

PROSPECT HILL SOLDIERS' LOT



Mourners at Alexandria National Cemetery, Virginia, c. 1865. After 1873, standard marble headstones replaced the wood headboards seen here. Miller, Photographic History of the Civil War (1910).

Civil War Dead

An estimated 700,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died in the Civil War (1861-1865). As the death toll rose, the U.S. government struggled with the urgent but unplanned need to bury fallen Union troops. This propelled the creation of a national cemetery system.

On September 11, 1861, the War Department directed officers to keep "accurate and permanent records of deceased soldiers." Federal authority to create military burial grounds came in an Omnibus Act of July 17, 1862. Cemetery sites were chosen where troops were concentrated: camps, hospitals, battlefields, railroad hubs. By 1872, 74 national cemeteries and several soldiers' lots contained 305,492 remains. About 45 percent were unknown.

The U.S. government established soldiers' lots at private cemeteries in northern states. National cemeteries, in contrast, were built throughout the South where most Civil War action occurred. While the army reported dozens of lots containing Union dead in the 1870s, the National Cemetery Administration maintains only fifteen. The number of graves ranges from less than ten to nearly 400 in these lots.

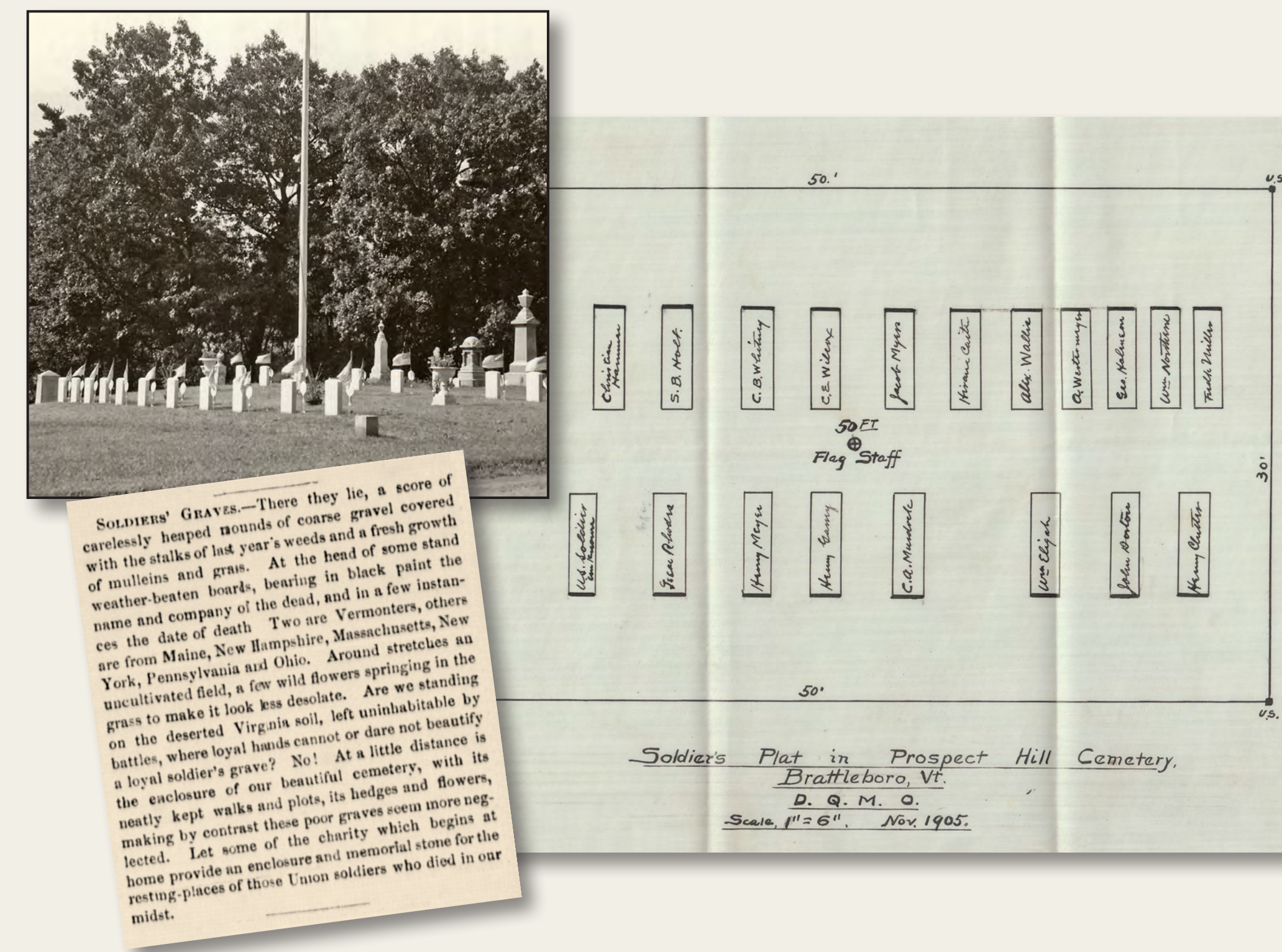
Brattleboro at War

In May 1861, a month after the Confederate assault on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, the State of Vermont established a camp in the town of Brattleboro. The barracks and other buildings were used to house recruits and train volunteer Union soldiers. In September, the 4th Vermont Infantry mustered into service and departed for Washington, D.C. They were the first of more than 10,000 troops to pass through the camp. Ten infantry regiments and one artillery battery were organized here.

Gov. Frederick Holbrook, for whom the camp was later named, prevailed upon the War Department to establish a military hospital in Vermont. He believed fresh cool Vermont air would aid the recovery of men unaccustomed to southern heat. In January 1863, several buildings were converted into a U.S. General Hospital. It could originally accommodate up to 2,000 patients. By 1864, new construction doubled that number. Brattleboro was home to the largest of three military hospitals operating in Vermont during the Civil War.



Top: Undated photograph of U.S. General Hospital. Special Collections of the Brooks Memorial Library, Brattleboro. Right: Union soldiers outside of a supply hut at the hospital, 1864. Courtesy of Thomas St. John.



Top: Photograph of soldiers' lot in 1954. National Cemetery Administration. Lower left: Article published in the Vermont Phoenix (Brattleboro), June 15, 1866. Library of Congress. Right: Plan of soldiers' lot with the names of the dead, November 1905. National Archives and Records Administration.

Military Burials

The bodies of most Vermont soldiers who died at the U.S. General Hospital were transported home for burial. Nineteen Union soldiers were interred on the hospital grounds, only one was unknown.

In 1866, the army moved these remains from the hospital cemetery to Brattleboro's Prospect Hill Cemetery. Three years later the town sold the small, rectangular soldiers' lot to the U.S. government for \$100.

Civil War veterans decorated the soldiers' graves with flowers as part of the first Decoration (Memorial) Day observance in 1868. The ceremony featured music, speeches, and a cannon salute. By 1874, the lot was enclosed with a hedge and trees were planted at the corners. The nineteen graves were marked with permanent marble headstones. A flagstaff was installed in the 1890s.