

Fort Smith National Cemetery
522 Garland Avenue and South 6th Street
Fort Smith, Arkansas 72901

Description

The Fort Smith National Cemetery, established in 1867, is located in Sebastian County on the former military reservation of Fort Smith. When the national cemetery was established, it contained five and one-half acres and was an enlargement of the post cemetery. The grounds were laid off in sections intersected by walks six feet wide and were well provided with trees and shrubbery. The cemetery was subsequently enclosed by a brick wall with 18-inch cement coping and an average height of four feet, constructed circa 1874. In January 1898, the east end of the wall was blown down by a tornado and was rebuilt with stone with a 22-inch coping. A stone retaining wall on the northwest corner, 64 feet in length and four feet high, was constructed in 1904. By then, the stone wall enclosed nine acres and in 1942 was expanded to encompass the full 16 acres. The cemetery was later expanded to the southeast and now contains 21.7 acres. From the eastern corner of the newer burial area to the southeastern corner of the cemetery, the area is enclosed by ornamental iron fencing supported by stone columns. The southeast and southwest corners of the newer burial area are framed with six-foot-high walls made of local stone, which is in keeping with the older walls on the site. Vinyl-clad chain link fencing with slats encloses the area from the southeast corner of Section 21 to the northwest corner of Section 17.



The main entrance is situated in the northeast corner and is protected by double ornamental wrought iron gates supported by concrete columns with granite bases and two side gates of the same material, all constructed in 1942. When these gates were constructed, the original iron gate was relocated to the southeast corner of Section 10. Upon completion of the newest burial sections, the original gate was restored and placed at the entrance to the committal service shelter between Sections 16 and 17 in the newer portion of the cemetery. There is a pedestrian gate on each side. A sign installed in 1997 outside and to the right of the main entrance, identifies the cemetery. From the main gate a drive leads to a circle, upon which is located the flagpole. The administration building, formerly the superintendent's lodge, and the maintenance building are located just north of the main entrance. A service gate is located on the east side of the cemetery. Graves are marked with upright marble headstones.

The lodge, now used as the administrative office, was constructed in 1904 and is a two-story brick structure with a stone foundation and asphalt shingle roof. A hip roof crowns the lodge's L-shaped two-story portion, while a lower hip roof covers a one-story portion. In addition to awnings, the windows have heavy stone lintels and sills. The front porch was converted into a foyer (sometime after 1948).



The rectangular brick and concrete maintenance building with a four-ply built-up flat roof was constructed in 1950. There are five storage bays, a shop area, staff restrooms, and public restroom facilities. In 1997, two bays were added and the restrooms were renovated.

The stone committal service shelter with a metal roof was constructed in 1997.

A carillon, located just to the east of the main entrance, was dedicated by the American Veterans of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam on November 11, 1986. A brick walkway leading to the carillon contains five plaques, four of which are inscribed with names of many persons and organizations that contributed monies towards the purchase of land for expansion of the cemetery. The fifth plaque is an appreciation plaque dedicated to all the contributors.

Noted Burials

Two Confederate generals, graduates of West Point and veterans of many campaigns with the United States Army prior to their espousal of the principles of the Confederate States, are buried in the Fort Smith National Cemetery. One of these men, James B. McIntosh, graduated from West Point in 1849 and participated in numerous Indian campaigns in Texas and Kansas. He was on duty at Fort Smith in May 1861, at which time he resigned his commission and joined the Army of the Confederacy. He gained the rank of colonel and participated in the Battle of Oak Hill, Missouri, on August 10, 1861. In 1862, Colonel McIntosh was appointed a brigadier general and took part in the engagement at Pea Ridge, the first battle of the Civil War fought on Arkansas soil. During the second day of the battle, March 7, 1862, the 34-year-old general was killed, and his remains were brought to Fort Smith for burial. He is interred in grave 1267, Section 3, Row 4.

Alexander E. Steen, the other Confederate general who also died during the Civil War, was also a West Point graduate and had served with distinction in the United States Army during the Mexican War. When the Civil War broke out, Steen was living in Arkansas. He cast his lot with the forces of the Confederacy and was disowned by his family in Missouri, who favored the Union cause. He followed his convictions, however, and became a brigadier general in the Confederate Army. A promising military career was terminated when General Steen was killed in action during the battle of Prairie Grove on December 7, 1862. He is buried in Grave 1822, Section 4, Row 2.

