

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

NEW ALBANY NATIONAL CEMETERY, ROSTRUM

HALS No. IN-4-B

Location: Ekin Avenue, New Albany, Floyd County, Indiana

The New Albany National Cemetery rostrum is located at latitude 38.300443, longitude -85.806012 (North American Datum of 1983). The coordinate represents the structure's southern corner.

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

Construction date: 1880-81; rebuilt 1931

Builder: W. L. Samuels (1880-81)

Description: The rostrum is a rectangular open-air pavilion with ten square columns supporting an open gable roof. It measures about 20' x 36' overall. The raised base of the rostrum, about 4' high, is a simple block made of red brick laid in running bond capped by a polished concrete slab floor that extends a few inches beyond the side walls. The ten square columns are also red brick. A single wide course of brick forms a base for each column. Another wider course of brick at the top of each supports a simple molded abacus of pre-cast concrete. The roof beams sit atop these abacuses. The beams, rafters, king posts, and roof sheathing are painted wood fastened with metal angles, bolts, plates, and straps. The roof is clad with sheet metal. Concrete steps on brick spandrels provide access to the rostrum floor along the structure's short sides. A simple, iron-pipe railing lines each staircase and the perimeter of the floor.

The wood components of the roof are replacements. Decorative scroll-saw work that originally appeared at the terminations of the roof beams and rafters was not replicated when the current roof structure was installed.

Site context: New Albany National Cemetery occupies a rectangular site that was originally bisected into symmetrical burial sections by a central drive. In the words of an 1893 report,

From the main entrance, at the center of the southeast side of the grounds, a graveled drive extends through the cemetery, encircling in its course three large circular plats of ground. Upon one of these circles is the flagstaff, and upon another is the rostrum, while the largest of the three, some 200 feet in

diameter, is quartered by two graveled walks and beautified with fine lawns, trees, shrubs, etc.

Today, only the short entrance drive, the flagstaff circle, and the axial walk from the flagpole to the rostrum survive from this layout. The rostrum sits atop a low mound and faces northwest toward the cemetery entrance.

History: The 5.46-acre New Albany National Cemetery was established by the U.S. Army Quartermaster's Department in late 1862 to provide a central burial place for Union soldiers who died in southern Indiana during the Civil War. Its circulation plan – a central drive linking a large central circular drive and two flanking subsidiary circles – dates from early in the cemetery's history. Civil engineer James Gall Jr., who inspected the cemetery for the army in January 1880, wrote that the circle "toward the rear end of the Cemetery" was vacant but appeared intended for a monument of some kind. "If no monument is to be erected," he continued,

it would be well to utilize this fine piece of ground in some other way, by the erection of a large gun or group of guns, by putting a handsome vase in the centre and appropriately planting the ground about it, or, what would be still better, by building a Rostrum on it. The site is excellently adapted for a Rostrum, being surrounded by a wide carriage way, and in close proximity to a grove of trees under which the Decoration Ceremonies are usually held. The people of New Albany and Jeffersonville are strongly loyal, think a great deal of the National Cemetery, and would, I feel sure, appreciate very highly the beauty and convenience of a Rostrum erected on the site proposed.

Gall's suggestion prompted acting Quartermaster General Stewart Van Vliet to order a rostrum built at New Albany "when funds are available." Within the year monies were identified, and construction of a rostrum was authorized at the beginning of September. Plans and specifications were drawn up by the Quartermaster's Department cemeterial office in Washington, D.C., and were substantially similar to ones previously used to build seven nearly identical rostrums at some of the more prominent national cemeteries – such as Antietam, Maryland; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania – in 1879.

The Quartermaster's Department invited sealed bids to build the New Albany rostrum in September 1880. W. L. Samuels, about whom nothing is known, won the contract on a bid of \$1,171. Construction began that fall and was completed in early 1881. The rostrum as completed comprised a brick podium about 40' long x 20' wide x 5' high, filled with earth and sodded. Two flights of stone steps with an iron hand rail led from the ground onto the grassy floor. Twelve brick piers 12' high supported a trellis-like open roof.

The rostrum was formally dedicated during the Decoration Day ceremonies held in the cemetery on May 30, 1881. The Committee of Arrangements invited former general and senator John A. Logan to be the president of the day, but, when he declined, the committee invited Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs to fill the role. "Your presence will be hailed with exultation by the people," chairman J. J. Brown told Meigs. "I have made arrangements to be at Arlington on that day," Meigs replied. Deputy Quartermaster General Lt. Col. James Ekins served as president instead, introducing orations by Indiana governor A. G. Porter and the Hon. A. E. Wilson of Louisville (a future governor of Kentucky). The elaborate ceremony featured performances by a twenty-piece band, a children's quartet, an adult choir of 100 voices, and a Flower King and Queen with their "retinue of attendants." Before the orations, there was a formal "Presentation of the Rostrum to the President of the day and Governor Porter, by the Flower King and Queen," followed by the communal singing of "America" and of a specially composed "Decoration Hymn" dedicated to General Meigs. The program concluded with more music and *tableaux vivants*, descriptions of which have, unfortunately, not been located.

The trellis roof of the original rostrum was renovated in 1901. The entire structure was razed in early 1931 and replaced by the existing rostrum, built to a simplified version of the original design with a gabled roof in place of the open trellis. The panelwork and pilasters that articulated the wall surfaces of the original podium were not reproduced in the new, simpler structure. The rebuilt rostrum, which cost approximately \$2,500, was completed in May 1931.

New Albany National 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 listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1999 as part of the Civil War Era National Cemeteries Multiple Property Submission.

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.

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 "New Albany National Cemetery." Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1999.

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