

Poplar Grove National Cemetery

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Petersburg National Battlefield
8005 Vaughan Road
Petersburg, Virginia



“The gem of the place was the church. Its wall, pillars, pointed arches, and spire, one hundred feet high, were composed entirely of pines selected and arranged with surprising taste and skill.”



Poplar Grove National Cemetery

The Virginia dogwoods were in blossom in the spring of 1865 when the Civil War, America's greatest tragedy, finally came to an end. The four years of conflict on Virginia's bloody battlefields would close with a gentleman's peace at Appomattox Court House on April 9 but only after a great loss of human life. More than 618,000 men, from the North and the South, would give their lives as a direct result of this war, many of them actual battlefield casualties.

In July of 1862, the U.S. Congress had passed legislation giving President Lincoln authority to purchase cemetery grounds “for the soldiers who shall die in the service of their country.” Thus efforts began to establish national cemeteries for Northern soldiers killed on Southern battlefields.

During the nine-month Petersburg campaign in 1864-65, most Federal soldiers had been buried on the field where they fell. In 1865, the U.S. Christian Commission located more than 95 different burial sites for the approximately 5,000 Union soldiers killed in action during the siege. In Petersburg and surrounding areas, work would not commence on purchase of a cemetery for about a year after the war ended.

Finally on April 17, 1866, Lt. Colonel James M. Moore began to survey the Petersburg area for a place to locate a permanent national cemetery. The Rev. Thomas B. Flower's farm on Vaughan Road, about four miles south of the city, was chosen as the site. During the war this area had been used as a camp-ground of the 50th New York Engineers who constructed a gothic-style pine log edifice named Poplar Grove Church. Left by the army, it was used by local residents to replace the nearby Poplar Springs Meeting House, destroyed during the fighting.

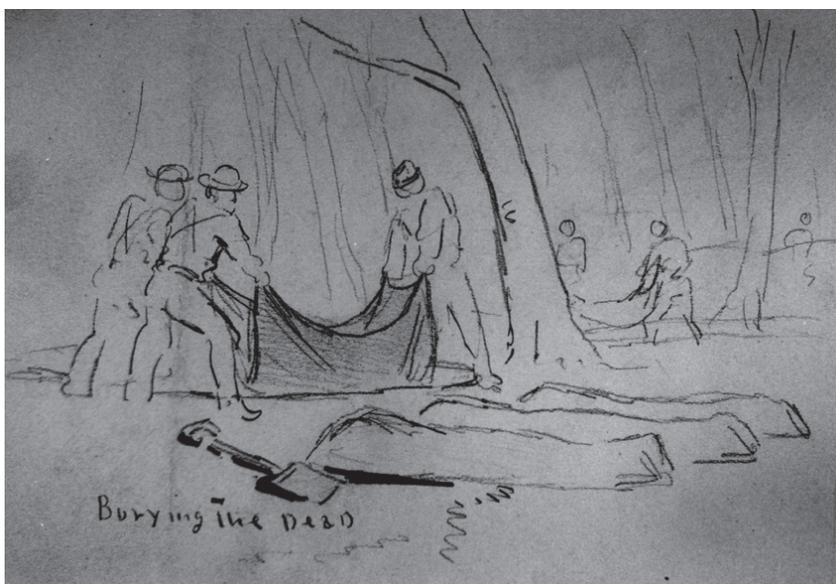
The “Burial Corps”

With a cemetery location now established, the “burial corps” was assembled which began a search and recovery of the scattered graves. An observer described the operation:

“Some had been buried in trenches, some singly, some laid side by side and covered with a little earth, leaving feet and skull exposed; and many had not been buried at all. Throughout the woods were scattered these lonely graves. The method of finding them was simple...”

A hundred men were deployed in a line a yard apart, each examining half a yard of ground on both sides as they proceeded. Thus was swept a space five hundred yards in breadth. Trees were blazed or stakes set along the edge of this space to guide the company on its return. In this manner the entire battlefield had been or was to be searched..

When a grave was found, the entire line was halted until the teams came up and the body was removed. Many graves were marked with stakes, but some were to be discovered only by the disturbed appearance of the ground. Those bodies which had been buried in trenches were but little decomposed, while those buried singly in boxes, not much was left but bones and dust.”



Burying the Dead
by Joseph Becker
1864

“Five Dollars... a skull”

The effects of the trench burial method was confirmed: “On the 30th of July, 1866, 300 bodies were taken out of the crater and the corpses were as perfect in flesh as the day they were consigned to the pit, two years before. They were fresh and gory, the blood oozing from their wounds, and saturating still perfect clothing.” Remains were disinterred, placed in plain wooden coffins. When identifying headboards survived, they were nailed to the coffins. Wagons transported remains to the cemetery.

A nearby resident, Jennie Friend, remembered these men:

The summer of 1866 was a time of searching through the country for the Union dead, to place in the cemetery. Five dollars was given for every collection of bones with a skull... The many dead lying about, with partially covered bodies, and worse yet the un-earthing of these bodies, made the whole country sickly. In August a terrible form of dysentary swept the community. In every family sickness, and often death added to the distress that already abounded.

The Unknown Dead

The search for burials not only included the battlefields around Petersburg but extended into the Virginia counties of Amelia, Appomattox, Campbell, Chesterfield, Dinwiddie, Nottoway, Prince Edward, Prince George, and Sussex. From July, 1866 through June, 1869, disinterring continued until the remains of 6,200 men were placed in Poplar Grove Cemetery. Sadly, only 2,100 of these were positively identified.

An early visitor to the site recalled that:

We rode out... to wander for a while among the graves. The place is laid out in sections, each section with its melancholy forest of white head-boards on which are painted the names and regiments of the dead men below... I wondered who the man was who lay beneath-where his home was-whether his mother was still alive, away, perhaps, in some far-off part of the world, wondering what had become of her boy, that she had not heard from him for so long, but still hoping that one day he would return to gladden her heart in her declining years. Here he lay, alas! sleeping his long sleep among the unknown dead.

The church survived until April, 1868, when, greatly deteriorated, it was torn down. The area where it stood was then also used for burial purposes.

The War Department administered the Poplar Grove cemetery until August 10, 1933, at which time responsibility was turned over to the National Park Service. Only 50 non-Civil War interments have been added since its inception, the last being in 1975. The last interments of Civil War soldiers occurred in 2003 after the remains of three Civil War soldiers were found at Reams Station and Peebles' Farm. Today the cemetery is closed to burials. Some of the last Civil War soldiers to be buried there were 29 recovered on the Crater battlefield east of the city in 1931. They were buried with full military honors.

NOTICE:

More information about records of soldiers buried at Poplar Grove National Cemetery can be found on the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors website at www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm. Further information is available at the Petersburg National Battlefield Visitor Center located at 5001 Siege Road (off Route 36) in Petersburg.

Most Confederate soldiers who died either in Petersburg hospitals or during the siege are buried in mass graves, by state, in the city's Blandford Cemetery on Crater Road. Only 2,000 soldiers of the approximate 30,000 buried there are known; this list can be seen at the Blandford Church Reception Center.

Many of the Union soldiers who died in the Depot Field Hospital at City Point during the siege are buried in the City Point National Cemetery in Hopewell. This 7.5 acre cemetery contains 3,760 known and 1,400 unknown soldiers who died at both the City Point and Point of Rocks hospitals. It is maintained by the Veterans Administration Richmond Office.



Soldier graves located by the Depot Field Hospital at City Point