Isaac C. Parker, a corporal in Company A, 61st Missouri Infantry, during the Civil War, is interred in Grave 4000, Section 9, Row 3. Parker's post war activities gained him a reputation and a degree of recognition which extended beyond his wartime service. He was known as the

“hanging judge.” A lawyer by profession and a circuit judge in Missouri prior to the Civil War, Judge Parker served two terms in Congress after the war. Then, in 1875, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed him United States District Judge for the Western District of Arkansas. The area within the jurisdiction of Judge Parker’s court was for the most part frontier territory and included the Indian Territory, which was later to become the State of Oklahoma. Here during the last quarter of the 19th century in a typical frontier environment, the forces of law and order were in frequent conflict with those who considered themselves above the laws of the United States. Crimes of every description—murder, rape, larceny, robbery, cutting timber on Government lands, bootlegging, mail robbery, and other acts of defiance against duly constituted authority—were common. It is said that more than 13,000 cases came before Judge Parker’s court during the twenty-one years that he presided as United States District Judge. Of the 12,000 criminal cases which came before him, there were 88 cases in which the penalty of death by hanging was upheld and carried out on a gallows erected near the United States Court House in Fort Smith. Judge Parker died on November 17, 1896, at the age of 58. Reports indicate that elaborate burial ceremonies were held, and that private and public business activity was suspended during the funeral services while the flag was flown at half-staff. The Fort Smith National Cemetery was crowded with mourners who accompanied the body to its final resting place. A notable tribute of respect was a garland of wild flowers placed upon the grave by Chief Pleasant Porter of the Choctaw Indians.

Many of the United States Deputy Marshals who “rode” for Parker, performing their jobs of bringing criminals to justice were also veterans of the Civil War and are buried in the national cemetery.

Major William Bradford, the first Commanding Officer of Fort Smith, is buried in Section 2, Grave 604. On May 5, 1813, while engaged in a battle at or near Fort Meigs, Michigan Territory, he received a gunshot wound in his left thigh. He was back at the head of his troops hobbling on a crutch before his wounds had sufficiently healed. He was promoted to Major in 1814. On December 25, 1817, he landed at the confluence of the Arkansas and Poteau Rivers in command of a company of riflemen. He established a log fort for the purpose of keeping peace between the native Osage and the Cherokee Indians who were moving from the east. This primitive frontier outpost became the present city of Fort Smith. He died on October 20, 1826, of yellow fever and was buried in the post cemetery which later became part of the national cemetery.

The first known person to have been buried in what is now the national cemetery is Thomas Russell, Surgeon, U. S. Army. He accompanied the command of Major William Bradford in 1817, when the first Fort was constructed at Fort Smith and was Surgeon of the Fort. He died on August 24, 1819, and is buried in Section 2, Grave 605.

Another noteworthy burial was that of James McCann, an officer’s steward on the USS Powhatan who served under the alias of James Lopinto. When he died on August 16, 1928, at the age of 115 years, he was the oldest man in Arkansas. He had served 53 years with the United States Navy. He is buried in Section 1, Grave 353.



Also interred in the cemetery in Section 4, Grave 1926B, is General Richard Caswell Gatlin. On September 23, 1846, he was commissioned to a Major without an increase in pay for meritorious conduct in the battle of Monterey, Mexico, where he was wounded. In the late 1850s he was stationed at Fort Smith, where he served as the post commander. With the secession of his native state, he resigned his commission and accepted one as a Brigadier General of the Confederate Army. He retired to Fort Smith following the Civil War and died on September 8, 1896. His wife, Sciotio, and infant son, Alfred, are buried in Grave 1926C. Sciotio died on January 3, 1852, several days after giving birth to Alfred. Alfred was born on December 27, 1851, and died on January 11, 1852.

Civil War Activity in Area

Fort Smith was established in 1817 on a point of land a little below the junction of the Poteau and Arkansas Rivers. The site was selected by Major William Bradford pursuant to orders of General Andrew Jackson. The place designated was known as Belle Point, a name bestowed upon the area by French explorers because of its natural beauty. The fort was later named "Fort Smith" for Brigadier General Thomas A. Smith.

