

## The National Cemetery Administration's Documentation Initiative

by Sara Amy Leach

One of three administrations within the Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) manages 122 national cemeteries and 33 soldiers' or government lots totaling 14,600 acres.<sup>1</sup>(Figure 1) More than 75 percent of NCA's cemeteries, including many small sites of 10 acres or less, date from the Civil War or earlier. Mindful of its heritage and its mission to honor "veterans with final resting places in national shrines and lasting memorials," the NCA hired its first permanent historian in 2001 (it now has three) to coordinate research, collections management, outreach, and educational activities related to the cemeteries. For the new History Program staff, a comprehensive plan for surveying, monitoring, and interpreting historic resources in all NCA cemeteries was paramount.

### The Memorial Inventory Project

With only an unconfirmed inventory of the buildings and structures in NCA's national cemeteries, the History Program staff began with a survey focusing on monuments and memorials (not to be confused with headstones). Launched in 2001, the Memorial Inventory Project (MIP)—a public outreach effort modeled after the Save Outdoor Sculpture! (SOS!) program but tailored to the veteran community—attracted responses from more than 3,000 potential volunteers, 372 of whom were eventually assigned to projects across the country. About 45 percent of these volunteers were veterans or active duty military.

By the time the project was completed in December 2004, volunteers had donated more than 3,400 work-hours identifying, measuring, photographing, and researching the monuments. They had recorded 780 memorials installed since the early 19th century at 128 national cemeteries or soldiers' lots, and had identified another 200 or so "landscape features," such as ornamental cannon and signage, which the NCA subsequently reassigned to non-memorial categories for tracking purposes.<sup>2</sup>(Figure 2)

The hard copies of the survey documentation (forms, 35mm negatives, photographic prints, and other research materials) will remain in the offices of the History Program, which will capture similar information as new memorials are installed in cemeteries (an average of 35 have been donated annually to NCA cemeteries over the past 15 years). Currently, the NCA is verifying survey



FIGURE 1  
*Cypress Hills National Cemetery on Long Island, NY, consists of 3 separate parcels in Brooklyn containing more than 20,000 graves. The Jamaica Avenue Unit shown here features a 2-story vernacular lodge (1887). (Courtesy of the National Cemetery Administration)*



FIGURE 2  
*The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Monument (1908), designed by sculptor Melzar Hunt Mosman, is one of several figurative memorials installed in New Bern National Cemetery in North Carolina. (Courtesy of the National Cemetery Administration)*

information and preparing to launch a public version of its memorials database on its website. NCA will eventually provide data on approximately 60 figurative sculptures of bronze or stone to the Smithsonian American Art Museum for its SIRIS database. It is also considering an expansion of the MIP methodology to the identification and documentation of thousands of private headstones in NCA cemeteries.

### Large-Format Photography

Just as the Memorial Inventory Project was drawing to a close, the NCA launched a second project to photograph all its national cemeteries. The historic black-and-white photographs, color snapshots, Kodachrome slides, instant Polaroids, and digital images already in the NCA's archives did not conform to a single technical or archival standard, and all of them posed unique technical challenges for preserving the history and evolution of the cemeteries. Recognizing the need for high-quality, large-format images appropriate for the archival documentation of cultural landscapes, the NCA launched a multi-year effort in October 2004 to photograph its national cemeteries according to the standards of the Heritage Documentation Programs of the National Park Service.<sup>3</sup>

Professional photographers contracted for the project are expected to complete approximately 27 NCA cemeteries per year. They are instructed to record the landscape and its recurrent elements—a keeper's lodge, administration building, rostrum, occasional chapels and columbaria, memorials, maintenance buildings, walls and gates, signage, and vegetation—as well as to make the essential panoramic views of private and government-provided headstones. When available, historic views are recreated in order to provide contemporary views suitable for then-and-now comparisons. All photos

FIGURE 3  
*This superintendent's lodge (1875) at Camp Nelson National Cemetery in Kentucky was typical of the lodges built at many Civil War-era national cemeteries after a design by Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs. (Courtesy of the National Cemetery Administration)*





