

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

WILMINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY, ROSTRUM

HALS No. NC-5-B

Location: 211 Market Street, Wilmington, New Hanover County, North Carolina

The Wilmington National Cemetery rostrum is located at latitude 34.238236, longitude -77.922490 (North American Datum of 1983). The coordinate represents the structure's approximate center.

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

Construction date: 1886-87

Builder / Contractor: Champion Iron Fence Company, Kenton, Ohio

Description: The rostrum is an octagonal, red-brick, open-air platform about 4' high and 16' wide surmounted by a wrought-iron railing. The platform is articulated by shallow corner pilasters with inset panels, additional inset panels on the flat wall surfaces between the pilasters, and a simple cornice, all created in brick laid in running bond. A coping of brick laid in a rowlock course forms a border for the rostrum's concrete floor.

Eight cast-iron steps lead from the ground up to the rostrum floor. The steps are ornate, featuring lattice-pattern pierced risers and S-scroll pierced stringers. The cast-iron newel posts and wrought-iron hand rails are original, as are the matching railings and octagonal corner posts that guard the perimeter of the platform. The corner posts are the remnants of tall iron posts that once supported a tent- or camp-form roof which was decorated by an iron open-fretwork decorative frieze and scrollwork spandrels. The roof was removed and the roof posts cut down into railing posts in February 1958. The balls that terminate the corner posts conceal the cuts where the posts were shortened.

The original roof was designed to be a framework only. It remained open to the sky until covered with galvanized iron sheathing in June 1934.

Site context: Wilmington National Cemetery is defined by an axial drive that runs through the level grounds; midway through the cemetery the road passes around a landscaped circle containing a flagstaff. The rostrum is located in Section 4 about 75' southeast of the flagpole. Any open space that may once have surrounded it as an assembly area has been filled with graves.

History: Wilmington National Cemetery was established in 1867 as part of a government effort to consolidate the remains of Union soldiers and sailors who died during the Civil War into centralized cemeteries. The national cemeteries were created and maintained by the U.S. Army Quartermaster's Department. In his January 1885 inspection report on the cemetery at Wilmington, civil engineer James Gall Jr. wrote,

There is an old dilapidated wooden structure, used as a speakers stand on Decoration days, situated in the most central part of the grounds which ought to be removed. The stand is unsightly and dangerous in its present condition and should be replaced, if possible, by a neat brick rostrum."¹

Gall estimated the labor to take down the speaker's stand, remove an old greenhouse, and build a coal pit would cost \$30.

The Quartermaster's Department had begun a concerted effort to build rostrums to a standard rectangular design in key national cemeteries in 1879. After encountering difficulties funding the construction of these structures after 1883, the department created a simpler and more cost-effective design that it began building in selected cemeteries in 1886. On July 12 of that year, the department advertised for bids to construct octagonal rostrums with iron superstructures at Loudon Park, Maryland; Cypress Hills, New York; Little Rock, Arkansas; Memphis, Tennessee; Nashville, Tennessee; and Wilmington. The five bids were opened on August 19. A. J. Mallard of Little Rock bid \$1,330 to build the rostrum at Little Rock. James H. Dyer of Washington, D.C., bid \$1,574.50 and \$1,600 to build just the examples at Loudon Park and Cypress Hills. The Champion Iron Fence Company of Kenton, Ohio, bid to build all six for \$596 a piece. The Composite Iron Works Company of New York City bid \$1,050 each for all six, and the Manly and Cooper Manufacturing Company of Philadelphia bid a range of prices from \$1,369 to \$1,555 to build all but the one at Nashville.

Champion Iron Fence Company won the contract. It produced the cast and wrought ironwork for all six rostrums at its factory in Kenton, Ohio, and shipped the pieces to the individual sites. A company mason visited each cemetery in turn to build the brick bases, starting at Loudon Park in September and October 1886 and progressing to Cypress Hills, Wilmington, Nashville, Memphis, and Little Rock. One or more men from the company then came to each site to install the iron superstructures.

Quartermaster Department civil engineer W. H. Owen selected the site for the rostrum at Wilmington in November 1886. "The site is not particularly desirable," he wrote, "but is, I

¹ James Gall, Jr., to R. A. Batchelder, January 15, 1885, dockets for Wilmington, RG 92, National Archives.

think, the best in the cemetery, considering all things." Construction of the brick base began in February 1887, and the rostrum was completed by April. English ivy, roses, and honeysuckle were planted around the rostrum soon thereafter to lend the structure the appearance of a picturesque garden pavilion.

Wilmington National Cemetery was transferred from the jurisdiction of 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 1997 as part of the Civil War Era National Cemeteries Multiple Property Submission.

Sources:

Call, Lewis W. *United States Military Reservations, National Cemeteries, and Military Parks. Title, Jurisdiction, etc.* Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1907.

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

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 "Wilmington National Cemetery." Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1997.

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.