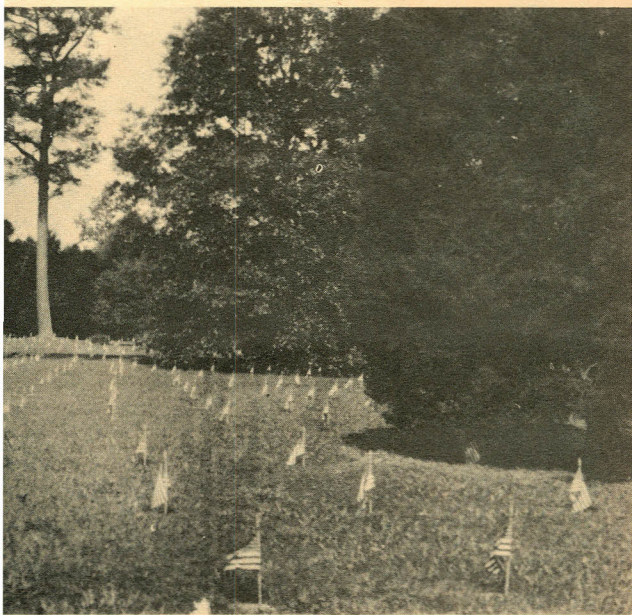


Poplar Grove National Cemetery

Petersburg National Battlefield





The coming of the Civil War found Americans unprepared to deal with the staggering number of deaths which would result from that conflict. No plans had been made for the systematic marking of graves, graves registration, or for the transportation of the dead to their home states except on a private basis. The responsibility for the proper burial of battle deaths now fell upon the Army.

In response to the crisis the Army issued General Orders number 75 and 33 which provided for the proper marking of graves and for the preservation of burial records. Commanders were given the authority to set aside plots of land for the burial of their dead. But, during active campaigns military necessity often made it impossible to organize proper burials. The rapid movements of the armies, tactical maneuvers, as well as advances and retreats made hurried interments the norm. In the bloody campaign of 1864, as the armies fought from the Wilderness to Cold Harbor, the soldiers who died in battle were usually buried where they fell, in shallow, unmarked and often massed graves.

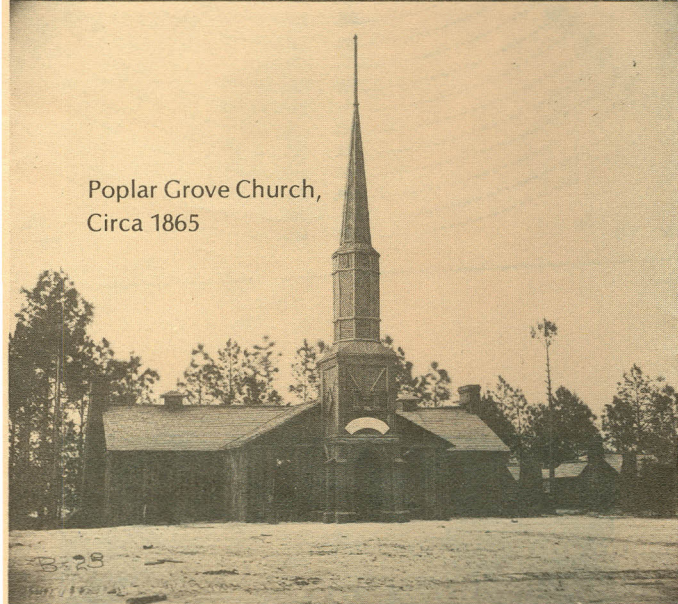
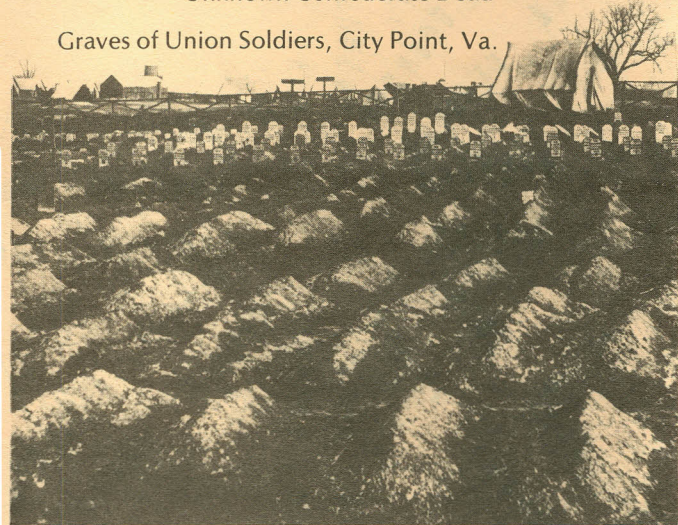
The burial practice at Petersburg did not substantially differ from earlier campaigns. Although men who died from their wounds were interred at cemeteries near rear line hospitals, those who died in combat were usually buried where they fell. When the fighting was intense, burial details did not devote adequate time to the dead. The fact that the Army of the Potomac often did not retain the field of combat contributed to the number of dead left unrecovered. Of the remains of 646 Union soldiers, recovered from the Crater long after the battle, not one could be identified.

