WOODLAWN NATIONAL CEMETERY

Elmira Military Depot

On April 15, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln issued a call for volunteers to put down the Confederate rebellion. Three days later, New York Gov. Edwin G. Morgan appealed for 13,280 troops to fill the state's quota of soldiers. He also announced that military bases would be established at New York City, Albany, and Elmira.

Located on two railroad lines and a canal, Elmira was the perfect rendezvous point for enlistees from upstate New York. Between 1861 and 1863, more than 20,000 men passed through the city on their way to the front. All three units of the army—infantry, artillery, and cavalry—were mustered in and trained at Elmira.

The 8th New York Militia band, some of the 20,000 men who mustered in at Elmira, c. 1861. Library of Congress.

Various buildings in town were leased to house recruits and store supplies. Later, officials acquired land in four Elmira locales, and established camps with barracks, officers' quarters, kitchens, and mess halls. Two of these camps were eventually closed. In summer 1864, Camp Rathbun or Barracks No. 3, located between Water Street and the Chemung River, became Elmira Prison Camp. Prison guards were housed in tents and barracks outside the west wall of the prison. Arnot Barracks, or Barracks No. 1, continued to house recruits and drafted men for the duration of the war.

National Cemetery

An 1871 Quartermaster Department inspection reported that 119 Union soldiers and 2,982 Confederate prisoners were buried in the private Woodlawn Cemetery. The graves of nine more Union dead were acknowledged here later. Most had died at Elmira General Hospital.

In 1874, through the efforts of Congressman H. Boardman Smith of Elmira, the government lot in Woodlawn Cemetery was designated Woodlawn National Cemetery. The Union graves, at the north end of the cemetery, were marked with marble headstones.

Smith also wanted the War Department to mark Confederate graves, but it refused on the basis it lacked the authority. These graves remained unmarked until 1908 when the Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead completed installation of the distinctive pointed-top headstones.
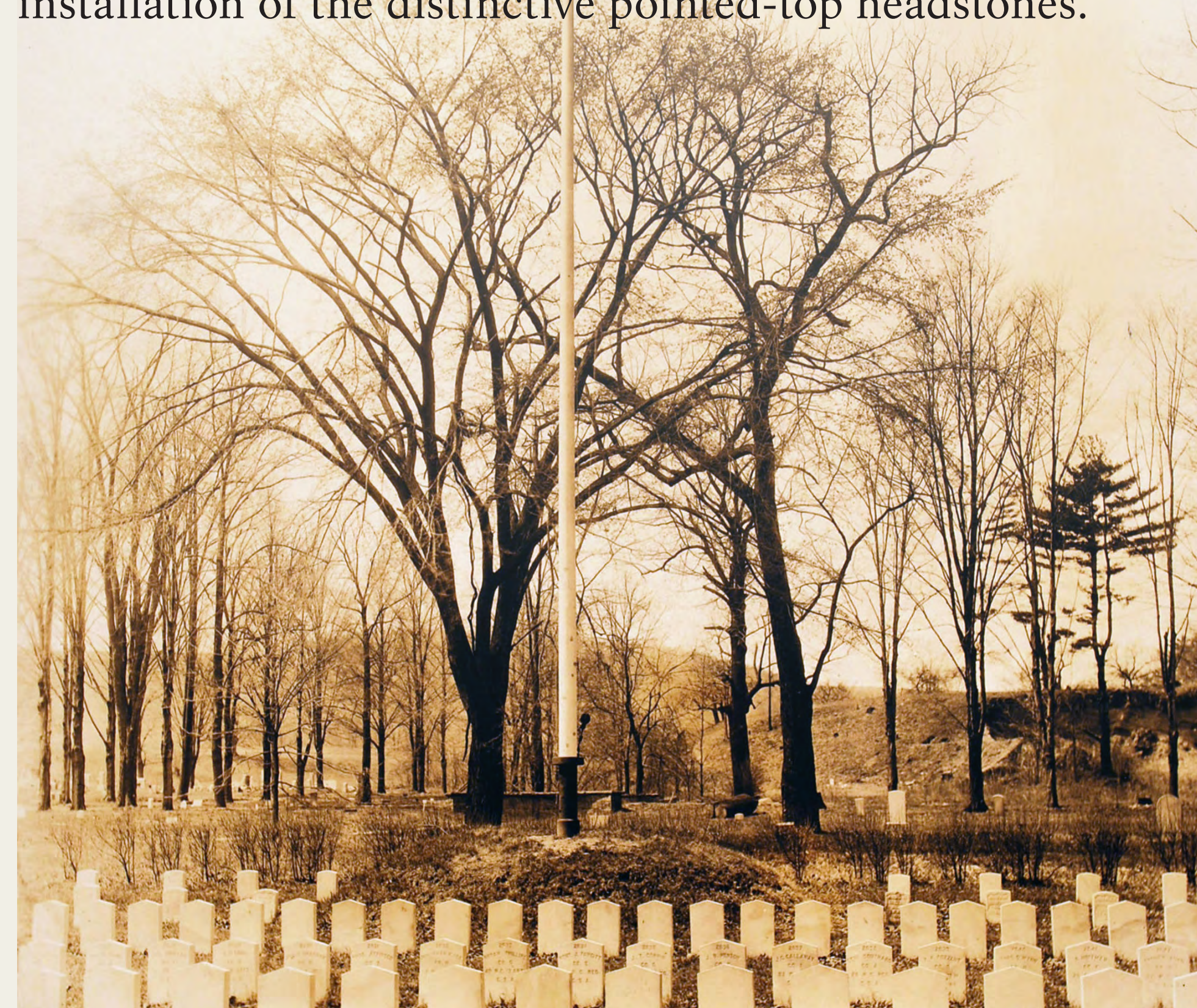
Woodlawn National Cemetery, c. 1933. National Archives and Records Administration.

Shohola Monument, 1912. National Archives and Records Administration.

Disaster: Shohola Monument

On July 15, 1864, a train bound for Elmira carrying Confederate prisoners and their Union guards departed Camp Lookout, Maryland. As it rounded a curve near Shohola, Pennsylvania, it rammed a coal train head-on. A telegraph operator had mistakenly put both trains on the same track.

Forty-nine prisoners and seventeen guards died. Railroad employees and Confederate prisoners buried them in a mass grave near the accident site. In 1911, the Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead exhumed the remains and reburied them in Woodlawn National Cemetery. The victims' names were inscribed on a single monument installed the next year—Union on one side, Confederate on the other.