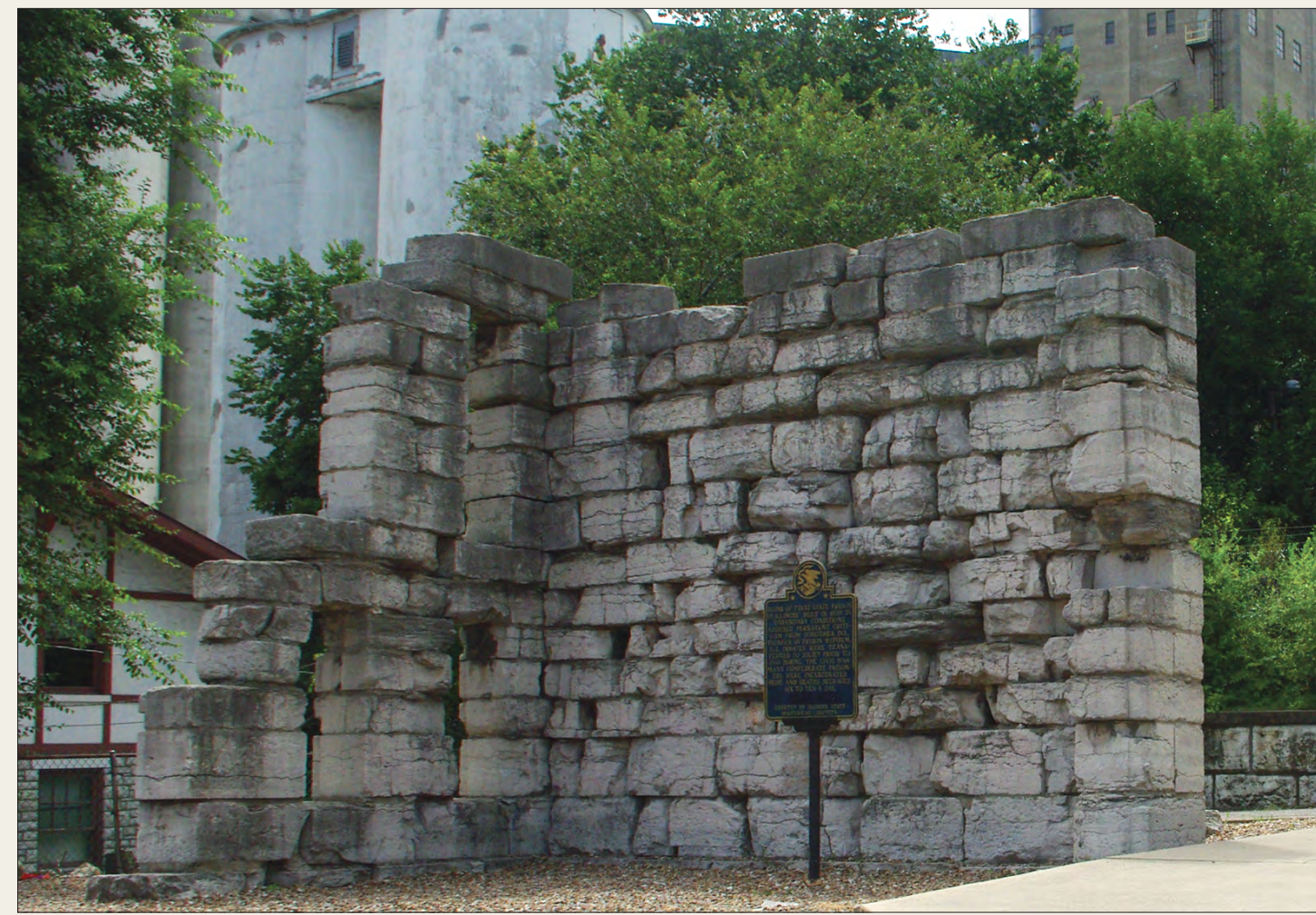


NORTH ALTON CONFEDERATE CEMETERY

Alton Military Prison

In late 1861, Union Gen. Henry Halleck received permission to use the former Illinois State Penitentiary in Alton, Illinois, as a military prison. The old prison had 256 cells, a hospital, a warden's house, and long-standing problems with drainage and sanitation.



This section of wall in downtown Alton is the only remnant of the old state penitentiary that held Confederate prisoners.

A U.S. Army inspector reported that the prison could house up to 1,750 prisoners. The first 1,640 prisoners arrived in early March 1862. Most had been captured at Fort Donelson, a Confederate stronghold on the Cumberland River west of Clarksville, Tennessee, that surrendered on February 16, 1862.

Within months smallpox broke out and the disease was a constant plague at the prison. The army built hospitals on islands in the Mississippi River in an effort to treat victims and contain the disease. Prisoners and Union soldiers who died on the islands were buried there; the remains were never moved to the mainland.