In July of 1862, the Congress, responding to public sentiment, passed legislation giving the President authority to purchase cemetery grounds... "for the soldiers who shall die in the service of their country." Four years later, and a year after the



Unknown Confederate Dead

Graves of Union Soldiers, City Point, Va.



Poplar Grove Church,
Circa 1865

Collecting Remains of the Dead, Cold Harbor, Va.

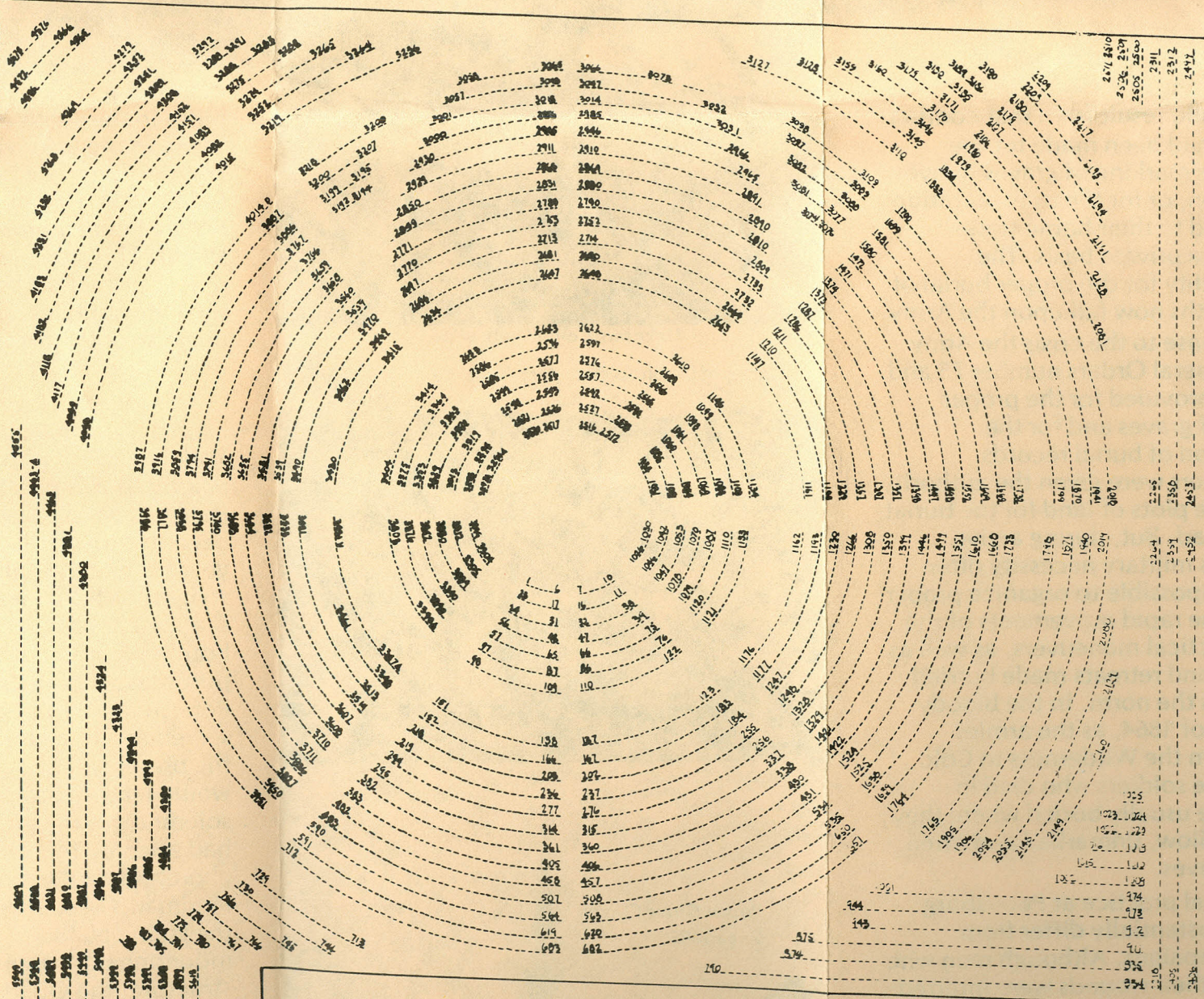


War had ended, efforts were begun to establish a national cemetery at Petersburg. The site chosen was six miles to the south and west of the town, in the area where the Battle of Peebles Farm had been fought in the fall of 1864. During the siege it had been an encampment area for Union forces. This site was selected because of its central location midway along the Petersburg siege lines, and because of the presence there of Poplar Grove Church.

This log structure was built in February of 1865 by the 50th New York Engineers who were camped nearby. It was named in honor of Poplar Springs Church which had been destroyed during the previous year's fighting. Built in the gothic style, the church was capable of seating 225 men, and was used for both religious and recreational purposes. During the final assault on Petersburg in April of 1865, it also served as a hospital. Officials felt that the presence of Poplar Grove Church would lend an atmosphere of solemnity to the grounds which they had selected for the cemetery. The church, one of the most distinctive landmarks of the area, remained until the spring of 1868. When faced with mounting costs to maintain the structure, the Quartermaster Department decided to have the building torn down.

