

Memphis National Cemetery
3568 Townes Avenue
Memphis, Tennessee 38122

Description

The Memphis National Cemetery, established in 1867, is located about seven miles east of the court house within the city limits of Memphis in Shelby County. Burial sections of different sizes are separated by drives and walks. The main entrance is located at the south-west corner of the cemetery at Townes Avenue and Jackson Avenue and is protected by a double wrought iron gate, with a pedestrian gate on each side, from which emanates a circular driveway containing the flagpole. The gates were constructed in 1950. A steel picket fence surrounds the entrance to the cemetery. A pedestrian



gate is located on the northeast side of the cemetery near the eastern corner. The cemetery is enclosed by ornamental metal picket fencing with brick columns, except for the west side, which is enclosed with the original brick wall that has been restored. It appears that the main entrance was originally situated in the center of the west end until an overpass over the railroad was built (date unknown). Historical records state that passenger trains of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad stopped at a station directly in front of the main entrance. The lodge and administration/service building are located along Jackson Avenue on the west side of the cemetery. Graves are marked with upright marble headstones.

In 1934, a two-story Dutch Colonial "cottage" lodge was constructed, with the first story of brick and the second story of frame and stucco. There are six rooms plus an office and basement. The front porch was remodeled in 1964 and screens replaced with glass to provide additional office space. The roof is Gambrel with a dormer across the front and is made of asphalt tile. The windows are double-hung.



Adjacent to the lodge are two brick buildings, constructed in 1934. The one building originally contained five garage bays. One bay door has been eliminated, and the entire bay is utilized for the administrative offices with a conference room and employee lunch room. The remaining portion of the building is part of the service area and contains the four remaining garage bays. The adjoining building located next to the garage bays contains public rest rooms, employee lockers, employee restrooms and lunch room, as well as the foreman's office. The windows are three-over-three. The roof, replaced in 1993, is asphalt shingles. A garage, 5 feet by 25 feet, with a built-up roof, was added in 1947 and is used for storage.

A frame and concrete pump house, 12 feet by 16 feet, was built in 1929. The roof is asphalt shingles.

Noted Burials

There is one Medal of Honor recipient buried in the Memphis National Cemetery: James H. Robinson, Private, Company B, 3rd Michigan Cavalry - Section H, Grave 4131. His grave 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."

Memphis National Cemetery is the burial place of many of the victims, known and unknown, who perished in one of the nation's most tragic maritime disasters—the explosion and burning of the Mississippi River steamboat, U.S.S. Sultana, during the night of April 26, 1865. This ship, a well-known river craft, had limited cabin space for 75-100 passengers and by law could carry 376 persons including crew. The ship left New Orleans on April 21, 1865, with stops scheduled upriver at Vicksburg, Memphis, Cairo, Evansville, Louisville, and Cincinnati. On April 24, the Vicksburg landing was made to take on passengers and cargo. At Vicksburg, a huge throng of Union soldiers recently released from Confederate prison camps anxiously awaited the arrival of the Sultana which was to take them to Cairo, Illinois, from which point they would make their way to their respective homes. An estimated 1,800 to 2,000 crowded on board the ship. The men were so eager to go on board that the authorities decided to delay making out muster rolls until after the ship had left Vicksburg. A leaking boiler had been hastily repaired at Vicksburg, and the overloaded steamer pressed on upriver towards Memphis, bucking river currents reinforced by heavy spring rains. They reached Memphis on the evening of April 26, and there some of the returning soldiers disembarked and went out to view the sights of the town while the ship was readied for the trip up river. A few of the men missed the boat when it set out after more repairs had been made to the boilers. As the Sultana pushed on through the night to a point above Memphis near the group of islands known as the "Hen and Chickens," the overburdened and weakened boilers exploded. Fire broke out on the ship, and the hundreds of hapless passengers were forced to jump into the swift and hostile current of the dark Mississippi. Some were drowned outright; others were rescued and taken to various Memphis hospitals, where many died as a result of burns, exposure to the elements, and weakened physical stamina brought about by long incarceration as prisoners of war in Confederate prison camps. The death toll of this Mississippi River tragedy has been estimated at more than 1,537 persons.