The first Fort Smith was abandoned in 1824 on orders of General Winfield Scott, the commanding officer of the Western Department of the Army at New Orleans. Pursuant to these orders, Colonel Mathew Arbuckle moved his five companies of troops from Fort Smith to a location at the mouth of the Verdigris River, Indian Territory (Oklahoma). This new location became Fort Gibson. One reason given for the move was the great amount of sickness among the troops at Fort Smith. Records indicate that about 25 percent of the command at Fort Smith died during the year 1823 and interred in the post cemetery there. Following the removal of troops from Fort Smith in April 1824, the stockade was unoccupied until late in March 1833. At that time, Captain John Stuart and Company C of the 7th U. S. Infantry were ordered to move from Fort Gibson to the site of Fort Smith, where it was thought that they would be able to intercept shipments of whiskey brought up the river by traders for illegal sale to the Indians. Captain Stuart published a notice warning all masters and owners of boats transporting merchandise or other stores west of Fort Smith to stop at the landing there for examination of cargoes to assure that no liquor was being brought into the area for sale to the Indians. During the time that Captain Stuart and his men were stationed at Fort Smith, eight soldiers and one surgeon died and were interred in the post cemetery. On June 16, 1834, the troops were ordered out and stationed at a new and more healthful location on the south bank of the Arkansas River about ten miles above Fort Smith.

No more troops were stationed in the area until July 1838, when a new garrison called Cantonment Belknap, was established about a mile and a half northeast of Fort Smith. Shortly before the arrival of troops at Cantonment Belknap in June 1838, the United States Government purchased some 306 acres located southeast of the Arkansas and Poteau Rivers. An area in the northwest corner of this property near the banks of the Arkansas River and slightly north and east of the first Fort Smith became the second Fort Smith. It is presumed that at some time between June 17, 1838, when Company F of the 7th U. S. Infantry arrived at Camp Belknap, and September 17, 1842, when the second Fort Smith was occupied, the original post cemetery was rehabilitated and enlarged.

Although no great battles took place during the Civil War in the area about Fort Smith, there was considerable guerrilla or bushwhacking activity between Union and Confederate

partisans. As a state, Arkansas, was a member of the Confederacy, but loyalties here on the northwestern frontier of the state frequently were divided evenly among members of the same family.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, this frontier outpost was garrisoned by two troops (approximately 150 men) of the 1st U. S. Cavalry under the command of Captain S. D. Sturgis. On April 23, 1861, 12 days after the surrender of Fort Sumter, South Carolina, two river steamers, the Frederick Nortrebe and the Tahlequah arrived at Van Buren from Little Rock with 300 Confederates under the command of a Colonel Borland. This force disembarked at Van Buren and moved upon Fort Smith by dirt road. Captain Sturgis, alerted by scouting parties that the Confederate forces greatly outnumbered his troops, thereupon evacuated Fort Smith, and it was occupied by the Confederate forces. After the evacuation of Captain Sturgis, Confederate troops began to gather at Fort Smith. As early as May 20, 1861, Colonel DeRosa Carroll was in command of the Fort. Many Confederate organizations were organized here, but it is said that they were devoid of even the slightest knowledge of military training. This deficiency was overcome, however, through the exertions of several men living in the town who had formerly served in the regular army.

The State of Arkansas had not formally seceded from the Federal Union at the time of the evacuation of Fort Smith, but an ordinance of secession was passed on May 6, 1861. Shortly thereafter, the State of Arkansas conveyed to the Confederate States of America the lands, buildings, and other property at Fort Smith. This transfer included the post cemetery.

In the spring of 1863, Union General James G. Blunt had established a base at Fort Gibson, Oklahoma, with the intent of securing the Indian Territory for the Union. The Confederate commander in the Indian Territory was Brigadier General William Steele, whose forces consisted of Brigadier General Douglas Cooper's brigade and William Cabell's brigade. These forces were grouped at Honey Springs, some 30 miles south of Fort Gibson. Promised reinforcements from Texas had not yet arrived, defective powder rendered many of the Confederates' weapons ineffective, and many dispirited Rebel soldiers, most notably those in Cabell's Arkansas brigade, began to desert. To make matters worse, Steele received a report that another Federal column was advancing south toward Fort Smith from Springfield, Missouri. On August 19, Steele sent what remained of Cabell's brigade back to the vicinity of Fort Smith to guard against this new threat. On August 31, Cabell, determined to abandon Fort Smith, ordered his wagon trains to prepare to move to Jenny Lind, some ten miles south of the city. When Blunt's force crossed the Poteau on September 1 to attack Cabell's camp, they found it deserted. Blunt sent Colonel William Cloud with 1,500 cavalry, 6 pieces of artillery, and 40 wagons loaded with infantry to pursue him. Blunt and the remainder of his command entered Fort Smith without opposition. Around 9 a.m. on September 1, advance elements of Cloud's Cavalry attacked the Rebel's rear guard at Jenny Lind. Skirmishing continued until the Federals reached the foot of Devil's Backbone around noon. Fighting raged for nearly three hours. Cabell managed to hold enough of his command together to allow his wagons to get safely over the ridge. He listed his losses at 5 killed and 12 wounded. Cloud's Federals took possession of the ridge and spent the night there before returning to join their comrades in Fort Smith on September 2. They reported 14 casualties in the battle. Fort Smith's Unionists hailed Blunt's arrival. On September 9, Colonel Cloud moved out of Fort Smith.

