

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

Addendum to FORT SCOTT NATIONAL CEMETERY, ROSTRUM

HALS No. KS-3-A

Location: 900 East National Avenue, Fort Scott, Bourbon County, Kansas

The Fort Scott National Cemetery rostrum is located at latitude 37.821398, longitude -94.692298 (North American Datum of 1983). The coordinate represents the structure's southwest corner.

Present owner: National Cemetery Administration,
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Construction date: 1882 (rebuilt 1931)

Contractor: Michael A. McGowan, Washington, D.C.

Description: The symmetrical rostrum at Fort Scott National Cemetery is a red-brick rectangular podium 37'-8.5" long x 22'-7.5" wide. Its walls are articulated by ten evenly spaced shallow pilasters inset with vertical dados. Additional horizontal inset dados span the flat wall surfaces between the pilasters. The podium supports a concrete floor with a molded edge that overhangs the walls by a few inches. Ten 3'-7" high x 2'-square brick pedestals line the floor of the rostrum above the ten perimeter pilasters. These pedestals, which terminate in capstones with ovolo-molded edges, function as posts for an iron-pipe railing that encircles the perimeter of the podium 3' above the floor. Two sets of stairs provide access to the floor along the rostrum's short north and south sides. These have cut-stone steps that rest on brick spandrel walls. The iron-pipe railing extends down each staircase, supported on pipe balusters. Pipe newel posts with spiked ball terminations stand at the foot of each stair. The brick surfaces of the rostrum are painted red, the concrete and stone surfaces are painted tan, and the ironwork is painted black. Two iron, six-tube flag-pole supports are installed along the edge of the floor on the rostrum's west side.

The rostrum was originally covered by a wood trellis roof. The pedestals located around the perimeter of the podium are the remnants of ten of the twelve 11'-8"-high square columns that formerly supported the roof. The columns and trellis were designed to form a pergola-like framework for climbing vines to shade the rostrum. The capstones that survive atop the pedestals today are the cut-stone caps that once terminated each column under the trellis beams.

The rostrum was substantially rebuilt in 1931. The columns were simplified – the stepped bases of each were reduced from three brick courses to two, and a one-course annulet near the top of each was eliminated. A new poured concrete floor replaced the original sod floor. The upper portions of the side walls were taken down and reconstructed. This work eliminated the brick cornice that originally encircled the top of the walls as well as the upper margins of the perimeter-wall dados – which now simply terminate at the underside of the overhanging concrete floor.

The open trellis was covered with galvanized-iron sheet roofing in 1934. This roof was removed, the two interior columns dismantled, and the remainder of the columns shortened in 1961.

Site context: The rectangular grounds of Fort Scott National Cemetery rise gently from west to east. The historic main entrance is on the west side of the cemetery and connects to an axial drive that divides into two curving drives as the grounds become steeper toward the east. The superintendent's lodge, a flagstaff mound, and the rostrum are located near the eastern or rear wall and command panoramic views over the cemetery. The land immediately in front of the rostrum contains no graves and provides a lawn for visitors to gather during ceremonies.

History: The national cemetery at Fort Scott was established in 1862 to provide a central burial place for Union soldiers in southeastern Kansas and surrounding areas who died during the Civil War. The concept of building a rostrum in this cemetery dates at least to 1880, when superintendent William C. Hershberger asked his superiors in the U.S. Army Quartermaster's Department for permission to erect a temporary speaker's stand in anticipation of Decoration Day ceremonies that year. Although Hershberger estimated the cost would not exceed \$10, his request was denied due to lack of funds for this purpose.

At the end of the following year, Maj. C. H. Carlton, an inspector with the 3rd Cavalry, reported to Maj. Benjamin C. Card, the officer in charge of national cemeteries, that

[A]t least ten thousand discharged Union soldiers have settled in this County (in which Ft Scott National Cemetery is situated) and adjoining counties. When the road now being built [from the town to the cemetery] is completed, it will be the most attractive drive in the Vicinity, and bring great numbers of visitors to the Cemetery. The size of the Cemetery and lay of the ground makes it desirable that a suitable rostrum be erected.

