

FOREST 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.

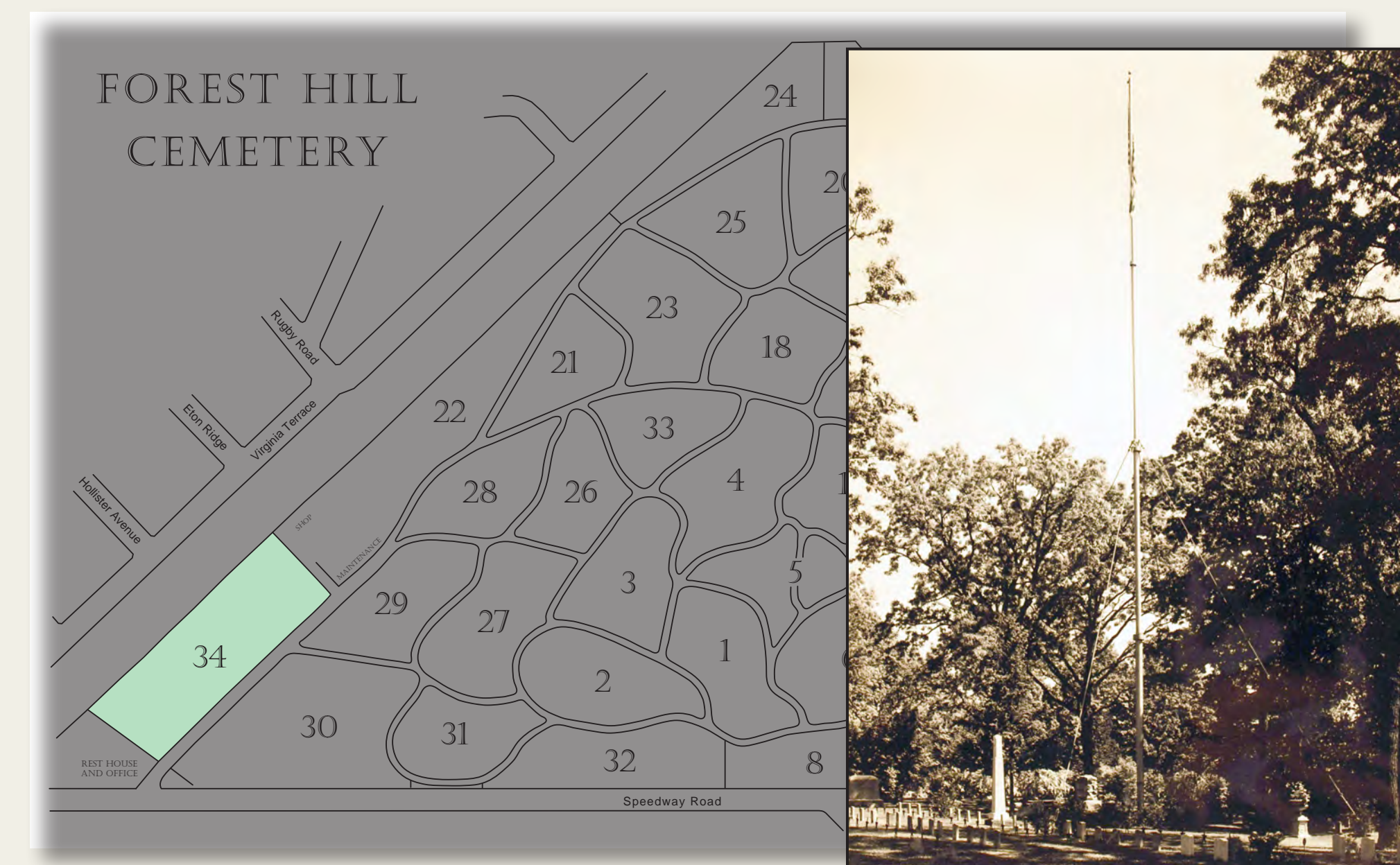
Harvey U.S. General Hospital

In spring 1862, Wisconsin Gov. Louis P. Harvey traveled south to visit the state’s volunteer soldiers who were being treated in hospitals near the fighting. On April 19, while crossing from one boat to another at Savannah, Tennessee, Harvey fell in the river and drowned. After his death, Harvey’s widow, Cordelia, was appointed the state sanitary agent. Mrs. Harvey worked tirelessly to provide for Wisconsin’s troops during the Civil War.

She toured hospitals in the South and saw the appalling conditions soldiers endured. In 1863, she persuaded President Abraham Lincoln to establish a general hospital in Madison. Harvey U.S. General Hospital opened in a three-story octagonal house built for former Gov. Leonard Farwell. A branch hospital at nearby Camp Randall was also set up. In December 1864, the complex reported that it was treating 587 patients. After the war, the general hospital became the Wisconsin Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home.



Orphans’ Home, 1870. It closed in 1874, after the last children had aged out of care. Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS-2690.



Forest Hill Cemetery plan, soldiers’ lot shaded green. Undated photograph of “Soldiers’ Rest.” National Archives and Records Administration.

Soldiers’ Lot

The City of Madison purchased land in 1857 to establish Forest Hill Cemetery. Section 34 of this 140-acre cemetery, set aside for Union dead in 1862, was initially known as “Soldiers’ Rest.” Its 240 interments include troops who died while training at Camp Randall. The remainder died at Harvey U.S. General Hospital. The city deeded the 0.36-acre lot to the federal government in 1866. The government acquired a second, smaller parcel in Forest Hill Cemetery in 1908.

The soldiers’ lot contains two Civil War memorials. The Wisconsin Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home Monument was erected in 1873. The marble obelisk is inscribed with the names of eight orphans who died at the home. Flanking it are the children’s graves marked with headstones bearing their initials.

In 1891, the Woman’s Relief Corps No. 37 erected a large boulder inscribed “To the Unknown Dead.” The corps—an auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic, a veterans organization—was founded in 1883 to perpetuate the memory of the men who saved the Union.