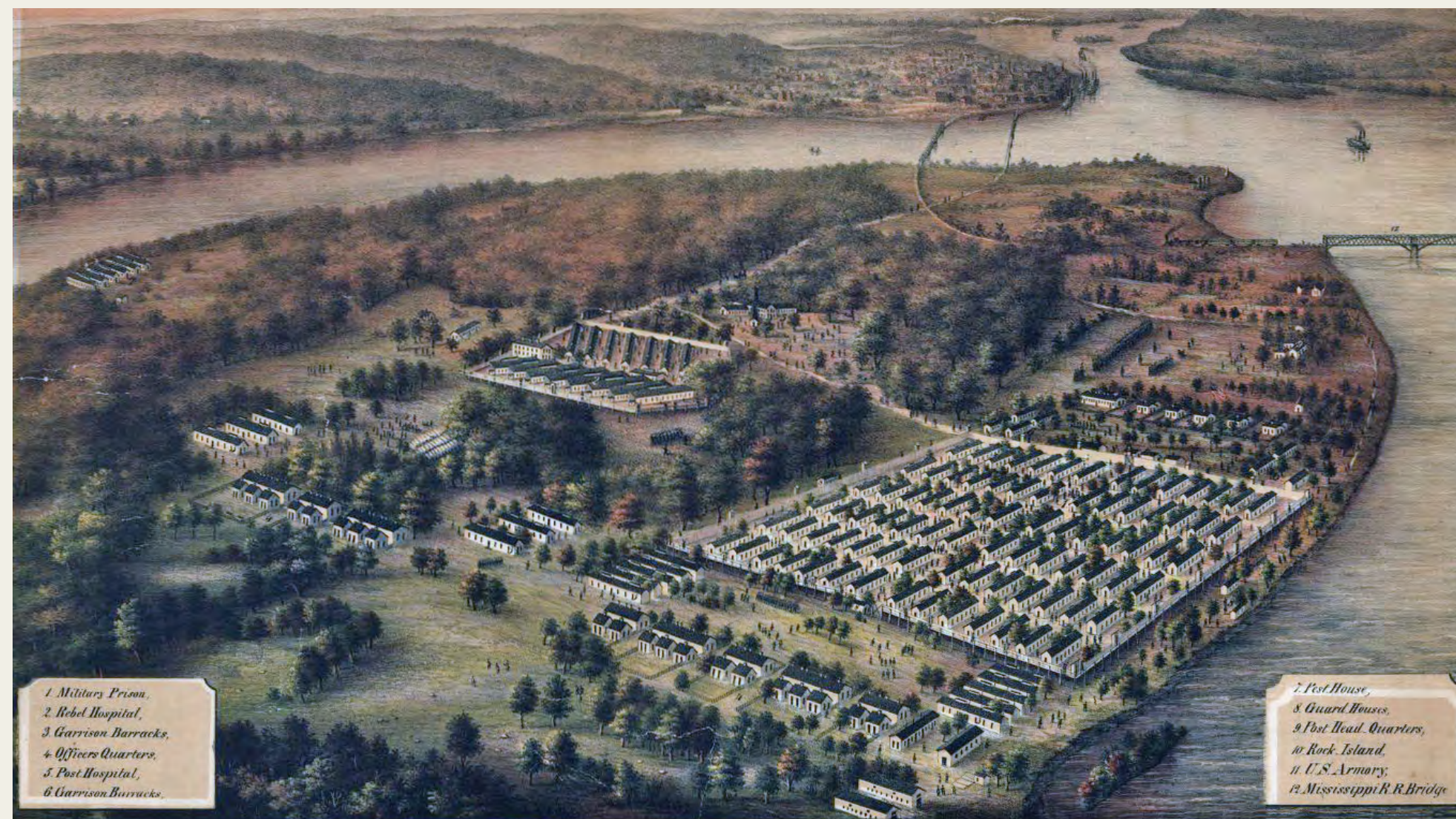


ROCK ISLAND CONFEDERATE CEMETERY



Bird's-eye view of Rock Island Prison Barracks, c. 1864. Library of Congress.

Rock Island Prison Camp

During summer 1863 two significant events took place. The Union and Confederate armies stopped exchanging prisoners, and the Union Army defeated the Confederates at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The Union prison system could not handle the resulting influx of prisoners, so later that summer, the War Department authorized a prisoner of war camp at Rock Island, Illinois.

