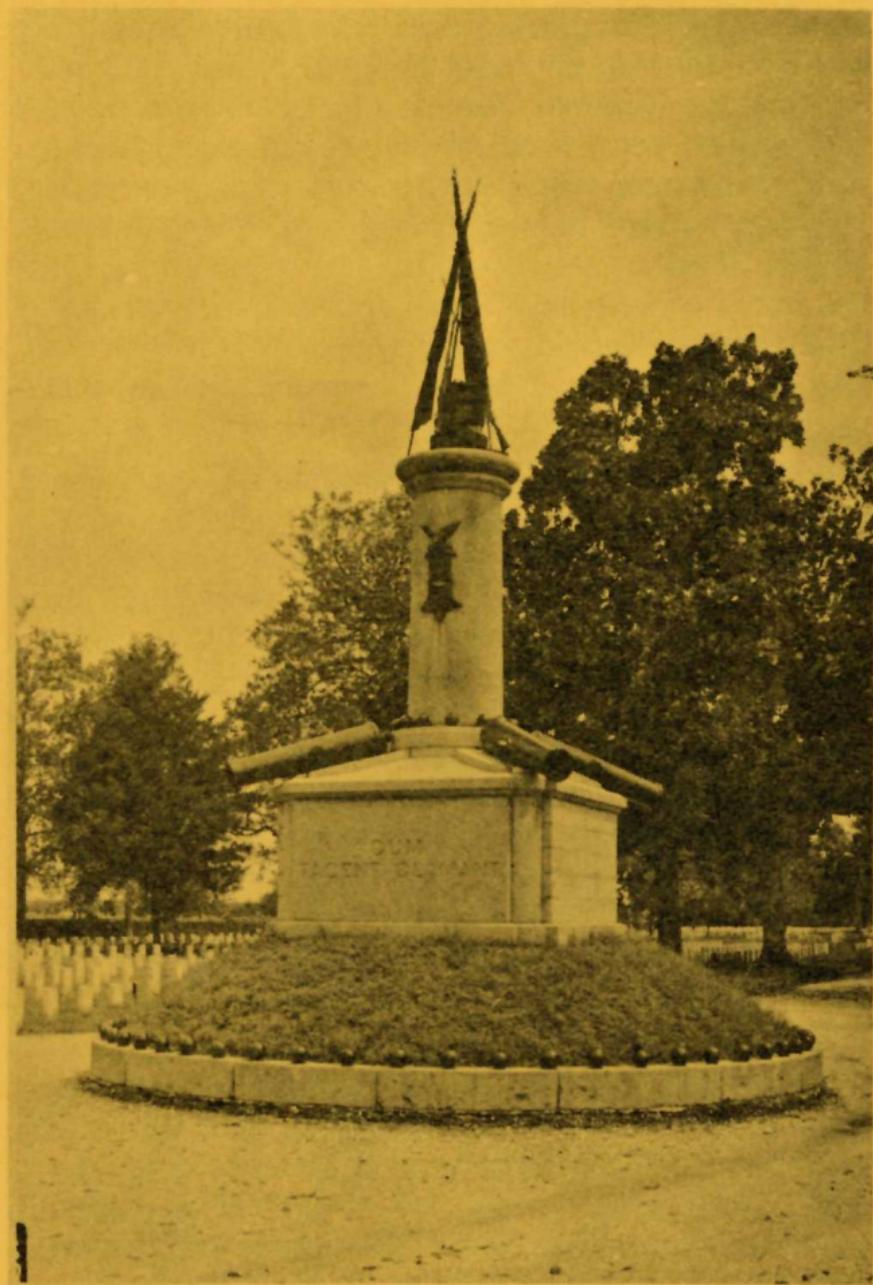


# CHALMETTE NATIONAL CEMETERY



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### —History of the National Cemetery

"Those not gloriously lying on the battlefield they had ennobled with their blood might lie side by side with their comrades with whom they had stood shoulder to shoulder in life. Few ties are closer than the companionship of a soldier's life. Next to sleeping in the tomb of his fathers, the soldier would prefer to be buried with his fellows."

So wrote a Union general during the Civil War, and it was from this concept that Chalmette National Cemetery and the National Cemetery system were born. It was nothing new for citizens to recognize and honor their countrymen who sacrificed their lives in times of war, but not until the tragic conflict of 1861-5 did the United States create special military reservations for the burial of veterans. Never before had Americans died on the battlefields in such numbers. Never before had the need been so great for an organization capable of dealing with the consequences of a modern war.

