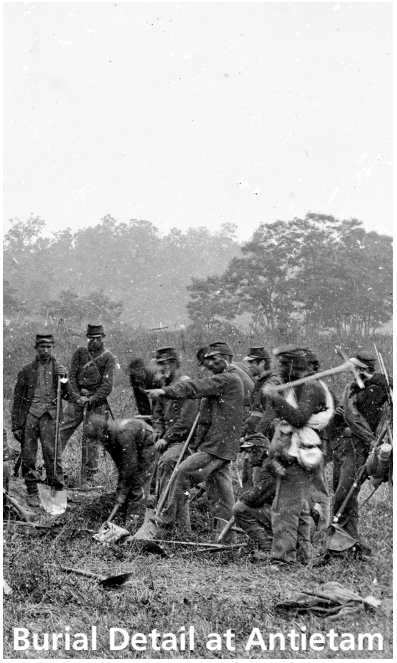
Antietam National Cemetery

Not For Themselves, But For Their Country



Burial Detail at Antietam

The Battle of Antietam, or Sharpsburg, on September 17, 1862, was the tragic culmination of Robert E. Lee's first invasion of the North. On that one fateful day more than 23,110 men were killed, wounded, or listed as missing. Approximately 4,000 were killed, and in the days that followed, many more died of wounds or disease. The peaceful village of Sharpsburg was turned into a vast hospital and burial ground extending for miles in all directions.

Burial details performed their grisly task with speed, but not great care. Graves ranged from single burials to long, shallow trenches accommodating hundreds. For example, William Roulette, whose farm still stands behind the visitor center today, had over 700 soldiers buried on his property. Grave markings were somewhat haphazard, and included stone piles, rough-hewn crosses and wooden headboards. A few soldiers were buried in area church cemeteries. In other cases, friends or relatives removed bodies from the area for transport home. By March of 1864, no effort had been made to find a suitable final resting place for those buried in the fields surrounding Sharpsburg. Many graves had become exposed; something had to be done.

Establishing a Plan

In 1864, State Senator Lewis P. Firey introduced a plan to the Maryland Senate to establish a state or national cemetery for the men who died in the Maryland Campaign of 1862. On March 23, 1865, the state established a burial site by purchasing 11¼ acres for $1,161.75.

The original Cemetery Commission's plan allowed for burial of soldiers from both sides. However, the rancor and bitterness over the recent conflict, and the devastated South's inability to raise funds to join in such a venture, persuaded the Commission to recant. Consequently, only Union dead are interred here. Confederate remains were re-interred in Washington Confederate Cemetery in Hagerstown, Maryland; Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Frederick, Maryland; and Elmwood Cemetery in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Approximately 2,800 Southerners are buried in these three cemeteries, over 60% of whom are unknown.

An Arduous Task

In an effort to locate grave sites and identify the dead, no one was of more value than two area men: Aaron Good and Joseph Gill. In the days, months, and years following the battle, these men freely gave of their time and gathered a large number of names and burial locations. The valuable service provided by these men cannot be overstated. The dead were identified by letters, receipts, diaries, photographs, marks on belts or cartridge boxes, and by interviewing relatives and survivors. Contributions totaling over $70,000 were submitted from 18 Northern states to the administrators of the Antietam National Cemetery Board. The cemetery was completed in September 1867 with a workforce consisting primarily of honorably discharged soldiers.

Dedication

On September 17, 1867, on the fifth anniversary of the battle, the cemetery was ready for the dedication ceremonies. The ceremony was important enough to bring President Andrew Johnson and other dignitaries. President Johnson proclaimed, "When we look on yon battlefield, I think of the brave men who fell in the fierce struggle of battle, and who sleep silent in their graves. Yes, many of them sleep in silence and peace within this beautiful enclosure after the earnest conflict has ceased."

Private Soldier Monument

The colossal structure of granite standing in the center of the cemetery reaches skyward 44 feet-7 inches, weighs 250 tons, and is made up of 27 pieces. The soldier which surmounts the monument is made of two pieces joined at the waist. He depicts a Union infantryman standing in the position of "In Place, Rest." Facing homeward to the north, the soldier itself is 21½ feet tall and weighs about 30 tons. The monument was designed by James G. Baterson of Hartford, CT, and sculpted by James Pollette of Westerly, RI, for a cost of over $32,000. The "Private Soldier" first stood at the gateway of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, PA, in 1876. It was disassembled again for the long journey to Sharpsburg.