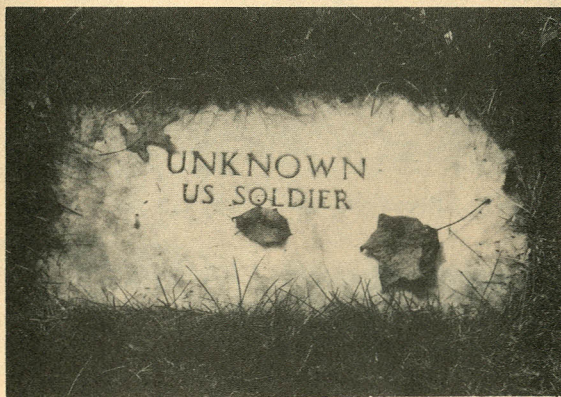
The recovery of the dead from the battlefields around Petersburg began early in July of 1866. A burial corps was created and ordered to search out existing graves, disinter the remains, identify them, and rebury them in Poplar Grove National Cemetery. Identification of the remains was often an impossible task. In many cases, the best that the corps could do was to determine whether the dead were Union or Confederate. From July of 1866 until June of 1869 the burial corps searched the battlefields of the Petersburg Campaign. Their task was carried out in nine Virginia counties, and bodies were brought in from as far away as Lynchburg.

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Poplar Grove National Cemetery was established in June of 1868 and administered by the War Department until it was transferred to the National Park Service in 1933. Today, Poplar Grove is the final resting place for 6,142 Union and 36 Confederate soldiers who died in the Petersburg and Appomattox Campaigns. Of these 6,178 Civil War interments, 4,110 are unknown. The last available cemetery plot was filled in 1957 and today the cemetery is closed to burials. A superintendent, whose address is P. O. Box 549, Petersburg, Virginia 23803, is in immediate charge of the site.



*Rest on, enbalm'd and sainted dead,
Dear as the blood ye gave;
No impious footstep here shall tread
the herbage of your grave;
Nor shall your glory be forgot
While Fame her record keeps,
Or Honor points the hallowed spot
Where Valor proudly sleeps.*

From "The Bivouac of the Dead"
by Theodore O'Hara

Petersburg National Battlefield
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior