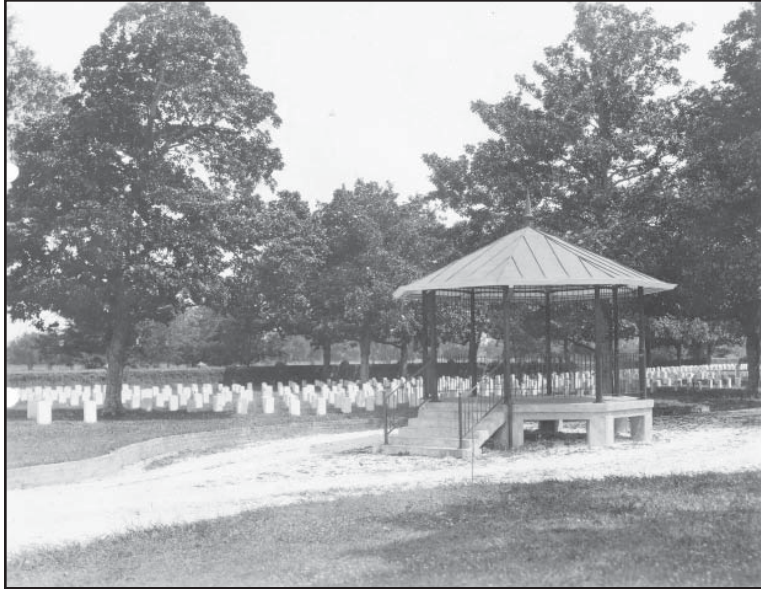




Chalmette National Cemetery



The national cemetery grounds have seen many changes. Used at one time for funerals and ceremonies, this bandstand no longer exists.

Heartbreak and Honor

Every man, woman, and child in the Civil War-era United States was affected by the Civil War. Some gained their freedom; some lost their homes. Hundreds of thousands lost their lives and millions lost someone they loved. To honor the fallen, on July 17, 1862, Congress authorized President Abraham Lincoln to purchase cemetery lands for “soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country.” National cemeteries were created and dedicated throughout the United States. In May 1864, Chalmette National Cemetery was established a few miles downriver from New Orleans on the same ground where American troops had stopped a British invasion at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.

Chalmette and the Civil War

During the Civil War the Confederacy built earthworks and forts along the Mississippi River to protect New Orleans. The city was a crucial port linking the Confederate states and the riches of the Mississippi River Valley to the rest of the world. In April 1862, 14 heavily armed Union ships headed up the river, bombarding forts as they went. The Confederate artillery at Chalmette was the last line of defense. In less than an hour, the gunners ran out of powder and abandoned their post.

As the Civil War continued, Union soldiers camped in the shadow of the unfinished Chalmette Monument, begun years before to honor the Battle of New Orleans’ troops. Slaves freed by the advancing Union forces used the area as a refugee camp. Former slaves, African American hospital patients, and both Confederate and Union troops were buried in or near the area that would soon become Chalmette National Cemetery.

Battlefield, Hospitals, and Cemeteries

Though tens of thousands died in many of the Civil War’s deadliest battles, many more troops died after the cannons were still. Wounds, illness, and the grueling life of a Civil War soldier or sailor took their toll on those who died in camps and hospitals.

Chalmette National Cemetery’s original purpose to provide a final resting place for Union soldiers who died in Louisiana during the Civil War, but civilians were buried there too, a practice that ended in 1867 due to fears that the national cemetery would become a paupers’ graveyard.

By 1868, some 7,000 troops who had been buried in local cemeteries were reinterred at Chamette National Cemetery. Troops were moved from cemeteries in

cluding Cypress Grove No. 2, Camp Parapet, Algiers, and Metairie Ridge in the New Orleans area as well as from Mississippi. Nearly 7,000 African American civilians who had been buried on what were now the national cemetery grounds were reinterred at a freedmen’s cemetery next to the national cemetery. The Ladies Benevolent Association of New Orleans received permission to move the bodies of Confederate troops buried at Chalmette National Cemetery to Cypress Grove Cemetery in New Orleans. Construction began on a “receiving tomb” for the bodies of officers awaiting transport to other cemeteries. Over 12,000 Civil War troops are buried at the national cemetery; nearly 7,000 of those are unknown and identified only by small square markers.