The legislative genesis of the National Cemetery system is contained in War Department General Orders No. 75 issued September 11, 1861. Commanding officers of corps and departments were to provide for the proper recording, burial and marking of soldiers who died and were interred in their jurisdictions. On July 17, 1862, President Lincoln signed a bill expanding on these provisions. Congress granted Lincoln the power, "to purchase cemetery grounds and cause them to be securely enclosed to be used as a national cemetery for the soldiers who shall die in the service of the country." Later that year a dozen national cemeteries from Kansas to New York were established to meet the grim needs generated by the fratricidal conflict.

Despite the existence of a framework for dealing with the war dead, the vast majority of Union fatalities were buried on the battlefields where they fell or in some cases, sent north by train to be interred in their hometowns. In places like New Orleans where Union armies of occupation fought the climate and disease more than Confederate soldiers, local cemeteries were appropriated by Federal authorities. In fact, all across Southern Louisiana, plantations, railroad sidings, churchyards, and municipal cemeteries filled with boys from New England and the Midwest who would never see their homes again.

By 1864 it was clear that sheer numbers alone dictated the establishment of a national cemetery in Louisiana. Furthermore, Union officials were none too confident

of the perpetual care Northern soldiers might receive at the hands of unreconstructed cemeterykeepers and the local populace after the war. The search for a suitable site eventually found its way to St. Bernard Parish. On the fields made famous by Andrew Jackson during the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, the army selected 13½ acres (later expanded to 17½ acres) for the creation of Chalmette National Cemetery. This ground, it seemed, was destined to play a continuing role in military history. Not only was it the site of British artillery batteries and the staging ground for infantry assaults in 1814-15, but it more recently marked the location of extensive Confederate earthworks built to defend New Orleans from a Yankee invasion.

In May 1864 the new national cemetery formally opened in sight of the partially constructed Chalmette Monument. The property was then, as it is today, a long narrow strip of land running from the Mississippi River toward the cypress swamps which characterized the area in the 19th century. This configuration was typical of early land divisions along the lower Mississippi where each plantation included river frontage necessary for water transportation.

The army's first order of business was the grisly task of locating the thousands of Union soldiers who were buried in scores of areas around southern Louisiana. The remains of these men would compose the first burials at Chalmette. While the burial crews carried on with their unsavory duties, work progressed well on the physical development of the national cemetery. In 1868 an army officer inspected the facility and his report reveals much about the cemetery's appearance. A shell road (now paved) sixteen-feet wide bisected the grounds which were further subdivided by two parallel walks and by forty crosswalks making 169 squares (sections) for interment. The cemetery was landscaped with flowers and shrubs and the old Confederate earthworks were levelled to improve drainage. Near the river entrance gate, a large brick lodge with a full first floor gallery served as the cemetery superintendent's quarters and a decorative iron fence was in the course of construction. Ornamental cannons and pyramids of artillery ammunition adorned the entrance.

The new graves were marked with white wooden headboards or, in the case of unknown soldiers, numbered stakes. The cemetery development cost, up to that time, \$146,799.75. The superintendent was one Gerald Fitzgerald, a discharged sergeant of Company K, 5th U.S. Artillery. The report concluded that the cemetery had "a pleasing effect" and Sgt. Fitzgerald was noted for the faithful discharge of his duties and the great pride he took in his work.

Chalmette National Cemetery continued to operate under the direction of a resident superintendent ap-

pointed by the War Department throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. This man, assisted by caretakers, maintained the grounds and provided for additional interments pursuant to legislation which expanded the eligibility for burial in national cemeteries to include honorably discharged veterans and certain of their dependents. Granite and marble headstones replaced wooden markers above the graves and a masonry wall was built on the eastern and western sides of the property.

The relatively tranquil routine at Chalmette ended in the late 1920's when the Corps of Engineers determined that the levee should be set back farther from the bank to provide a stable barrier against flooding. This work would disturb several sections of interments as well as the superintendent's house and entranceway.

The levee setback resulted in changes which reflect the present condition of the national cemetery. The remains of 401 Union troops were disinterred from their graves near the riverbank and reburied together under a headstone in the southeastern corner of the property. The cemetery lodge was destroyed and new brick buildings constructed at the northern end of the road to serve as a residence and carriage house. St. Bernard Highway replaced the levee road as the primary visitor access to the cemetery, but the beautiful iron entrance gates were salvaged and moved to their current location. Finally, the Grand Army of the Republic Monument which originally sat in the middle of the road in a still visible wide place in the pavement was moved to its present location in a newly constructed cul-de-sac at the river terminus of the road.



