

# FORT McPHERSON NATIONAL CEMETERY



Fort McPherson, 1865. The Battle of Atlanta (1910).

## Frontier Fort

In 1863, the U.S. Army sent Gen. George M. O'Brien to select the site for a fort to protect the growing transcontinental railroad and settlers migrating west. Perched above Cottonwood Canyon in the Nebraska Territory, Fort McKean was renamed in 1866 for Union Gen. James B. McPherson, who was killed in the 1864 Battle of Atlanta. Soldiers posted here were actively engaged with various American Indian tribes from 1864 until the army abandoned the fort.

Two significant expeditions embarked from Fort McPherson. Lt. Col. George A. Custer led the 7th U.S. Cavalry in a campaign against tribes in Kansas in 1868. The following year, Maj. Eugene Carr led the 5th U.S. Cavalry to defeat the Cheyenne at the Battle of Blue Summit Springs.

For seventeen years, the garrison protected wagon trains, stagecoaches, and mail and telegraph lines. Completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 transformed the area. Wagon traffic declined and American Indians were pushed farther west. In 1880 the U.S. Army vacated Fort McPherson.

## National Cemetery

Fort McPherson National Cemetery, established in October 1873, evolved from an existing post cemetery. The army used a 107-acre tract to consolidate the dead removed from frontier posts it had abandoned. The first remains came from Fort Kearney, Nebraska, and Fort Sedgwick, Colorado.

By 1874, the remains of 389 U.S. soldiers, 271 of them unidentified, had been reinterred. Between 1878 and 1947, remains from twenty-three more military posts in Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming were reburied here.



An undated photograph of Decoration (Memorial) Day at the cemetery. Nebraska State Historical Society, NE RG2608-2926b.



Lodge and cemetery, 1903. National Archives and Records Administration.

Per an 1867 law, the secretary of war appointed a “meritorious and trustworthy” superintendent to manage the cemetery. To qualify for the position, the individual had to have been an enlisted man disabled in service. These rules were loosened in 1872 to allow any man honorably discharged from the service of the United States to serve as a cemetery superintendent.

The first superintendent, assigned here on March 9, 1874, was George Griffin, formerly a captain in the 1st District of Columbia Cavalry. The army constructed a lodge for the superintendent and his family two years later.

In 1920, the U.S. Army determined that the property was too large for a national cemetery. As a result, much of the undeveloped land was transferred to private ownership. The federal government retained 20 acres.