is located at latitude 38.890558, longitude -90.163225 (North American Datum of 1983). The coordinate represents the location of the lectern on the front of the rostrum.

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

Construction date: 1941

Designer: Construction Division, Office of the Quartermaster General

Builder/Contractor: unknown

Description: The rostrum is an integral component of a combined monumental staircase and retaining wall that forms the entrance to Alton National Cemetery. The retaining wall presents to the street a central block flanked by two lower wings. The wall and wings are screened from the street by a cast-iron fence and entrance gates supported by a low wall 2'-8" high and six concrete piers 8'-6" high x 3'-2" square. The fence and gate ironwork is cast in part in the form of stylized laurel branches. A 66'-6"-wide x 15'-2"-deep forecourt planted with shrubs separates the fence from the retaining wall. Visitors passing through the entrance gates follow a brick path 15'-10" wide across the center of the forecourt to a flight of brick steps that rises 4'-9" to a landing at the base of the central block of the retaining wall. Flanking staircases 6'-7" wide rise 7' from either side to secondary landings, at which they return and rise a final 3'-6" to a concrete terrace. The rostrum proper sits between the two staircases at the top of the wall, facing the rows of headstones that fill the long and narrow cemetery. The rostrum is enclosed at the back to a height of about 4' by the central part of the wall and on the sides by return walls. At its front, the rostrum is screened by a cast-iron railing 3' high similar in pattern to the fence and gates. A concrete lectern sits at the center front of the rostrum. Two narrow staircases rise about 3' from the terrace onto either end of the rostrum front. A single chamber under the rostrum serves as a tool or storage room; a centered metal door set in a metal frame opens into the room from the first landing through the eastern front of the retaining wall.

The rostrum, stairs, and retaining wall are constructed of poured-in-place reinforced concrete atop concrete footings. The exposed concrete surfaces originally had a smooth finish, but this has deteriorated over time, exposing the pebble aggregate in many places, particularly near the tops of the walls and fence piers. Recessed form marks cast into the vertical surfaces of the wall and rostrum divide the whole into 24" high x 48" wide panels, simulating construction with large blocks. The top of the central block of the retaining wall – which also forms the rear and side walls of the rostrum proper – is set with stone coping blocks 1'-3" high x 1'-6" deep and decorated with a raised T-shape meander pattern. The stairs, landings, and rostrum platform are paved in red brick.

The stairs have aluminum handrails. Metal letters spelling "U. S. National Cemetery" are affixed to the wall of the central block, facing the street. A cast-aluminum eagle and a cast-aluminum wreath were designed to decorate the eastern wall and the lectern front, respectively, but these elements were not built. The cast-iron fence, gates, and rostrum railing were made by the Usona Manufacturing Company of Saint Louis.

The overall dimensions of the entrance staircase and rostrum are 78'-0" wide x 48'-0" deep x 22'-7" high.

Site context: Alton National Cemetery sits on limestone bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. Covering just under half an acre, it is surrounded on three sides by Alton Cemetery and on the fourth side, to the east, by a public road. A 15' grade change separates the road from the easternmost grave sites, and the rostrum and entrance stairs are built into this slope. The rostrum lectern faces west, toward the graves and the cemetery's flagstaff, which is set about 10' in front of the lectern.

History: Union soldiers who died at the local post hospital and others whose bodies were delivered by passing Mississippi steamers were buried in a small, 0.44-acre soldiers' lot in the private Alton Cemetery during the Civil War. According to reports from the U.S. Army Quartermaster General's Office and the inspector of national cemeteries from the late 1860s and early 1870s, the government secured title to this lot in October 1867 and secured exclusive jurisdiction to it through an act of the Illinois state legislature approved March 31, 1869.¹

In 1937, a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project was proposed to make improvements to the soldiers' lot, but the Quartermaster Corps office responsible for the cemetery, the Headquarters of the Sixth Corps Area, could find no record that the

¹ Deed from Thomas Dunford and wife, Oct. 15, 1867, recorded in book 104, p. 17, of the deed records of Madison County, Ill., and Act of Mar. 31, 1867, cited in Lewis W. Call, *United States Military Reservations, National Cemeteries, and Military Parks* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1907), 83.

government owned the lot, and its officers came to believe that the title had never been transferred.

As a result, the Alton Cemetery Association was induced, in January 1938, to offer to donate the soldiers' lot to the federal government. In August, the cemetery association made a further offer to donate an additional 1,700 square feet (0.04 acre) of land located between the soldiers' lot and nearby Pearl Street if the government would build a permanent rostrum there. The government accepted both offers in turn, and a rostrum with a monumental entrance stair was designed for the cemetery in late 1938 and early 1939. Construction funding was secured through the WPA.

The cemetery submitted the necessary deed and title paperwork in March 1939, but the deed was for an easement to use the land for burial purposes, not a fee simple title. While the U.S. Attorney General's Office and the Army Judge Advocate General (JAG) determined whether an easement was acceptable, work on developing the WPA-funded improvements was suspended. The JAG found the deed not acceptable in October 1939. In June 1940, the Illinois state legislature enacted legislation authorizing the conveyance of fee simple title to the United States, and the cemetery association submitted a new deed dated July 1, 1940. This deed was found acceptable and was recorded in the Madison County land records on September 19, thus conveying ownership to the federal government of the soldiers' lot (which it already owned) and the small additional street frontage (which it had not previously owned).²

With the title transfer complete, work on the WPA-funded improvements resumed. Construction began in April 1941, with the Quartermaster General's Office funding the cost of materials and the WPA funding the labor. The rostrum was dedicated on November 11, 1941. Its cost, according to quartermaster records, was \$19,077.

Numerous references were made in the course of the 1937-40 title correspondence to the land being needed for a "national cemetery," and the final design of the rostrum placed the words "U.S. National Cemetery" in aluminum letters on the eastern side of the rostrum. But the Alton plot officially remained just a soldiers' lot until 1948, under the justification that army policy sought to avoid designating lots within commercial cemeteries as national cemeteries "because such a situation precludes expansion and the construction of a superintendent's lodge and other buildings required by law."³ After

² Deed of July 1, 1940, recorded Sept. 19, 1940, in volume 814, p. 263, of the deed records of Madison County.

³ Quote from Memorial Division Acting Chief, memo to Quartermaster General, Oct. 21, 1948, Records of the Veterans Administration, Department of Memorial Affairs, National Cemetery Historical File (Record Group 15/A-1, Entry 25), box 1, folder 7, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

the Allied Veterans Council of Alton applied pressure through the Illinois congressional delegation, the Quartermaster General designated the lot a national cemetery on October 7, 1948.

The cemetery was transferred from the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army Memorial Affairs Agency to the Veterans Administration (now the Department of Veterans Affairs) in 1973. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2011.

Sources:

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.

Letter of the Secretary of War Communicating . . . the report of the inspector of the national cemeteries of the United States for 1869. S. Ex. Doc. 62, 41st Cong., 2d sess., Mar. 15, 1870.

Office of the Quartermaster General. Construction Division. Drawings for Gates and Rostrum for Alton National Cemetery, February 20 1939. National Cemetery Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, 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.

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"Report of the Quartermaster General." In *Report of the Secretary of War 1870*, vol. 1. H. Ex. Doc. 1, pt. 2, 42nd Cong., 2d sess. Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1871.

Wagoner, Paige, and Edward Salo. National Register of Historic Places nomination for "Alton National Cemetery." U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2011.

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.