The Federal forces found that capturing Fort Smith was easier than holding it. For the Confederacy, the loss of Fort Smith was another devastating blow, ending any real hope of capturing northwest Arkansas.

On July 31, 1864, a considerable force of Confederate troops appeared about four miles south of Fort Smith and drove in Federal pickets. A brisk fire was kept up for some time by the skirmishers and the Confederates threw a number of shells from Howitzers. A part of the 2nd Kansas Battery under a Captain Smith promptly took position about a mile in advance of Fort No. 2, supported by two companies of the 1st Kansas Colored Troops, just in time to prevent the Confederates from occupying the same hill with their battery. The firing from Smith's guns was effective and killed a number of the enemy plus all their battery horses except one. The Confederates then retired to the dense thickets of the Poteau bottoms, from where they continued firing until the next day, when they left. The Union loss was one killed, one wounded and one taken prisoner; Confederate losses were not ascertained.

On September 1, the Federal pickets on the Texas Road were attacked by the Confederate forces consisting of about 300 Indians, and on September 28, a forage train belonging to the Federal Army supported by a portion of the 14th Kansas Cavalry, was attacked at a point 14 miles out on the Little Rock Road by a group of Indian guerillas. Eight men were killed and one was severely wounded. The remainder of the men were obliged to retire, leaving the wagons and dead soldiers.

According to the booklet titled "Fort Smith National Cemetery," there was a newspaper article on the subject of burial grounds in Fort Smith, in which Mr. W. J. Weaver stated that shortly after locating in Fort Smith in 1841, he visited a burying ground on the highest point on the east bank of the Poteau River, quite a distance above the stockade fort built by Major Bradford in 1817 and near where the Ketcham Iron Foundry was later erected. He says it was about 30 feet square and in a very dilapidated condition. It had been surrounded by a fence, very little of which was left, having been knocked down by cattle or rotted down. It contained a few graves, three of which were marked by marble slabs. One of the slabs was in memory of a surgeon, the other two marking the resting place of lieutenants. The unmarked graves were occupied by soldiers who had died in the hospital. He further states it is reasonable to conclude that the surgeon whose grave was marked by one of the marble slabs was Doctor Thomas Russell. Several other articles in newspaper clippings made reference to this small cemetery. One of them stated "Among the officers laid to rest here were Major William Bradford and Doctor Thomas Russell, as well as several missionaries who came to preach the gospel to the Indians." It is evident, therefore, that this was the first Post Cemetery and must have been established at the time of, or just prior to, the death of Surgeon Thomas Russell in 1819. Also, it is believed that this small cemetery was located within the area of what is now the national cemetery.



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The old post cemetery at Fort Smith did, in fact, become the Fort Smith National Cemetery in 1867. Legislation enacted February 24, 1871, provided for the disposition of certain useless military reservations by transfer from the War Department to the Department of the

Interior, who would then offer the property for sale. The military reservation at Fort Smith was among the surplus properties slated for disposal, and the Fort Smith reservation was transferred on March 25, 1871, as announced in War Department General Orders No. 19, dated March 6, 1871. In May 1871, Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs advised Secretary of War William W. Belknap that a national military cemetery had been established on the Fort Smith reservation, and General Meigs requested that the national cemetery be excepted from the sale directed by Congress or, if that could not be done, that he be given instructions as to the means to be taken to protect the remains of the dead soldiers there interred. Correspondence concerning this matter then ensued between the Secretary of War and Secretary of the Interior Columbus Delano. The result was a brief Executive Order, signed by President Ulysses S. Grant on May 22, 1871, which removed the area occupied by the Fort Smith National Cemetery from sale to the Department of the Interior and restored it to the custody of the War Department.