Rock Island's 12-acre prison compound was surrounded by a ditch and a 12-foot-high plank fence punctuated with guard towers. It contained eighty-four barracks that held 10,080 prisoners. There was no hospital. The first prisoners arrived in December 1863. Temperatures fell, wind howled through walls; smallpox broke out. Nearly one-third of all prisoners who perished at Rock Island—995 men—died in the first three months.

By the end of July 1865 when the prison closed, more than 12,000 prisoners had passed through its gate. Almost 2,000 died at Rock Island. The U.S. Army razed the last prison buildings in 1907; nothing remains except the Confederate cemetery.

The Cemetery

The prison surgeon felt the original cemetery was too close to the prison. He selected this site for the new cemetery. Most Confederates in this cemetery were interred at the time of their death, but all prisoners buried elsewhere on the island were eventually moved here.

Confederate dead were buried by contract after removal to the "dead house." Frank Knox of Rock Island prepared bodies for burial and laid them in coffins made by his father Charles. Another man, J. de Harpart, hauled coffins to the cemetery and placed them into trenches he had prepared earlier. A headboard marked each grave.

In 1871, Lt. M. L. Poland mapped all graves using cannon barrels at each corner of the property as reference points. He wrote grave numbers on the map, corresponding to lists of the dead. Poland gave the plan to the post quartermaster for safe keeping.

The Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead inspected the cemetery in 1907. They used Lieutenant Poland's map to identify individual graves and set pointed-top marble headstones inscribed with the name and regiment of the deceased.



The cemetery pre-1890, with small U.S. flags on the graves. Rock Island Arsenal Museum.

