

Fort Gibson National Cemetery
1423 Cemetery Road
Fort Gibson, Oklahoma 74434

Description

The Fort Gibson National Cemetery, established in 1868, is located at two miles northeast of Fort Gibson and ten miles northeast of Muskogee in Muskogee County, in the Three Forks country where the Verdigris and Grand Rivers join the Arkansas River. The main entrance gate, located on the north side, has double wrought-iron gates flanked by concrete pillars painted white, with a pedestrian gate three feet six inches wide, on each side. To the left of the main entrance is a steel sign which reads:



FORT GIBSON NATIONAL CEMETERY
ESTABLISHED 1868.

The cemetery is enclosed by chain link fencing, except along the northern boundary from the entrance gate to the northeast corner. This area is enclosed by wrought-iron fencing supported by concrete pillars. The flagpole is situated directly north of the main entrance gate and is surrounded by the Officers Circle. The administration building and service building are located just east of the main entrance. In the center of Section seven is a rostrum, and a committal service shelter is situated near the southeastern corner of Section 16. Just outside Section 13 is a carillon bell tower. Graves are marked with upright marble headstones.

The brick administration building with an asphalt shingle roof was constructed in 1990.

The brick service building was constructed in 1953, and is partitioned into a workshop, supply room, locker and shower space, public restrooms and vehicle storage. The roof is asphalt shingles. A maintenance bay, as well as space for an employee break room were added in 1989.



An octagon-shaped stone rostrum, 15 feet in width and three feet, six inches in height, with a concrete slab floor, was constructed in 1939. The railings and steps are of concrete, but there is no roof. The structure is located in Section 7.

A brick committal service shelter was completed in 1998. The exterior roof is metal, and the interior of the roof is wood. Along one wall are granite seals of the insignias of the five branches of the military service which are inlaid into the brick wall. Another wall contains names of persons and organizations who donated monies towards the construction of the shelter.

A carillon tower was placed in the cemetery in 1985 through a donation by the American Veterans of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam (AMVETS) and is located in Section 10.

Noted Burials

There is one Medal of Honor recipient buried in the national cemetery: John N. Reese, Jr., Private First Class, U. S. Army, Company B, 148th Infantry, 37th Infantry Division. His grave (Grave 1259-E, Section 2) is marked with a special marker inscribed with an enlarged gold-leafed replica of the medal of the United States Army and the words "MEDAL OF HONOR."

A memorial headstone honors another Medal of Honor recipient, Corporal John Haddoo, U. S. Army, who died on September 30, 1877. He is interred in the Custer National Cemetery, Crow Agency, Montana.

Several noted burials in the Officers Circle include:

Talahina Rogers Houston, the second wife of General Sam Houston, is buried in Grave 2467. She was born in 1799 and died in 1833 of pneumonia. She had originally been interred near Muldrow, Oklahoma. In the late 1890's, the editor of a Fort Gibson newspaper had met someone who told him where Houston's Cherokee wife was buried, and he began a campaign to have the body reinterred in the Fort Gibson National Cemetery. He convinced the War Department that someone of such status as the wife of the President of the Republic of Texas should be buried in a national cemetery, and permission was given for this burial. In September 1904, with much pomp and ceremony, a funeral parade, and services at the cemetery, the reinterment was made. There is some controversy over the correct spelling of her name, and many articles have been written on this subject. "Talahina" is a Choctaw word, and Mrs. Houston was Cherokee. Many people believe the correct spelling of her name is Tiana. Her headstone still bears the spelling of "Talahina." It is said that the newspaperman picked up this name from another newspaperman who said it was an incorrect interpretation of her name. Only since that name appeared on the headstone has she been known as "Talahina." In papers written during her lifetime, she is called "Diana."

