

CAMP BUTLER NATIONAL CEMETERY



Camp Butler in 1862. National Archives and Records Administration.

Union Training Camp

The State of Illinois established Camp Butler in August 1861 in response to President Abraham Lincoln's second call for volunteers to suppress the rebellion. Named for William Butler, the state treasurer, its location on Clear Lake was unfortunate. By October measles and typhoid swept the camp. Men who died were buried near the infantry encampment.

In December 1861, the military relocated to higher ground six miles southwest of Springfield. The new locale was served by reliable road and rail connections. Union troops departed Camp Butler in early February 1862. Until fall 1863, the facility served as a prison camp for Confederates.

After the last prisoners left, Camp Butler resumed its role as a Union training camp. Over the course of the Civil War, more than 200,000 Union soldiers passed through it. The camp formally closed on June 19, 1866.

National Cemetery

The original 6.5-acre cemetery was created in 1862. More than 700 Union soldiers who died in Camp Butler Hospital were buried here, along with a similar number of Confederate prisoners. Unlike most national cemeteries established after the Civil War, the first interments were not arranged in regular rows. Rather, graves were “dug as most convenient.”

For nearly a decade, a picket fence separated Union graves in the “cemetery proper” from Confederate graves. By the 1870s, a brick wall enclosed the entire property. All graves were marked temporarily with wooden headboards. Permanent headstones for Union graves were installed after 1873 and for Confederate graves in 1908.

The graves of unknown soldiers originally featured small, square marble markers. In 1938, the army replaced these with upright headstones to create a uniform appearance.



Pre-1908 view of cemetery showing the original superintendent's lodge, flagpole mound, and unknown graves with square markers. National Archives and Records Administration.



Ceremonial area with flagpole and cannon monuments, 1933. The original octagonal rostrum, left, was replaced in 1939. National Archives and Records Administration.

Superintendents

An 1867 law directed the secretary of war to appoint a “meritorious and trustworthy” superintendent to manage each national cemetery. To qualify for the position, an individual must have been an army enlisted man disabled in service. A later change to the law allowed any honorably mustered-out or discharged commissioned officer or enlisted man to serve.

James McCaulley, who lost an arm while serving in the 25th Indiana Infantry, was the first superintendent here. He saw the first permanent lodge constructed and flagstaff installed. Stone gateposts flanking the entrance supported an iron archway that read “National Cemetery.”

From 1906 to 1930, Spanish-American War veteran George W. Ford, an African American, served as superintendent. He oversaw construction of the current lodge. Ford died in 1939 and is buried in Section 3, Grave 869.