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Confederate Memorial



Section 16

The history of the Confederate Memorial embodies the complex and contested legacy of the Civil War at Arlington National Cemetery, and in American culture generally.

In 1900, Congress authorized Confederate remains to be reinterred at Arlington National Cemetery, which designated a special section for them (in what is now Section 16). The Confederate Memorial was erected there in 1914. By the early 1900s, it had become tradition to establish a new section at Arlington for the dead from a particular war, followed by a commemorative monument. In Section 22, where many soldiers and sailors from the Spanish-American War are buried, the [Spanish-American War Monument](#) and the [Rough Riders Monument](#) memorialize that conflict. After fallen World War I service members were repatriated and buried in Sections 18 and 19, the [Argonne Cross](#) was dedicated in Section 18. In this sense, the creation of a Confederate section and memorial followed customary practice at Arlington.

However, to understand more fully why Confederate graves are at a former Union cemetery, and to interpret the memorial's symbolism, it is necessary to delve more deeply into historical context. By the turn of the twentieth century, [Arlington had become a truly national cemetery](#), a transformation that occurred amidst reconciliation between North and South, enduring racial inequality, and a new war. Reconstruction — the U.S. government's efforts to reunify the nation and transform the South's former slavery-based society — effectively ended in 1877. That year, President Rutherford B. Hayes agreed to withdraw federal troops from Southern states, allowing for sectional reconciliation but also the systemic disenfranchisement of African Americans, enforced by white violence and racial segregation in the South. In 1898, mobilization for war against Spain, and the United States' expanding global power, reinforced a sense of national unity — at least among many white Americans.

In this context, the U.S. government reassessed its policies on Confederate burials. Although the [Tomb of the Civil War Unknowns](#) likely contained the remains of both Union and Confederate dead, Arlington had been a U.S. Army cemetery, and for years after the Civil War, Confederate veterans could not be buried there. However, on December 14, 1898 — four days after the Spanish-American War ended — President William McKinley kicked off his “Peace Jubilee” nationwide tour with a speech in Atlanta in which he proclaimed, “in the spirit of fraternity we should share with you in the care of the graves of Confederate soldiers.... Sectional feeling no longer holds back the love we feel for each other. The old flag again waves over us in peace with new glories.”

Notably, this “spirit of fraternity” did not include African Americans. In 1871, a group of black soldiers had petitioned the War Department to relocate the graves of hundreds of United States Colored Troops (USCT) from the “Lower Cemetery,” where they were buried alongside former slaves and poor whites, to the main cemetery near [Arlington House](#), where white Civil War veterans lay at rest. The War Department denied the petition. Arlington National Cemetery would remain segregated until 1948, when President Harry S. Truman desegregated the armed forces by executive order.

Meanwhile, the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) identified Confederate graves around the Washington, D.C. area and successfully petitioned the government to have those remains transferred to Arlington. On June 6, 1900, Congress appropriated \$2,500 for the removal and reinterment of Confederate remains. By 1902, 262 Confederate bodies were interred in a specially designated section, Section 16. Unlike the orderly rows in the rest of the cemetery, graves in the Confederate section were arranged in concentric rings. Their headstones also looked different: while having the same dimensions as regular government headstones, the Confederate headstones featured pointed tops. The cemetery added more Confederate graves over the years, eventually totaling more than 400.

On June 7, 1903, the first Confederate Memorial Day ceremonies were held in Arlington's Confederate section. President Theodore Roosevelt sent a floral arrangement, beginning a tradition continued by nearly every U.S. president. In 2009, President Barack Obama modified the tradition, sending two wreaths: one to the Confederate Memorial, the other to Washington, D.C.'s [African American Civil War Memorial](#), in honor of U.S. Colored Troops.

In 1906, with [Secretary of War William Howard Taft's](#) approval, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (a hereditary organization of Southern women) began raising funds to erect a memorial in the Confederate section. Through such voluntary civic organizations, women led many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century efforts to commemorate wars and to mourn the dead — and, in so doing, women gained influence in public life even before they won the right to vote. (In another example of women's commemorative efforts, the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America was responsible for creating the [Spanish-American War Memorial](#).)

Unveiled in 1914, the Confederate Memorial was designed by [noted American sculptor \(\(Moses Jacob Ezekiel\)\)](#), a Confederate veteran and the first Jewish graduate of Virginia Military Institute. The elaborately designed monument offers a nostalgic, mythologized vision of the Confederacy, including highly sanitized depictions of slavery. Standing on a 32-foot-tall pedestal, a bronze, classical female figure, crowned with olive leaves, represents the American South. She holds a laurel wreath, a plow stock and a pruning hook, with a Biblical inscription at her feet: “They have beat their swords into plough-shares and their spears into pruning hooks.” The statue stands on a pedestal with four cinerary urns, one for each year of the war, and is supported by a frieze with 14 shields, one for each of the 11 Confederate states and the border states of Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri. Thirty-two life-sized figures depict mythical gods alongside Southern soldiers and civilians.

Two of these figures are portrayed as African American: an enslaved woman depicted as a “Mammy,” holding the infant child of a white officer, and an enslaved man following his owner to war. An inscription of the Latin phrase “Victrix causa diis placuit sed victa Caton” (“The victorious cause was pleasing to the gods, but the lost cause to Cato”) construes the South's secession as a noble “Lost Cause.” This narrative of the Lost Cause, which romanticized the pre-Civil War South and denied the horrors of slavery, fueled white backlash against Reconstruction and the rights that the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments (1865-1870) had granted to African Americans. The image of the faithful slave, embodied in the two figures on the memorial, appeared widely in American popular culture during the 1910s through 1930s, perhaps most famously in the 1939 film “Gone with the Wind.”

Sculptor Moses Ezekiel was buried at the base of his creation in 1921, after being honored at the first funeral ceremony in the newly built [Memorial Amphitheater](#). Three other Confederate soldiers lie next to him: Lt. Harry C. Marmaduke of the Confederate Navy, Capt. John M. Hickey of the Second Missouri Infantry and Brig. Gen. Marcus J. Wright, who commanded brigades at the battles of Shiloh and Chickamauga.

The Confederate Memorial offers an opportunity for visitors to reflect on the history and meanings of the Civil War, slavery, and the relationship between military service, citizenship and race in America. This memorial, along with the segregated United States Colored Troops graves in [Section 27](#), invites us to understand how politics and culture have historically shaped how Americans have buried and commemorated the dead. Memorialization at a national cemetery became an important marker of citizenship — which, in the post-Reconstruction era, was granted to white Civil War veterans, Confederate or Union, but not to African American soldiers who had served their country. In such ways, the history of Arlington National Cemetery allows us to better understand the complex history of the United States.

Read more about [the history of Arlington National Cemetery](#).



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