On September 17, 1880, the statue was finally in place where it was formally dedicated. The journey of "Old Simon," as he is known locally, had been delayed for several months when the section from the waist up fell into the river at Washington, D.C. When retrieved, it was transported on the C&O Canal, and dragged by using huge, wooden rollers through Sharpsburg to the cemetery. The inscription on the monument reads, "Not for themselves, but for their country."

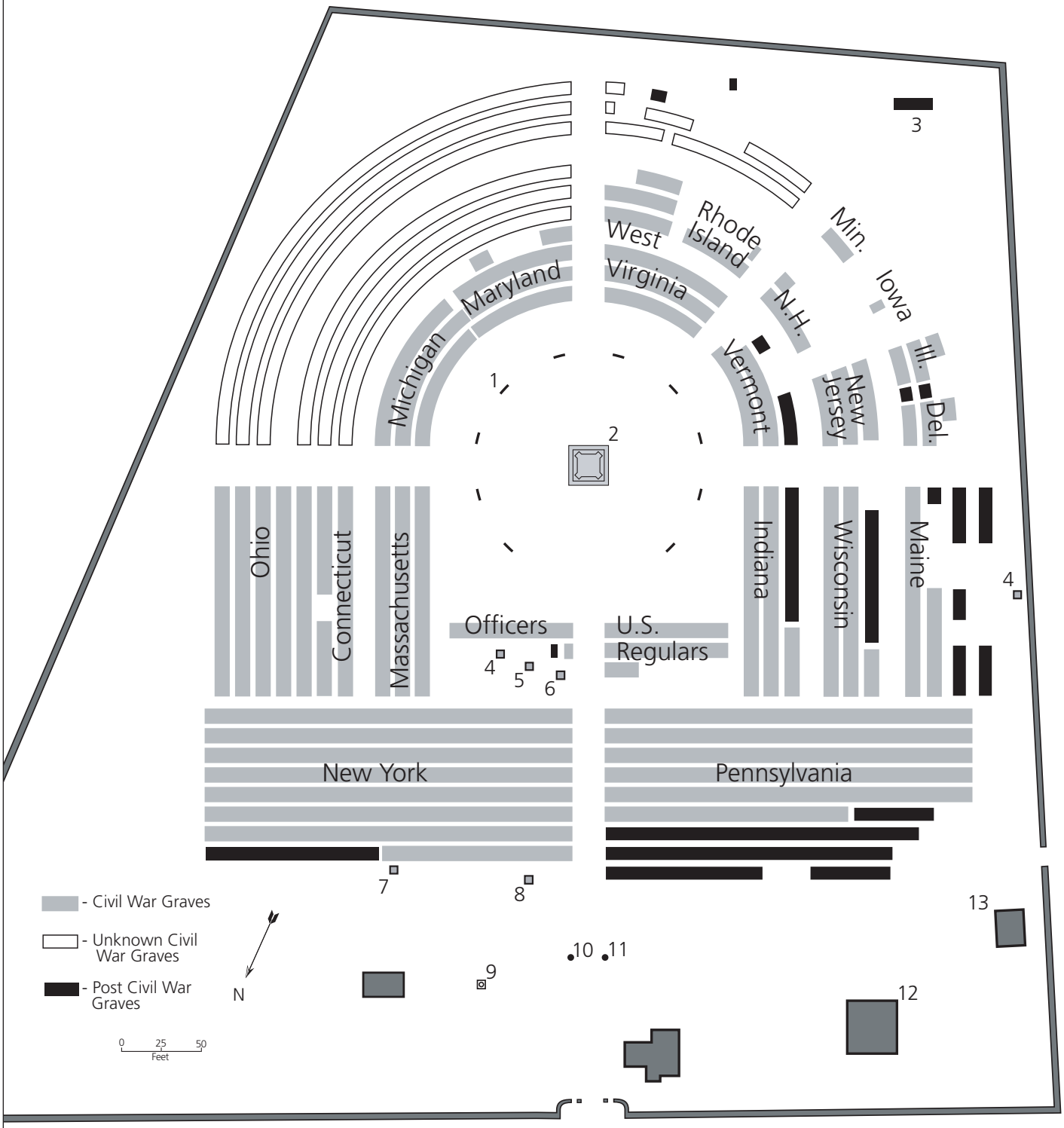
The Cemetery Today

Antietam National Cemetery is one of the 142 cemeteries of the National Cemetery System, a system that began during the Civil War. There are 4,776 Union remains (1,836 or 38% are unknown) buried here from the Battles of Antietam, South Mountain, Monocacy, and other action in Maryland. All of the unknowns are marked with small square stones. These stones contain the grave number, and if you look closely on a few stones, a small second number represents how many unknowns are buried in that grave. There are also a few of the larger, traditional stones that mark unknown graves.

