

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

SAN FRANCISCO NATIONAL CEMETERY, ROSTRUM

HALS No. CA-1-B

Location: 1 Lincoln Boulevard, San Francisco, San Francisco County, California

The San Francisco National Cemetery rostrum is located at latitude 37.800704, longitude -122.462042 (North American Datum of 1983). The coordinate represents the structure's lectern.

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

Construction date: 1914-15

Builder / Contractor: unknown

Description: The symmetrical rostrum comprises a low, tile-and-concrete platform from which rises a monumental stela made of concrete faced with sandstone blocks from Colusa County, California. On the platform in front of the stela, a sandstone speaker's lectern sits atop a stepped concrete podium. Low sandstone walls fronted by carved benches curve from the stela around the back of the platform. The bench walls terminate in sandstone corner posts. The entire structure sits on concrete foundations and measures 26' high x 58' wide x 25' deep overall.

Two steps spanning the full width of the rostrum originally led from the surrounding ground onto the broad platform. The addition of soil to raise the grade and construction of a new approach path have buried these steps except at the extreme ends of the platform. The monumental stela rises in battered stages from a rectangular base about 15' wide x 6' deep to a pyramidal cap about 12'-6" wide by 3'-10" deep. Low buttresses terminating in simple brackets support the sides of the stela. Simple stepped and hollow-chamfered moldings articulate the transitions between surfaces on the rostrum. The stela is decorated by two groups of carved lilies that emerge from square inset panels about three-quarters of the way up the stela. Carvings of entwined stems and leaves drape below the panels along the wall plane. An aluminum grille covers a rectangular opening between the foliate carvings. Below the grille, a large shallow inset panel dominates the center of the stela, providing a frame behind the lectern. A cast-iron plaque displaying the text of the Gettysburg Address is mounted in the middle of the inset panel. The interior of the stela contains an air space; a second aluminum grille on the rear of the stela allows for air circulation inside the shaft.

The square corner posts at the end of the perimeter benches are battered and have pyramidal caps that echo the apex of the stela. A bronze plaque memorializing the First Army Division is mounted on the front of the north post; another donated by the California Society of the Order of the Founders and Patriots of America is located on the front of the south post.

The stepped podium in front of the stela supports a simple lectern 3'-0" wide x 1'-6" deep x 4'-0" high. Five galvanized iron pipes used as flagpole supports are installed in a line along the rear of the podium.

The stone portions of the rostrum are painted white; the concrete and tile areas are painted red. A hedge is planted behind the rostrum to hide buildings just beyond the cemetery wall. On the side nearest San Francisco Bay the hedge is *Pittosporum eugenioides*; on the southwest side it is *Pittosporum tenuifolium*.

Site context: San Francisco National Cemetery is located in the Presidio, the former military reservation that occupies the northwestern tip of the San Francisco peninsula. The cemetery occupies a rectangular tract of land that gently rises toward the southwest. The northeast end of the property commands a panoramic view of San Francisco Bay. The rostrum is sited near the main entrance gates in the eastern corner of the cemetery. A paved walkway leads straight to it from the main drive. A flagstaff rises from the middle of this walkway. A speaker at the podium looks directly up the walkway to the flagstaff and beyond to the superintendent's lodge on the opposite side of the main drive. A panoramic view of San Francisco Bay unfolds to the speaker's right, and the headstone-covered slopes of the cemetery gently rise to the left.

History: The post cemetery at the Presidio was elevated to the status of national cemetery in December 1884. Originally encompassing 9.5 acres, it now covers 28.34 acres. It was the first national cemetery on the Pacific Coast and the only one on the coast until the establishment of Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego in 1934. U.S. military activities in the West as well as expanded involvement in the Pacific after the Spanish-American War increased the demand for burial sites in this cemetery, and by 1910 the burial ground had become the nation's third largest national cemetery. Temporary rostrums were built in the cemetery repeatedly to accommodate speakers at the Grand Army of the Republic's annual Memorial Day observances, and in 1911 the inspector general of the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps's western division recommended the construction of a permanent one. A bill to appropriate \$10,000 for this purpose was written in 1912 but not passed by Congress. An authorization for \$6,000, inserted by Congressman Julius Kahn of California into the 1914-15 army appropriations bill, did pass in April 1914.

The rostrum was designed in the Office of the Quartermaster General in Washington, D.C., and construction is presumed to have started in the fall of 1914. It was completed April 24, 1915, at a cost of \$5,835.15, according to the Quartermaster General's annual report for 1915.

The structure's original plans included a toilet room underneath the rostrum, but this was eliminated from the design prior to construction. The room, containing a single toilet and a sink, would have been reached by a set of stairs descending from grade at the back of the stela. The exterior door to the room would have been flanked by two windows to light the interior.

The cemetery's cast-iron Gettysburg Address plaque was installed on the front of rostrum in May 1934. It was placed high in order to be visible above and behind speakers on the podium. The perforated aluminum ventilation grilles on the front and rear of the stela were installed in September 1959.

San Francisco 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 is a contributing resource within the Presidio of San Francisco National Historic Landmark District, designated in 1962.

Sources:

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Office of the Quartermaster General. Drawings for Rostrum for National Cemetery, Presidio of San Francisco, Calif., October 1914. Project 3-1275. National Cemetery Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, D.C.

"Plans begun to house exhibits." *San Francisco Chronicle.* July 28, 1914, 9.

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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War Department Annual Reports, 1915. H. Doc. 92, 64th Cong., 1st Sess. Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1916.

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.