

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

SAN ANTONIO NATIONAL CEMETERY, ROSTRUM

HALS No. TX-6-B

Location: 517 Paso Hondo Street, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas

The San Antonio National Cemetery rostrum is located at latitude 29.421368, longitude -98.466905 (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: 1889-90

Builder / Contractor: probably the Champion Iron Fence Company, Kenton, Ohio

Description: The rostrum is an octagonal open-air platform about 16' across x about 18" high surmounted by a wrought-iron railing carried on eight cast-iron corner posts. The side walls, built of cut blocks of local limestone laid in two visible courses (with additional courses below grade) are articulated by eight shallow projections that wrap each corner. The floor is poured concrete surrounded by pre-cast concrete coping blocks that overhang the perimeter walls by a few inches.

A flight of two cast-iron steps leads from the ground onto the rostrum floor. The ornate steps feature lattice-pattern pierced risers and S-scroll pierced stringers. The wrought-iron railings match the railings that connect the corner posts around the edge of the platform.

The corner posts are the surviving lower portions of tall cast-iron posts that once supported a cast-iron tent-form roof, which was decorated by an iron open fretwork decorative frieze and scrollwork spandrels. The roof was sheathed in tin or galvanized-iron roofing.

Site context: The 3.63-acre cemetery is rectangular with two large circular drives linked by an axial drive. A transverse drive leads from the entrance gates to the eastern circle, which contains the cemetery's flagpole. The rostrum is located just inside the entrance gates, to the west of the transverse drive and approximately 100' from the flagpole.

History: San Antonio National Cemetery was established after the Civil War in 1867 to allow Union dead from San Antonio and surrounding areas to be consolidated into a single burial ground.

The U.S. Army Quartermaster's Department, responsible for maintenance and operation of the national cemeteries, contracted to have seven rostrums built in selected cemeteries in 1889-90, including San Antonio. These covered platforms served as speaker's stands at Decoration Day (later Memorial Day) observances and other ceremonial occasions. They were built to a standard Quartermaster Department design previously employed to construct rostrums at six cemeteries in 1886-87 and five more in 1888. All of these rostrums were built by the Champion Iron Fence Company of Kenton, Ohio. Based on the appearance of the 1889-90 rostrums, which feature identical ironwork, it is likely they were built by the same firm.¹

Most of the rostrums built in 1889-90 had brick foundations and side walls. At San Antonio, local limestone was used instead because it was more plentiful, cheaper, and of higher quality than the local brick, and because the cemetery superintendent's lodge was built of stone. The San Antonio rostrum was completed in February 1890. Due to deterioration, its roof was removed in May 1957, and the roof posts cut down to form railing posts.

San Antonio National Cemetery was transferred from the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army to the Veterans Administration (now the Department of Veterans Affairs) in 1973. It was added to 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.

¹ The seven rostrums built in 1889-90 were those in the national cemeteries at San Antonio; Alexandria, Virginia; Andersonville, Georgia; Beaufort, South Carolina; Corinth, Mississippi; Fort Smith, Arkansas; and New Bern, North Carolina. Only the examples at New Bern and San Antonio survive from this group.

Sammartino, Therese T. National Register of Historic Places nomination for "San Antonio 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.