While the national cemetery functioned as an active installation of the War Department, interest mounted in preserving the adjacent Chalmette battlefield. In 1939 this effort culminated in the creation of Chalmette National Historical Park. Congress directed that the cemetery be included in the new national park and the Department of the Interior assumed control, ending the army's 75-year association with the facility. Shortly thereafter the national cemetery was closed to further burials and the transition to a memorial was almost complete.

### —Burials at Chalmette National Cemetery

Despite its location on the historic Chalmette battlefield, the national cemetery is not related to the Battle of New Orleans or its participants. In fact, only four veterans of the War of 1812, their graves marked by small American flags, are reinterred here. The unknown Tennessee soldier buried in Section 23 fought with Jackson at the battle, but died near Love Creek, Mississippi, on his march home after the campaign. None of the hundreds of British battlefield dead are buried in the cemetery and indeed their remains have never been found.

More than 15,300 individuals are interred at Chalmette, representing veterans of every American war except the Revolution and the Korean Conflict. The vast majority of graves date from the Civil War—some 12,000 altogether. Of these, 6,773 are unknown, primarily because poor records were kept or identities were difficult to determine when the soldiers were originally buried during the war. A few civilians from the 1860's are scattered among the oldest burials, but the 132 Confederate prisoners of war originally buried in the national cemetery were later moved. The only foreign national is Able Seaman Watcyn G. Jones of the Royal Navy who died in 1943. Jones is buried in section 171.



When gravesites became full in 1945, the National Park Service closed the cemetery to new burials. A few interments have taken place since then, however, because of regulations which allow widows to be buried in their husband's graves, so long as they have not remarried. Some veterans who reserved grave space prior to 1945 were also buried at Chalmette in recent years. Special permission was granted to a handful of area servicemen killed in Vietnam and they now rest next to their countrymen in the cemetery's newest gravesites. A list of all the known interments in the national cemetery is available at the visitor center or park headquarters and park personnel will be happy to assist interested visitors to locate particular graves.

## —A Guide to the Cemetery

Chalmette National Cemetery is the oldest below ground cemetery in the New Orleans area. Most of the historic gravesites in the city consist of tombs and vaults located above ground due to the high water table and naturally swampy terrain of southeastern Louisiana. Elevation is highest near the river (some six to eight feet above sea level in the national cemetery) and therefore burials are possible here.

The graves are all numbered and divided into sections for easy location. Grave numbers are inscribed on the stones themselves while the section numbers are marked by blue signs painted on the curbs or mounted in the ground. The oldest interments are located near the river and bear the lowest grave and section numbers. Generally, the newer the burial the farther it is from the river, with most of the first 140 sections occupied by Civil War veterans.

Visitors to the cemetery will notice a wide variety of headstones above the graves. The government provided a regulation monument for all national cemetery interments, but the design of the monuments has changed several times over the years. Interpretive signs in the cemetery illustrate the different headstones from the Civil War, Spanish-American War and World War I and II eras. The small square stones indicate the graves of unknown soldiers. Some families decided to bear the expense of a personal monument and examples of their selections are readily visible throughout the cemetery, especially among the Civil War interments. Many graves are topped by miniature versions of the Chalmette Monument, although various other original designs can also be found.

Pick a row of graves and read the inscriptions. Chances are you will come across an unusual burial or a set of potentially confusing abbreviations. There is obviously less than perfect uniformity in the grave sections and many of the markers reveal more about the deceased than merely a name. Most soldiers are identified by their home state and other graves include rank or perhaps the unit in which served. Occasionally you will discover a personal sentiment or the grave of a spouse, child or civilian employee mixed in among the veterans.

Many of the lettered abbreviations refer to military terms, some of which are long out of date. Most of the black troops from the Civil War, for example, are buried in graves labelled U.S.C.T.—United States Colored Troops. Other letters abbreviate rank or branch of service such as PVT for private or Q.M. for quartermaster. Spend some time acquainting yourself with the inscriptions and you will be reminded that real people, not just names on a roster, compose these quiet ranks.

There are several other points of interest in the national cemetery in addition to the interments. The Grand Army of the Republic monument now at the river end of the road was erected in 1874. The GAR was the Union soldier's veterans organization and they dedicated the monument to their comrades buried at Chalmette. The chiseled phrase "Dum Tacent Clamant" means, "while they are silent, they cry aloud."