A Cemetery by the River

The gates of Chalmette National Cemetery originally faced the Mississippi River: in the 1860s, the road along the levee and river itself were the most convenient ways to travel. Visitors were greeted by a wide avenue dividing the national cemetery in two, lined with young trees. Flowerbeds set off by walks bloomed near the entrance and about halfway down the avenue.

By 1871, however, an inspection report noted that the wooden grave markers were in poor condition; marble headstones gradually replaced the wooden markers beginning in 1875.

Over the years, buildings were constructed and demolished as needs changed, including a wooden water tank, stables, a stand-alone kitchen, privies, a carriage house, a rostrum with a pergola roof where ceremonies were held, and a home for the superintendent/caretaker.

The Language of Flowers

The landscape of Chalmette National Cemetery was designed to produce a feeling of reverence, peace, and remembrance. “The language of flowers” was widely understood in the late 1800s, and plants, flowers, and trees that represented honor and remembrance were traditionally chosen for cemeteries.

At Chalmette National Cemetery, arbor vitae bushes represented hope and eternal life; cedar trees sym-

bolized healing, and magnolias meant purity. Weeping willows were a common choice for cemeteries, representing both sorrow and immortality. Roses symbolized love and devotion, sweet olive trees faithfulness, and laurels recalled the wreaths awarded to heroes.

Ports, Floods, and Levees

The first great change in the layout of Chalmette National Cemetery occurred in 1910 when the New Orleans Terminal Company planned to develop the land along the Mississippi River. By then a railroad and a highway ran along the back of the national cemetery so access was insured when the national cemetery’s gates were moved from the levee end to where the entrance now stands. Land was added to the current entrance’s end and a road was built from the gates to the highway through the railroad right of way.

The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 redrew the national cemetery’s design once again. In 1929, Congress approved the moving of 572 graves and the caretaker’s home from the national cemetery’s river end to accommodate wider levees requested by the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Lake Borgne Basin Levee Board, and the Mississippi River Commission. More than 400 Union dead were relocated to a single mass grave. The superintendent’s house on the river end was demolished and the two-story house and smaller carriage house near the current entrance gate were built. The two buildings are now used for park offices, storage, and a maintenance workshop.



Memorial Day was first observed in 1868 at Arlington National Cemetery, but honoring the fallen is a tradition as old as war itself. This photo is from a Memorial Day program at Chalmette National Cemetery in the mid-1950s.

National Cemetery, National Park

Through the years, over 16,000 men and women and over 15,000 graves have slowly filled Chalmette National Cemetery. Troops from every American conflict from the War of 1812 to the Vietnam War are buried there, including an unknown soldier who fought at the Battle of New Orleans, died in Mississippi on his way home to Tennessee, and was reinterred at Chalmette National Cemetery. Lists of all known burials are available at the battlefield/national cemetery visitor center and on line at the park website www.nps.gov/jela.

In 1933, Chalmette National Cemetery was transferred from the War Department to the jurisdiction of the National Park Service in 1933. When Chalmette National Historical Park was established at the site of the Battle of New Orleans in 1939, the new park became responsible for the national cemetery. Both became part of the newly established Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve in 1978.

War and Peace

Chalmette National Cemetery is filled with monuments. Some are merely numbered blocks of stone marking unknown graves. Some are elaborately carved bearing tributes to family or comrades.

One is a tree, with a marker nearly hidden by the passage of time and growth. A great sycamore tree stands at the river end of the cemetery. Face the levee and look at the last grouping of headstones on the left. The big tree that stands among them is a peace tree.



A weathered bronze marker sits at the tree’s base, surrounded by the wood that has grown around it through the years. The marker reads: “Planted on November 18, 1927, under the auspices of the National Association of the Survivors of the Battle of Shiloh. The sycamore was chosen because of its white body and limbs, white being the emblem of peace.” The rest of the text is hidden by trunk and roots.

The Battle of Shiloh in 1862 was one of the bloodiest of the Civil War. In two days, 23,746 men were killed, wounded, or missing----more casualties than in all previous American wars combined. The survivors of Shiloh, Union and Confederate, carried the memory of war and the hope for peace with them forever. They chose a living legacy to share their memories and their hopes with all who visit Chalmette National Cemetery.