An unsigned minute preserved with Carlton's letter in the quartermaster's records concurs with the major's appraisal: "[A] Rostrum would, in view of the large number of people visiting the cemetery on Decoration days, be of considerable advantage." External pressure

underscored these internal assessments. In January 1882, local members of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) – the nation’s politically powerful Union veterans’ association – petitioned Senator J. J. Ingalls requesting a congressional appropriation to fund a rostrum. Two weeks later, the Kansas encampment of the GAR sent a resolution to its congressmen requesting that the quartermaster general be urged to build rostrums at Fort Scott and Fort Leavenworth “such as have already been built at the National Cemetery at Vicksburg, Miss., for the better accommodation of old soldiers and those who annually meet at those places to commemorate the heroic deeds of those who sleep in those cemeteries.” Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs replied to the Kansas congressional delegation that rostrums were planned for the national cemeteries at Fort Scott and Fort Leavenworth as soon as funding was available.

In May 1882, the Quartermaster’s Department advertised for proposals to build rostrums at the Fort Scott and Fort Leavenworth national cemeteries, as well as at Marietta, Georgia; Stone’s River, Tennessee; and Mound City, Illinois. The winning bidder for Fort Scott was Michael A. McGowan of Washington, D.C., who proposed to do the work for \$1,768. He was also awarded the contract to build the rostrum at Fort Leavenworth for \$1,697.

McGowan’s contract completed July 1, 1882, required him to build both rostrums to a standard Quartermaster’s Department design developed for the national cemeteries in 1878. His workmen completed the Fort Scott rostrum in April 1883.

The rostrum appears to have fallen into disrepair over time, for it was largely rebuilt in 1931 with simplified brickwork and the original trellis roof was converted to a nearly flat roof in 1934. A 1950 plan in the records of the National Cemetery Administration indicates that there was a preliminary design for a new rostrum, grass assembly area, and improved flagstaff precinct at Fort Scott. This scheme, similar to one built at Alexandria National Cemetery, Virginia, in 1946, was not realized here. Instead, further deterioration led to the removal of the roof of the existing rostrum in 1961.

Fort Scott National Cemetery was transferred from the U.S. Army Memorial Affairs Agency to the Veterans Administration (now the Department of Veterans Affairs) in 1973. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1999 as part of the Civil War Era National Cemeteries Multiple Property Submission. The National Cemetery Administration plans to repair or restore the rostrum to its original appearance should funding become available.

Sources:

Holt, Dean W. *American Military Cemeteries*. 2nd ed. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2010.

Office of the Quartermaster General. Construction Division. Elevation, plan, and longitudinal section of flagpole steps, assembly area, and standard type-A rostrum, September 20, 1950. Plan No. MC-114-A (3-5-1-004). National Cemetery Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, D.C.

Records of the Veterans Administration, Department of Memorial Affairs, National Cemetery Historical File (Record Group 15/A-1, Entry 25), National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, General Correspondence and Reports Relating to National and Post Cemeteries (Record Group 92, Entry 576), National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

Sammartino, Therese T. National Register of Historic Places nomination for "Fort Scott National Cemetery." Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1999.

U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps. *Outline Description of Military Posts and Reservations in the United States and Alaska and of National Cemeteries*. Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1904.

Historian: Michael R. Harrison, 2012

Project Information: The documentation of lodges and rostrums in the national cemeteries was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), one of the Heritage Documentation Programs of the National Park Service, Richard O'Connor, Chief. The project was sponsored by the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) of the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Sara Amy Leach, Senior Historian. Project planning was coordinated by Catherine Lavoie, Chief of HABS. Historical research was undertaken by HABS Historians Michael R. Harrison and Virginia B. Price. NCA Historian Jennifer M. Perunko provided research and editorial support. Field work for selected sites was carried out and measured drawings produced by HABS Architects Paul Davidson, Ryan Pierce, and Mark Schara.