



National Cemetery



Fort Donelson Today

Fort Donelson National Cemetery was established by an Act of Congress in 1866 to serve as a final resting place for United States soldiers. The National Park Service maintains and protects the burial grounds, as well as the national battlefield, which commemorates the 1862 Battles for Forts Henry, Heiman, and Donelson. A park Superintendent is entrusted with the care of the sites.

The National Cemetery Idea

Prior to the Civil War, most Americans were buried in private (family, church, or city) cemeteries. The idea of “nationally” recognizing veterans with memorials or cemeteries was not practiced.

Congress passed legislation in 1862 to set aside cemetery grounds for “soldiers who had died in service to our country.” Fourteen cemeteries were established, including Antietam (MD) and Mill Springs (KY).

President Abraham Lincoln reinforced the idea of national identity and establishing cemeteries with the Gettysburg Address in 1863. By 1870, over 300,000 soldiers had been buried in 73 national cemeteries, located near camps or battlefields in the South.

National cemeteries were designed with circular patterns, a central flagpole, and an enclosing stone wall. Adopting a style influenced by noted landscape designer Frederick Law Olmstead in the 1870s, cemeteries, it was said, should be simple in design, which Olmstead believed promoted sanctity within the closed walls, and “a permanent dignity and tranquility” for the deceased. Trees, shrubs, and flower beds, along with “gun monuments” were included in the design.

Americans in the North and South began to honor the memory of soldiers soon after the Civil War. In 1868, May 30th was officially recognized as Decoration Day, later renamed Memorial Day. The holiday is now celebrated on the last Monday in May each year. Some Southern states have a separate holiday to honor Confederate veterans.

Building a National Cemetery (1866-1868)

In 1866, the U.S. Quartermaster Corps and U.S. Engineers Department returned to Dover, this time to search for U.S. soldiers for reburial in a new national cemetery. This cemetery was designed to contain the bodies of all U.S. soldiers who were buried “on the banks of the Cumberland [River] from Smithland to Clarksville.” The site of the old Union Fort Donelson was chosen as most suitable place for the new cemetery, even though some locals opposed its development.

U.S. soldiers, along with African Americans who were living in a small community surrounding the old Union fort, helped with the construction of the fifteen-acre cemetery. Bodies of the Union dead were located and reburials began in 1867. The large numbers of unknown soldiers attest to the fact that soldiers were not issued government identification.

The existing limestone rock wall is a skillful remnant of the handiwork of former slaves. The lodge house (the large red brick building built in 1877) originally housed the cemetery caretakers, a Superintendent and his family. The smaller red brick building was a carriage house.

Confederate soldiers were not moved to this cemetery; they remain buried somewhere on the battlefield. A monument to these soldiers, placed on the park grounds in 1932 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, commemorates their sacrifices during the Civil War.

The Freedman's Camp

Not long after the Confederate surrender in February 1862, freedom-seeking slaves came to the fort searching for protection, shelter, and new opportunities. Former slaves found jobs working with the U.S. military, either as soldiers' aides or with the Army Quartermaster Corps.

The Free State

The Union Army built a new Fort Donelson in 1863, located closer to the town of Dover, on the present-day site of the national cemetery. Former slaves and their families moved with the army—this time, making a permanent community called the “Free State.” At least 300 individuals and families lived here from 1863-1865, building permanent homes, churches, and schools on the outskirts of the new fort.

“... Large numbers of women and children most of whom have husbands and fathers employed on our fortifications have found their way inside our lines... I have protected them from being taken out of our lines against their will but have allowed them to leave at their pleasure. Should their number increase materially I think they must be subsisted by the Government or suffer for food.”—Colonel W.P. Lyons, July 13, 1863

“There are a great many women here, whose husbands are in the army, and who want to come to school. They bring their little babes to school with them.”—Ella M. Groves, teacher at the Fort Donelson freedmen's school, May 24, 1865

Recruitment of Black Soldiers



In 1863, the U.S. Army recruited former slaves as soldiers from the freedmen's camps and the surrounding area. These soldiers formed portions of United States Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.), such as the 8th Heavy Artillery and the 13th, 16th, and 17th Infantry Regiments.

Andrew Jackson Smith (photo at left) was a member of the 55th Massachusetts Colored Infantry. He was posthumously awarded a Medal of Honor in 2001. Smith fled from slavery in Kentucky to the safety of the Union lines, joining with the U.S. Army at Forts Henry and Donelson in 1862.

Visiting the Cemetery Grounds

Fort Donelson National Cemetery contains the remains of 670 Civil War burials and approximately 909 veterans from all other American wars. The National Park Service maintains the cemetery grounds, headstones, and buildings.

A roster of the veterans and dependents is located in the small red brick building. The park Administrative Offices are located in the larger brick house. Additional information is available at the Visitor Center. The National Cemetery grounds are open daily from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, and extended on Memorial Day.

For more information about park programs or history, please visit the Visitor Center, located one mile north on Hwy 79. You may also visit the park's website: www.nps.gov/fodo

Credits:

Bowman, Andrew. Indianapolis, IN.

Department of Veterans Administration, “Landscapes of Honor & Sacrifice: The History of the National Cemeteries,” 2003.

General Correspondence & Reports Relating to National & Post Cemeteries: Donelson (TN), RG 92, National Archives & Records Administration.

Roll of Honor : Names of Soldiers Who Died in the Defense of the American Union (Washington: GPO, 1869).

Whitman, E.B. to Bvt. Maj. Gen. J.L. Donaldson, Field Report of the Condition of the Battlefield. Fort Donelson, TN, March 8, 1866, RG 92, NARA.