



**Department of
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VA National Cemeteries – History and Development

On July 17, 1862, in the second summer of a war that few had believed would last more than a few months, Congress enacted legislation authorizing the president to purchase “cemetery grounds ... for soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country.” Fourteen national cemeteries were established that first year, including one in Sharpsburg, Md., where 4,476 Union soldiers were laid to rest after the one-day Battle of Antietam. (By comparison, approximately 3,000 American, British and Canadian fighters died on June 6, 1944, during the invasion of Normandy.)

By 1870, the remains of nearly 300,000 Union dead had been buried in 73 national cemeteries. Most of the cemeteries were located in the Southeast, near the battlefields and campgrounds of the Civil War. After the war, Army teams searched the countryside for the remains of soldiers who died in battle. They were buried in the new national cemeteries, which were enclosed by brick walls and entered through ornate gates. Tragically, the identities are unknown for nearly half the Union dead who are buried in national cemeteries.

What would become a national cemetery system operated by the Army evolved slowly after the Civil War. All honorably discharged Union veterans became eligible for burial in 1873. Cemeteries associated with military posts on the western frontier, such as Ft. McPherson, Neb., were added in the late 19th century.

In 1923, Congress established the American Battle Monuments Commission, an independent agency responsible for maintaining burial grounds in foreign countries for U.S. armed forces members who die overseas. The commission maintains 24 American military cemeteries as well as monuments and memorials.

In the 1930s, new national cemeteries were established to serve veterans living in metropolitan areas such as New York, Baltimore, Minneapolis, San Diego, San Francisco and San Antonio. Others associated with battlefields such as Gettysburg and Antietam were transferred from Army control to the National Park Service because of their historical significance.

In 1973, Congress authorized the transfer of 82 national cemeteries from the Department of the Army to the Veterans Administration, now the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Joining with 21 VA cemeteries located at hospitals and nursing homes, the National Cemetery System comprised 103 cemeteries after the transfer.

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On Nov. 11, 1998, congressional legislation changed the name of the National Cemetery System (NCS) to the National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

Today, there are 141 national cemeteries. Through its National Cemetery Administration, VA operates 125 of them. Two national cemeteries – Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia and the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. – are still administered by the Army. Fourteen national cemeteries continue to be maintained by the Department of the Interior's National Park Service.

More than three million people, including veterans of every war and conflict – from the Revolutionary War to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan – are buried in VA's national cemeteries, which have a total of more than 17,000 acres of land from Hawaii to Maine and from Alaska to Puerto Rico. More than 300 recipients of the Medal of Honor are buried in VA's national cemeteries. More than 950 monuments and memorials recall the courage and sacrifice of Americans – from Revolutionary War hero Nathan Hale, at Calverton, N.Y., National Cemetery, to America's prisoners of war memorialized at Riverside, Calif., National Cemetery.

In April 2007, VA opened its 125th cemetery – South Florida VA National Cemetery. Currently, 65 VA cemeteries in 34 states are able to provide both casket and cremation burials for America's veterans and their families. An additional 21 provide burial for family members of those already buried and can also bury cremated remains. The remaining 39 provide burials only if a family member is already interred in the cemetery.

In 1999 and 2003, with the passage of two laws, Congress directed VA to establish 12 new national cemeteries. Six have been opened -- at Fort Sill, Okla.; Pittsburgh, Detroit, Atlanta; Sacramento and West Palm Beach, Fla. The rest – one in Alabama, one in California, two in Florida, one in Pennsylvania and one in South Carolina – will be located near large populations of veterans who do not have access currently to burial in a veterans cemetery.

In addition to providing a gravesite, VA opens and closes the grave, provides a headstone or marker, a Presidential Memorial Certificate and a U.S. Flag, and perpetually cares for the grave at no cost to the veteran's family.

To complement national cemeteries and expand burial options for veterans, VA assists states in building or improving state veterans cemeteries through its State Cemetery Grants Program. VA will pay for construction costs in exchange for states providing the land and operating the cemeteries. VA has helped establish 69 veterans cemeteries in 37 states and U.S. territories, which provided more than 23,000 burials in fiscal year 2007. Since the program began in 1980, VA has awarded 163 grants totaling more than \$315 million.

Today, more than 23 million veterans, and current and former Reservists and National Guard members with 20 years of service, have earned the right to burial in a national cemetery. Veterans with discharges "other than dishonorable," their spouses and dependent children are eligible for burial in a VA national cemetery. Those who die on active duty may also be buried in a national cemetery.

For more information, contact the nearest national cemetery or a VA regional office at 1-800-827-1000. Information also is available on VA's home page at <http://www.cem.va.gov>.

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