The artillery pieces at the cemetery entrance date from the Civil War and may be the very guns mentioned in the 1868 inspector's report. The large tubes mounted upright are Columbiads and their muzzles point skyward to symbolize a place of burial. The small cannon is a rare Brennan gun. Of course, the brick buildings which now serve as the park administrative and maintenance headquarters date from the levee setback in the 1920's. The blue plaques erected along the cemetery road contain verses from an old fashioned and haunting poem which seems to have been written especially for a national cemetery. In fact, Theodore O'Hara's "Bivouac of the Dead" was composed in 1847 on the occasion of the burial of O'Hara's friend who was killed in the Mexican War.

### —About Your Visit

Chalmette National Cemetery is open daily 8:00 - 5:00 September through May and 8:00 - 6:00 in the summer. The battlefield and cemetery are closed Christmas, New Years and Mardi Gras days. Visitors may park in the headquarters lot and walk among the graves or drive down the cemetery road to the GAR Monument. The speed limit is 15 m.p.h. and is enforced. Please respect the sanctity of the area and refrain from ball playing, picnicking or other activities inconsistent with the purpose of the cemetery. Tours for schools and other groups may be arranged in advance by contacting the park visitor center.

### —A Note on Safety

The National Cemetery contains certain hazards which may result in an injury to you or your children. Please exercise caution and common sense while visiting with us. Be aware of the fire ant mounds scattered throughout the cemetery. The ants live up to their names and are capable of a painful sting. The brick walls flanking the cemetery are a century old and are unstable—please do not climb on them. Watch your step while walking on the uneven ground between the graves. We hope you have a safe and enjoyable visit and will return often.

### Administration

Chalmette National Cemetery is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior as a part of Chalmette National Historical Park. A unit manager whose address is St. Bernard Highway, Chalmette, LA 70043 is in charge.

## Mississippi River & Levee

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G.A.R. Monument		9	10
x	21	12	11
22	24	20	19
x	30	25	26
31	32	28	27
38	37	36	35
39	40	41	42
46	45	44	43
x	46A	45A	44A
47	48	49	50
54	53	52	51
55	56	57	58
62	61	60	59
63	64	65	66
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71	72	73	74
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150	149	148	147
151	152	153	154
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159	160	161	162
166	165	164	163
167	168	169	170
174	173		171
175	176		
182	181		

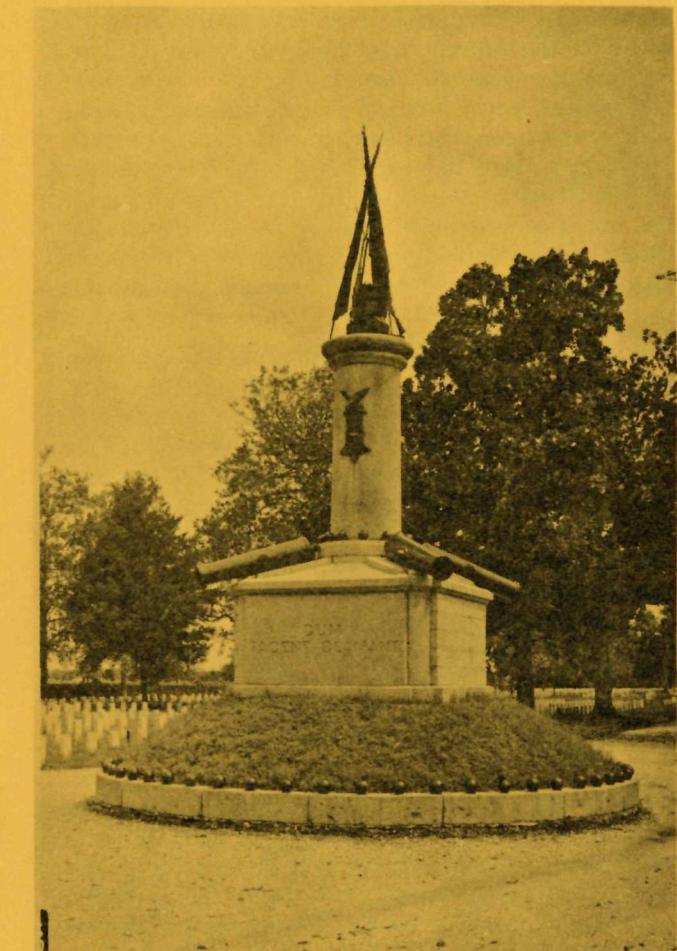
x indicates site  
of War of 1812  
veteran burial

HWY. 46



Entrance

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