Vivia Thomas, whose story is very interesting, is interred in Grave 2119. One of the many versions of her legend is that she was a high-spirited daughter of wealthy Boston parents and attended Boston society's finest affairs. At a ball after the Civil War, she met and fell in love with a handsome young lieutenant. After several months of courtship, they announced their engagement. Shortly before the wedding date the lieutenant suddenly left. His note stated that he desired to go west in search of adventure and that marriage and Boston society were not for him. Broken-hearted and bitter over the embarrassment caused her and her family, Vivia left home in search of her lover. Learning from the military that the lieutenant was stationed at Fort Gibson, Indian Territory, she began her long journey. She cut her hair, dressed in men's clothing, and joined the Army. She avoided recognition by the young lieutenant, although she frequently observed him. She discovered he had an Indian girl friend he visited each evening. One cold evening, Vivia trailed, ambushed and killed him. An intensive investigation was conducted to no avail, and the matter was dropped. However, Vivia became remorseful and was disturbed over the killing. She visited the grave at night, contracted pneumonia from continued exposure, and one night collapsed near his grave. Her comrades were so impressed with her courage in

coming alone to the frontier and carrying out a successful disguise as a male that, rather than condemning her, they awarded her a place of honor for burial in the Officers Circle.

Captain John P. Decatur, interred in Grave 2101, was the Sutler (a person who follows an army and sells provisions, etc., to the soldiers) at Fort Gibson and is the brother of Commodore Stephen Decatur, naval hero of the War of 1812. He was appointed as Sutler to the Army at Fort Gibson in April 1831. The Sutler served an important role for the Army, particularly at the remote frontier posts. The Army provided food and uniforms for the troops, so the soldiers and their families were dependent upon the Sutler's store for everything from shaving equipment and toothbrushes to dress fabrics and jewelry. He died on November 12, 1832, of typhoid.

Mary Eliza Mix, interred in Grave 2110, was reputedly a spy for the U. S. Government. Since she died before the Mexican War, the only war in which she could have been a spy was the War of 1812 or some of the Indian skirmishes.

Major Joel Elliott, interred in Grave 2233, was a member of General George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry. Major Elliott commanded the 7th Cavalry during the year that Custer was suspended from his command and rank after being court-martialed on seven charges growing out of desertion of his command at Fort Wallace. He had to hurry to his wife at Fort Riley after receiving reports of cholera there. General Custer led a troop of 800 men against a Cheyenne village at the Washita River. Major Elliott took a detachment of 19 men in pursuit of a group of Indians escaping from the village. Over a considerable period of time, shots were heard in the distance. The fact was fully reported to General Custer several times, but he made no effort to send troops to rescue Elliott's detachment. Major Elliott and the 19 men with him were all killed. He was originally buried at Fort Arbuckle, and his remains were later transferred to Fort Gibson National Cemetery. In 1875, a military post was established in Wheeler County, Texas, as a protective measure against Indian outbreaks. The post was named Fort Elliott in his honor.

Billy Bowlegs, also known as Sonuk Mikko, was named Captain of Company F in April 1862, when the First Regiment of Indian Home Guards was formed at LeRoy, Kansas. He proved to be a fine officer and leader of his men. He was cited as deserving high praise for his service at the Battle of Prairie Grove; he led 75 of his men in a brave charge at Greenleaf Prairie. At the Battle of Honey Springs, he was again named in a report for his gallant conduct and efficient service. He is buried in Grave 2109.

John Nicks, second postmaster of Oklahoma and first postmaster at Fort Gibson at the time of his death on December 31, 1831, is buried in Grave 2099. When the War of 1812 ended (1815), the Armed Forces were reduced and Nicks was discharged as a Major. He was in Louisiana at the time and he remained there, practicing law while seeking reinstatement into the Army. By December, he was accepted and he served for six more years, before resigning a Lieutenant Colonel's commission to accept the appointment as Sutler to the 7th Infantry, a regiment he had served with for several years. In 1827, when the mail route was extended to Fort Gibson, Nicks was appointed Postmaster. He was one of the Commissioners appointed to locate a county seat for the newly organized Lovely County, Arkansas. His name appears as a witness on many of the treaties drawn with various Indian tribes.