Toward Reconciliation

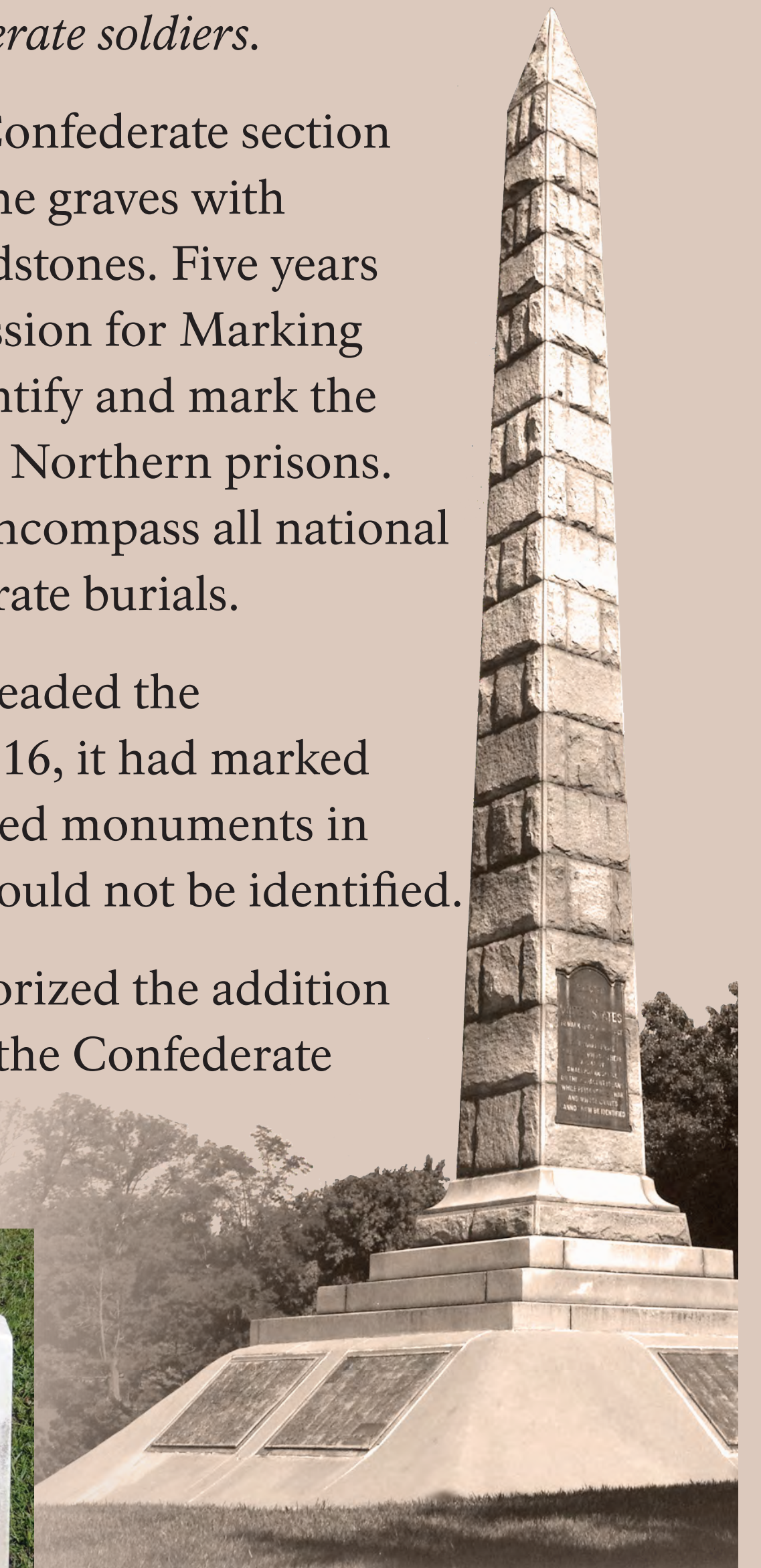
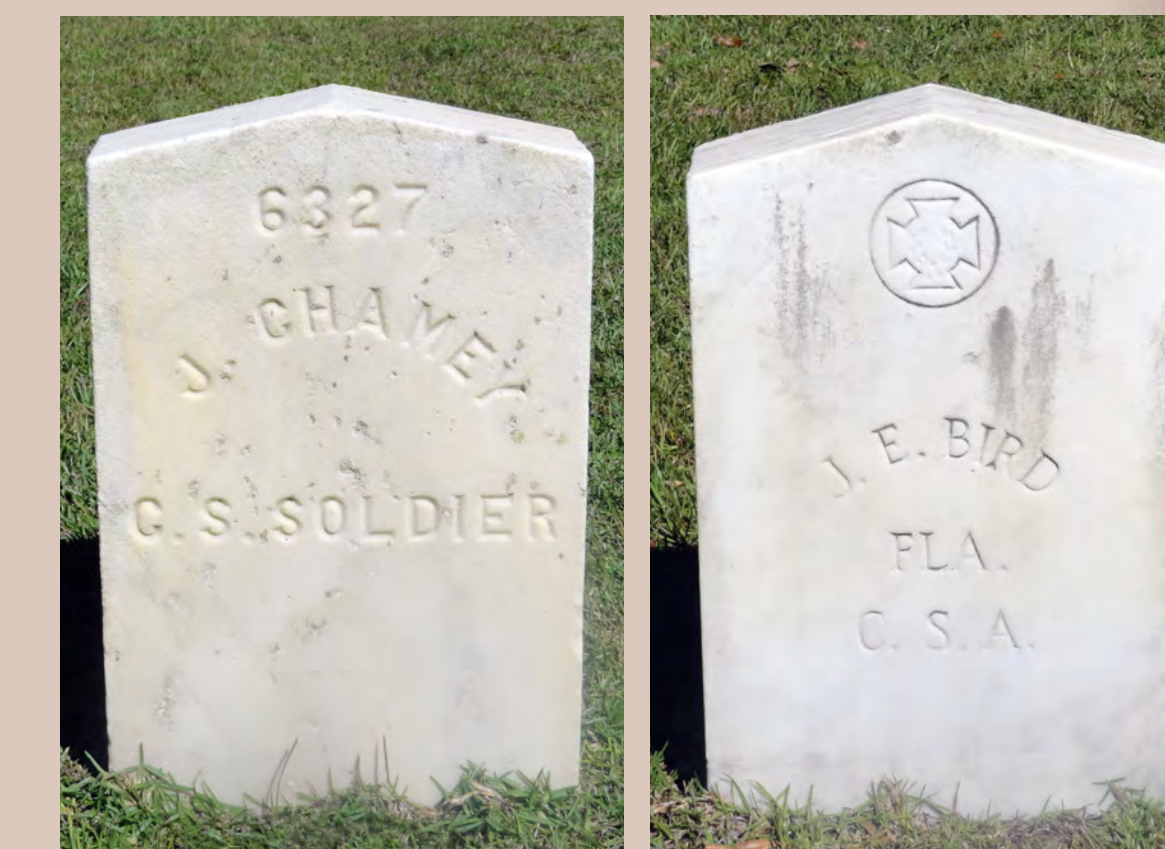
On May 30, 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic decorated Union and Confederate graves at Arlington National Cemetery. Thirty years later President William McKinley proclaimed:

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).