

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

NEW BERN NATIONAL CEMETERY, ROSTRUM

HALS No. NC-1-B

- Location:** 1711 National Avenue, New Bern, Craven County, North Carolina
The New Bern National Cemetery rostrum is located at latitude 35.124376, longitude -77.052476 (North American Datum of 1983). The coordinate represents the structure's approximate center.
- Present owner:** National Cemetery Administration,
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- Construction date:** 1889 or 1890
- Builder / Contractor:** probably the Champion Iron Fence Company, Kenton, Ohio

Description: The rostrum is an octagonal open-air platform about 16' across surmounted by a wrought-iron railing carried on eight cast-iron corner posts. The side walls, built of cut blocks of local shell rock laid in regular courses, are articulated by eight shallow projections that wrap each corner, plus a simple cornice that runs underneath the rostrum's overhanging concrete floor.

When constructed, the platform stood about 4' above grade. It is now between 1' and 2' above grade due to extensive filling of the ground throughout the cemetery. A flight of cast-iron steps, originally seven steps high, is now buried to the level of the fourth step, and only the top 16" of its cast-iron newel posts appear above the ground. The ornate steps feature lattice-pattern pierced risers and S-scroll pierced stringers. The wrought-iron railings match those around the top of the platform.

The corner posts on the platform are the surviving lower portions of tall cast-iron posts that once supported a tent-form roof, which was decorated by an iron open fretwork decorative frieze and scrollwork spandrels. The original roof was designed to be a framework only. It remained open to the sky until covered with galvanized-iron or tin sheet roofing material at an unknown date. The roof was removed in 1957.

Site context: The cemetery covers a rectangle of ground just under 7.7 acres in extent. A single axial drive starting at the entrance gates bisects the cemetery. The rostrum is located in Section 20, in the northeast corner of the cemetery adjacent to the gates; the superintendent's lodge is located in the corresponding section south of the drive.

History: New Bern National Cemetery was established in 1867 as part of the federal government's substantial effort to consolidate the graves of Union soldiers and sailors after the Civil War. The U.S. Army Quartermaster's Department, responsible for creating and operating the national cemeteries, began building permanent rostrums in selected

cemeteries in 1879. These covered platforms served as speaker's stands at Decoration Day (later Memorial Day) observances and other ceremonial occasions. By 1882, the department had erected rostrums in fifteen of the eighty-one national cemeteries, but not in the cemetery at New Bern. In June of that year, members of a memorial association in New Bern petitioned the quartermaster general:

Decoration day has been annually observed since the National Cemetery was established at this place and we have yearly put up temporary platform[s] at considerable expense, which has to be defrayed by the few old Union Soldiers and others of this City; as we understand the U.S. Government has put up permanent Rostrums at nearly all National Cemeteries, we respectfully request that one may be put up at this place. . . . We do not object to the yearly expense, although borne by a few, but we certainly would like to have the same privilege as other communities. The number of people present at last Decoration day was between four and five thousand.¹

This plea produced no result. A second call for a rostrum "for the better convenience and accommodation of the observances of Decoration day" came from the New Bern post of the Grand Army of the Republic in December 1887, but it was met with the official reply "that there is no appropriation from which such Rostrum could be erected at the present time. Your request will however receive due consideration when the allotments for the next fiscal year are made."²

The Quartermaster's Department made funding available for a rostrum at New Bern in the 1889-90 fiscal year. It was one of seven built that year; the others were erected in the national cemeteries at Alexandria, Virginia; Andersonville, Georgia; Beaufort, South Carolina; Corinth, Mississippi; Fort Smith, Arkansas; and San Antonio, Texas. Like the six rostrums the department built in 1886-87 and the five it built in 1888, the New Bern rostrum and its six contemporaries were probably constructed by the Champion Iron Fence Company of Kenton, Ohio, as they feature patented ironwork identical to the examples built between 1886 and 1888. The only significant differences among these rostrums, in fact, lie in the material chosen for their bases. The base at New Bern was made of local shell rock, while that at San Antonio was made of stone. The balance were built with brick bases. The rostrums at New Bern and San Antonio are the only examples to survive from the 1889-90 building campaign.

The 1873 superintendent's lodge and an 1880 outbuilding standing in New Bern National Cemetery in 1889 were built shell rock – often called "marl" – from one of Craven County's quarries. The rostrum was built of this material to match.

¹ T. H. Henry, et al., to Quartermaster General, June [], 1882, dockets for New Bern N/C, RG 92, National Archives.

² Phillip J. Lee to Quartermaster General, Dec. 19, 1887; J. G. Chandler to Phillip J. Lee, Dec. 23, 1887; both in the dockets for New Bern N/C, RG 92, National Archives.

The roof of the rostrum was removed in 1957, and the iron roof posts were cut down to their present height. The removal of the rest of the rostrum was authorized in late 1970 but never carried out.

New Bern 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 1997 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 Bern National Cemetery." Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1997.

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.