In addition to the Civil War burials, more than 200 non-Civil War dead are also buried here. Veterans and their spouses from the Spanish-American War, World War I and II, and Korea were buried here until the cemetery closed in 1953. Recently, an exception to the closure was made for the burial of a Keedysville (a town near Sharpsburg) resident Patrick Howard Roy, United States Navy. Fireman Roy was killed during the attack on the U.S.S. Cole and was buried in the Cemetery on October 29, 2000.

If you walk to the back of the cemetery you will notice a few separate graves. Ironically, on the battlefield that led directly to Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, these African-American graves from WW I and WW II were segregated to this out-of-the-way corner.

Map of Antietam National Cemetery



1 - Iron Tablets with poem "Bivouacs of the Dead"

2 - Private Soldier Monument

3 - African-American graves from WW I

4 - Monument to Company F, 1st Regiment U.S. Sharpshooters

5 - Monument to 20th N.Y. Infantry

6 - Grave of Civil War General Jacob Duryee

7 - Grave marker of four Union soldiers found on the battlefield in 1988

8 - Monument to 4th N.Y. Infantry

9 - Flag Pole

10 - Smoothbore 24-pounder Naval barrel captured at Harpers Ferry

11 - Rifled 20-pounder cannon barrel found at the base of Elk Ridge

12 - Cemetery Superintendent's Quarters, now the park headquarters

13 - Mule Barn

Antietam National Cemetery - Most Often Asked Questions

Q: Where are the Confederates buried?

A: Confederates are reinterred in three local cemeteries - Elmwood Cemetery in Shepherdstown, WV; Washington Confederate Cemetery (which is located within the boundaries of Rose Hill Cemetery) in Hagerstown, MD and Mt. Olivet in Frederick, MD.

Q: What are the little square stones?

A: Unknown remains believed to be from the state section where buried, if they are in the state section, otherwise in separate section for unknowns. Partial identification was usually based on location of initial burial, uniforms, buttons, etc.

Q: Why are officers and regulars separate from the volunteers?

A: Army officers and regulars were traditionally kept separate from enlisted volunteers. Their disassociation with the volunteer units extended to the grave.

Q: Are there any African-Americas soldiers buried here?

A: Yes. Prior to 1948 it appears that eight soliders were segregated by race and buried in the back right corner of the Cemetery. On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which established, "that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin," which among other things desegregated National Cemeteries.

Q: What is the single number on the stone?

A: That is the number of remains reinterred in that grave.

Q: How many Civil War dead are buried here?

A: A total of 4,776 and of these 1,836 are unknown.

Q: Why did the cemetery close and not take any other veterans?

A: The cemetery was closed due to the large amount of rock in the area. It was very hard to dig more graves.

Q: How can you tell the difference between Civil War and post Civil War burials?

A: The Civil War burials usually have the writing facing the statue in the middle of the cemetery, and the post Civil War burials will have the writing facing the stone wall on the outside.

Antietam National Cemetery Exploration - Student Worksheet

Use the National Cemetery Brochure, the Most Frequently Asked Questions Handout, and the cemetery itself to answer the following questions.

1. As you walk through the cemetery, write down the names of nine soldiers from your home state. If your state is not represented, please pick the state closest to where you live.

2. Why are some stones large and others small?

3. What does the single number on the small gravestones represent/mean?

4. If the unknown soldiers buried here were not identified, then why were they buried in state sections? How did people know to bury them in specific state sections?

5. Write down two names and dates of non-Civil War burials.

6. How do you know they are not from the Civil War?

7. How is a National Cemetery different than a private cemetery?

8. Why is the cemetery closed when there is still empty space?

9. "Old Simon" is the statue in the middle of the cemetery. Why is he facing north?

10. Why do you think only Union soldiers are buried here?

11. What do you find most interesting about the National Cemetery? Why?

12. Who owns Antietam National Battlefield and the National Cemetery?

13. In what year were the soldiers from the Irish Brigade reinterred in the cemetery?

14. Use the space below to record your thoughts about the veteran you found on your card or about the National Cemetery.