Between February 1862 and the end of the war, 11,760 Confederate prisoners entered the prison at Alton. Nearly 1,300 died there and were buried on the grounds.

The Confederate Cemetery

Lt. Col. Sidney Burbank received specific instructions to guide burial of prisoners: "Those who may die will be decently interred and a proper mark affixed to their place of burial, which will be within the usual grounds set apart for that purpose in the city of Alton." Prisoners were placed in individual coffins in trenches. Each grave was marked with a numbered stake. Mr. W. H. Hart buried most of these dead and kept a record book of the interments.

The federal government assumed ownership of the cemetery in 1867. Henry Nichols, a U.S. Army quartermaster clerk, inspected the site in 1899. After speaking with Hart, he decided that even using the record book, it was "utterly impossible to identify the graves of those buried there."

The Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead tried without success to document these burials in 1907. Finally, the Commission hired Van Amringe Granite Company to erect the existing 57-foot-tall obelisk, which was completed in December 1909. Bronze plaques on the base contain the names of 1,354 soldiers buried here and those buried in the smallpox hospital cemetery. Names of civilians who died at the prison were omitted from the plaques.



The Champion Iron Company of Kenton, Ohio, erected the wrought-iron fence and the memorial gates between 1909 and 1911; the Works Progress Administration repaired them in 1935. National Archives and Records Administration.

