

RICHMOND NATIONAL CEMETERY

Union Prisoners

Richmond, the Confederate capital, housed thousands of Union prisoners of war in three prisons—Libby Prison, Castle Thunder, and Belle Isle. In March 1862, the Confederate government seized Luther Libby's warehouse and converted it into Libby Prison. Five months later, Gleanor's Tobacco Warehouse, Palmer's Factory, and Whitlock's Warehouse collectively became Castle Thunder prison.

Another prison opened that summer on Belle Isle, a small island in the James River across from Libby Prison. This facility housed prisoners in tents on an open field. Unshaded in summertime, tents were stifling; in winter they were cold and windy. Poor conditions fostered disease at all three prisons and, as a result, thousands of Union captives died. Confederate authorities buried them in various private Richmond cemeteries. Hundreds were buried on Belle Isle.



Libby Prison, c. 1864. The print, with prisoners visible in the windows, contradicts Confederate orders directing guards to shoot anyone looking out. Library of Congress.

National Cemetery

During the Civil War, Union and Confederate armies fought multiple battles for control of Richmond. Thousands of Union soldiers perished. They are now buried in Richmond National Cemetery and six other national cemeteries established in the Richmond-Petersburg area in 1866.



Union prisoners were housed in tents on Belle Isle, c. 1864. Library of Congress.

Most of the men who lie here died in Richmond's Confederate prisons. Among those are 3,200 Union soldiers reinterred from Oakwood Cemetery, and another 388 from Hollywood Cemetery. The remains of 210 prisoners were moved from Belle Isle to the national cemetery, along with twelve men removed from a trench in the "Rocketts," a suburb near Castle Thunder prison. The remains of 2,710 Union soldiers who died in local battles are interred here, too.

Nearly a decade passed between the time the cemetery was established and the completion of the reinterments. An 1868 U.S. Army report estimated the total at 6,329. By 1874, the grave count rose to 6,540. In addition, fourteen non-combatants—civilians and government employees—are buried here.

The 8-acre cemetery was originally laid out in four sections with a flagstaff mound in the center. Each section, divided by graveled walks, was organized into six plots. The government erected its first brick Second Empire-style lodge here in 1870. By 1874, a stone wall enclosed the cemetery. The first superintendent, Patrick Hart, a discharged sergeant from Co. B, 44th U.S. Infantry, erected a greenhouse near the lodge where he raised plants and trees for use in the cemetery.

Today, over 9,000 burials are located in the cemetery, including an unknown Confederate soldier reinterred here in 1978.



The rostrum, built 1888, with unknown grave markers in foreground, 1908. National Archives and Records Administration.