FIGURE 4  
*This screen from the pilot GIS mapping of Alexandria National Cemetery shows an image of a headstone keyed to a mid-20th-century site plan.*

are taken when the trees are leafed out so that the views record the effects of the plantings on the cemetery landscapes. The photographers are also photographing the elaborate memorials and other essential buildings, as well as architectural details where they survive.(Figure 3)

Depending upon the size of the cemetery and the quantity, age, and complexity of its components, the photographers are producing between 5 and 40 views at each site, averaging 20 per site. They are also making at least one large-format color transparency of each cemetery. The project overall is generating about 500 images annually. If current funding levels continue, NCA will have documented all its cemeteries and soldiers' lots, including the newest ones, within four years.

Although the photographs satisfy mandated National Historic Preservation Act Section 110 documentation requirements, the History Program staff plans to use them for exhibits, publications, and other forms of public outreach. The NCA is also donating a complete set of contact prints and negatives to the Historic American Landscapes Survey for its collection at the Library of Congress so that the public will have convenient access to this documentation.

#### GPS/GIS Mapping at Alexandria National Cemetery

Since the NCA has not yet migrated all of its real property information from paper to electronic media, GIS technology is of limited use currently in identifying the locations and boundaries of trees and headstones in NCA's national cemeteries. In an effort to start moving in that direction, the NCA has entered into an agreement with the National Park Service's Cultural Resource GIS (CRGIS) Facility to fund a pilot project at Alexandria (Virginia) National Cemetery. The project will result in the mapping of all cemetery features and the development of a GIS application for NCA.

Established in 1862 as part of the first group of national cemeteries authorized for the interment of Civil War soldiers, this 5-acre site is exemplary both architecturally and culturally.(Figure 4) The Victorian lodge, designed by General Montgomery Meigs, and the enclosure wall are made of dark red Seneca sandstone, a familiar building material in the region. Behind the lodge is a

standard-design "comfort station" (circa 1887) that, though much altered, may be the only one extant NCA-wide. The 4,092 graves at Alexandria National Cemetery include those of about 280 black soldiers of the United States Colored Troops, and the cemetery's only memorial marks the graves of men who died in pursuit of President Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth.

Historic records provide a glimpse of this landscape at benchmark times. The 19th- and 20th-century changes at the cemetery are recorded in site maps, construction drawings and photographs, and textual information such as Army inspection reports, ledgers, and newspapers. This data will be linked to modern-day operations data (burial scheduling, raising and realigning headstones), construction data (cemetery expansion, environment and historic compliance), financial information (capital asset management, budget), and statistical data (ranking, size) to demonstrate how GIS can help organize information for uses other than resource management and interpretation.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this third project is the mapping and documentation of every headstone in the cemetery. Building on the NCA's electronic Burial Operations Support System (BOSS, the equivalent of old paper Records of Interments), NCA and CRGIS will add spatial data, digital images of each headstone, and a transcription of the headstone inscription. Other fields will be made available for posting photographic portraits and genealogical and historical information. Eventually, researchers will be able to search the records for Alexandria National Cemetery by name, date of death, war period, military service, rank, and awards.

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### Notes

1. Besides NCA's 122 national cemeteries, the National Park Service has 14 affiliated with national parks associated with significant battles or persons; the Department of Defense manages two, Arlington National Cemetery and the cemetery at the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home in Washington, DC. As a complement to NCA's mission, the American Battlefield Monuments Commission, an independent agency, oversees 24 American cemeteries and monuments on foreign soil.
2. One of the challenges in classifying the monuments and memorials was in separating *private headstones* from *cenotaphs* and *memorials* in the absence of historical records illuminating early burials.
3. The National Park Service's Heritage Documentation Programs include the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), and the Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS). All three programs follow the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Architectural and Engineering Documentation. See "The Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Architectural and Engineering Documentation," *Federal Register* 68, no. 139 (July 21, 2003): 43159-43162.

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