Toward Reconciliation

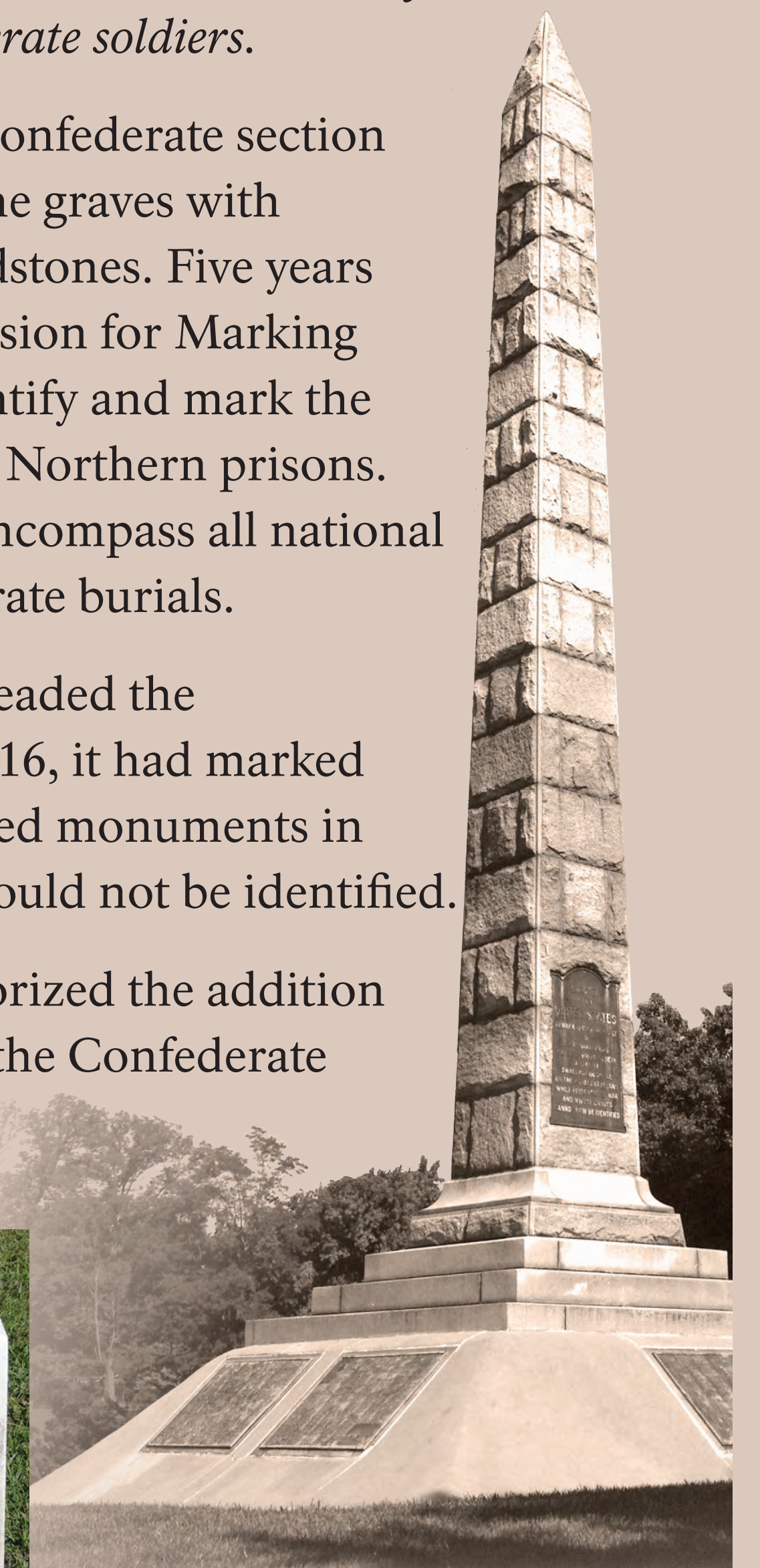
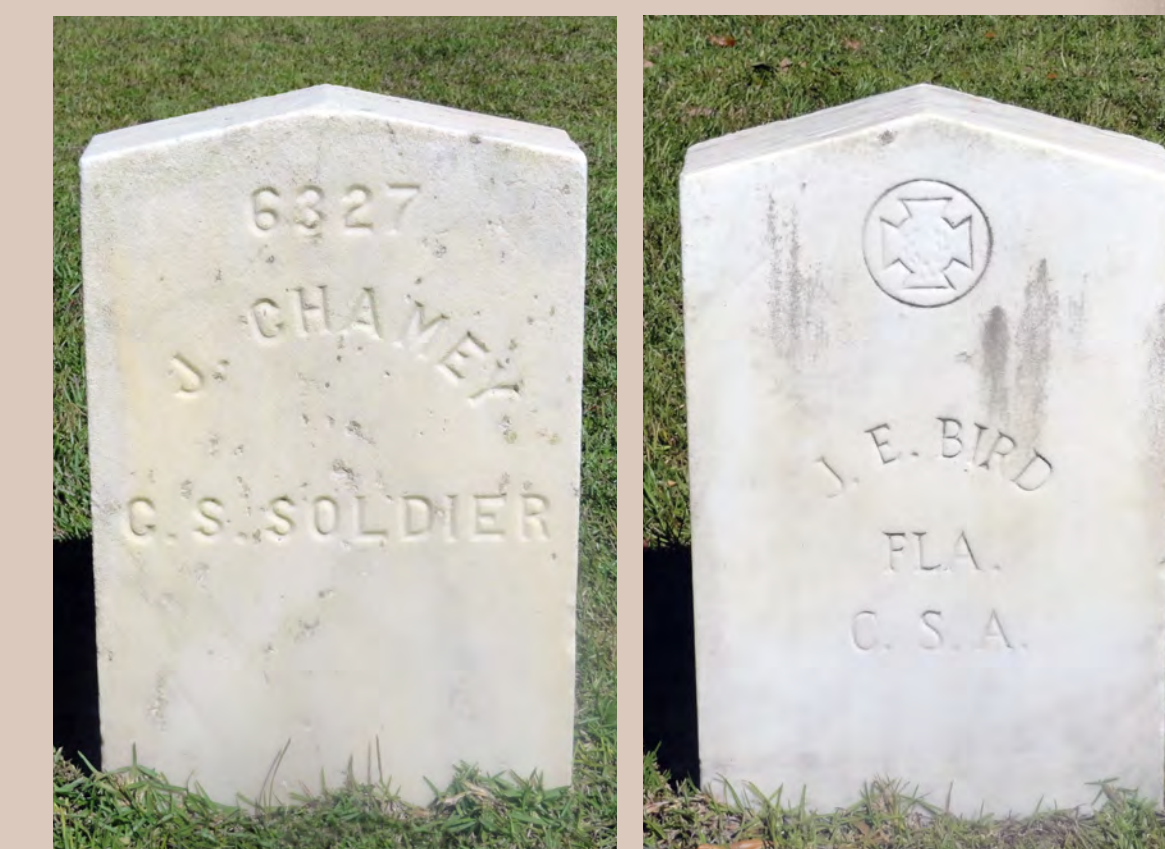
On May 30, 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic decorated Union and Confederate graves at Arlington National Cemetery. Thirty years later President William McKinley proclaimed:

The Union is once more the common altar of our love and loyalty, our devotion and sacrifice . . . Every soldier's grave made during our unfortunate Civil War is a tribute to American valor . . . in the spirit of fraternity we should share with you in the care of the graves of the Confederate soldiers.

The War Department created the Confederate section at Arlington in 1901, and marked the graves with distinctive pointed-top marble headstones. Five years later, Congress created the Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead to identify and mark the graves of Confederates who died in Northern prisons. Its mission was later expanded to encompass all national cemeteries that contained Confederate burials.

Four former Confederate officers headed the Commission over its lifetime. By 1916, it had marked in excess of 25,500 graves and erected monuments in locations where individual graves could not be identified.

In 1930, the War Department authorized the addition of the Southern Cross of Honor to the Confederate headstone.



*North Alton Confederate Cemetery Monument, 1909, Alton, Ill.
Original Commission headstone (left) and headstone with Southern Cross of Honor (right).*



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
National Cemetery Administration

To learn more about benefits and programs for Veterans and families, visit www.va.gov