Significant Monuments/Memorials

Just to the west of the Officers Circle is a monument made of an original cast-iron sea-coast artillery tube secured by a concrete base. Affixed to the monument is a bronze plaque inscribed as follows:

UNITED STATES
NATIONAL MILITARY CEMETERY
ESTABLISHED 1868
INTERMENTS 2123
KNOWN 156
UNKNOWN 1967



Civil War Activity in Area

Fort Gibson, founded in 1824, (then Cantonment Gibson) was not only the oldest and most celebrated military establishment in the annals of Oklahoma but, in its early days, it was the farthest west outpost of the United States. In many respects, it continued for years to be one of the most important on that frontier. The military reservation was located on the Grand River about three miles above the point where the Grand flows into the Arkansas. In addition to this strategic river location, Fort Gibson lay alongside the Texas Road, the major north-south artery in the Indian Territory. Because of its location, possession of the fort was considered crucial to the conflict in the Indian Territory. The fort was named "Fort Gibson" in honor of Colonel George Gibson, then United States Commissary General of Subsistence. This new fort was first garrisoned by five companies (B, C, G, H, and K) of the 7th U. S. Infantry stationed at Fort Smith, Arkansas, and commanded by Colonel Matthew Arbuckle.

On February 14, 1833, a treaty was made with the Indians regarding use of the land near the fort. Later, the Cherokees made a determined effort to have the garrison removed, as they claimed that the fort had served its purpose. They further stated that the site of Fort Gibson would serve the community better if it were changed into a town. This location was important because of the natural rock. The river was the most important highway. The Cherokees finally won their point with the Government and on June 8, 1857, Fort Gibson was abandoned by members of the 7th Infantry, the regiment which established the fort 33 years before (in 1824).

The Cherokees created a town, and called it Kec-too-whah, which was short-lived, because this location was a strategic position for military forces. Early in 1863, the old post was re-established by Brigadier General James G. Blunt, commander of the District of the Frontier and the 1st Division, Army of the Frontier. The name of the post was officially changed to Fort Blunt, until the latter part of that year. For a time in the possession of the Confederate Army, it was afterwards regained by the Union side and on April 5, 1863, the whole hill was reoccupied by three Cherokee regiments, four companies of Kansas cavalry, and Hopkins' Battery of Volunteers, an aggregate of 3,150 men, with four field pieces and two mountain howitzers. A main works embraced 15 to 20 acres with angles and facings; from this extended a line of earthworks about a quarter of a mile in length, the whole defense being considered strong enough

to resist a force of 20,000 men. For a time, this entire area was given the name of Fort Blunt, in compliment to Major General James G. Blunt, then commanding the district of the frontier.

General Blunt had made a forced march from Kansas to Fort Gibson and on the night of July 16, 1863, crossed the Arkansas River, proceeded down the Texas Road. The next morning, he attacked the Confederate command under General Douglas H. Cooper at Honey Springs, near the site of the present Oktaha, south of Muskogee. By this engagement, the most important battle in the Indian Territory during the war, the Union forces succeeded in preventing a joining of Cooper's forces with those of General William L. Cabell, coming from Fort Smith, and the probable recapture of Fort Gibson by the Confederates.

After this battle, the strength of Fort Gibson was increased until July 31, when it aggregated 5,204. On August 31, there were 6,014 troops at the garrison, with 18 field pieces. Being the most important fortified point in the Territory, it served as headquarters for the military operations in this region during the remainder of the Civil War and played a conspicuous part in strengthening the hands of the loyal elements among the tribes. The name of Blunt was officially attached to the post until December 31, 1863, when it was dropped in favor of the old name, Fort Gibson.



There were three military cemeteries located in and around Fort Gibson in which the dead were buried from the earliest days of the fort. The first of these was created in 1824 when Fort Gibson (then Cantonment Gibson) was erected and garrisoned by the 7th U. S. Regiment of Infantry. During the decade and a half in which this regiment and several dragoon regiments garrisoned Cantonment Gibson, the personnel were decimated by recurrent epidemics of fever, which necessitated the establishment successively of these cemeteries in order to receive the many dead. After the abandonment of the post in 1854, the cemeteries fell into a neglected state with the result that the wooden headboards marking the graves rotted or were burned away. The identity of most of the dead remained unknown.

By Executive Order dated February 13, 1891, the military reservation of Fort Gibson was transferred to the Department of the Interior for disposition, except for a piece of ground 600 feet in length by 500 feet in width on the southwest corner, it being the site of the Fort Gibson National Cemetery.