A grave of interest is the grave of Caleb Adams, an ex-slave who died on July 14, 1933, at the age of 112. He served with the 122nd U.S.C. Infantry in 1864 and 1865 and was the house servant of President John Quincy Adams for a number of years. He is buried in Section K, Grave 5372A.

Significant Monuments/Memorials

Illinois Monument - A sarcophagus type monument of granite and bronze showing the shrouded figure of a soldier lying in state. The monument was dedicated on October 15, 1929, with the dedication address being given by Dr. C. O. Brown, Commander of U.S. Grant Post, Grand Army of the Republic of Chicago. The monument is located in Section B of the cemetery and bears replicas of the seal of the State of Illinois and of the United States.



Minnesota Monument - This monument, erected by the State of Minnesota in 1916, is located in Section C of the cemetery. It was created by John K. Daniels, a sculptor from St. Paul, Minnesota. Daniels, a native of Norway, was a highly acclaimed artist who was noted for the versatility and spirituality of his work. He had won numerous awards and had been decorated by the King of Norway. He was selected by the Minnesota Monument Commission, established by an act of the Minnesota State Legislature in 1913 to organize the construction of memorials honoring Minnesota soldiers of the Civil War who were buried in national cemeteries in several southern states. The monument depicts a Union soldier standing bare-headed with his head slightly bowed. The figure's hands rest atop the butt of his rifle, which is inverted with the barrel resting on the ground before him. His cap is held in his proper right hand and rests against his proper left shoulder. He is dressed in a rain slicker, which billows out behind him. The base, which is made of Minnesota granite, is 106 inches by 95 inches by 95 inches. The sculpture is made of bronze. On the east side of the base are crossed palm fronds.



Civil War Activity in Area

The location of the City of Memphis as one of the great commercial centers on the Mississippi River was of considerable strategic importance to the Confederacy following Tennessee's secession from the Union in 1861. The city furnished a convenient location for military hospitals to care for a portion of the wounded and sick from the Mississippi River combat area. General hospitals capable of caring for 5,000 men were located in and around the city.

The war for the central Mississippi and the city of Memphis had become a series of actions and counteractions. Both Union and Confederate governments were desperately attempting to seize the initiative.

On April 12, 1862, Confederate lookouts watching the Mississippi River above Memphis spotted a Union steamer upriver from them, and five Confederate ships gave chase. At 8:30 the next morning, at the mouth of the Obion River, the lookouts reported more Union warships coming down the river toward them. Captain Thomas Huger signaled the Confederate ships to form a line of battle, but the Union flotilla was too strong to fight. The U.S.S. Benton, the most powerful warship on the Mississippi River, led the way, with more Union ironclads in a line behind her. Huger decided that he could not risk a general battle against the ironclads, since his vessels were unarmored and badly outgunned. Instead, he ordered Maurepas and his other two gunboats back down the river, leaving the rams General Price and General Van Dorn to face the ironclads alone. The two Confederate rams reached the protection of Fort Pillow, 40 miles north of Memphis on Chicksaw Bluff and warned the fort's defenders that Union warships were approaching. Union ships came into view and continued downriver to test the Confederate defenses. Union Commander Flag Officer Andrew Foote suddenly ordered the ironclads to come

about. They steamed upriver a few miles before tying up, close enough to constitute a threat to Fort Pillow.

On August 7, 1861, the U.S. War Department issued a contract to James B. Eads to build seven ironclad gunboats by February 10, 1862. The Confederates reacted to the ominous news by beginning construction on a pair of their own ironclad rams at Memphis—the Arkansas and the Tennessee. In mid-January 1862, Confederate Secretary of War Judah Benjamin decided to take further steps to stop the Union ironclads. On January 15, he ordered Major General Mansfield Lovell to seize 14 steamers at New Orleans with the “intention and design...to strengthen the vessels with iron casing at the bows, and to use them at high speed to run down, or run over and sink, if possible, the gunboats and mortar rats prepared by the enemy.” The two men chosen to lead the ram fleet were James E. Montgomery and J. H. Townsend.

To defend the South against the anticipated northern onslaught, the Confederates had fortified several points along the central Mississippi, including Island No. 10, Fort Pillow, Fort Wright at Randolph, and Fort Harris just above Memphis. At Island No. 10, Major General John Pope and Foote effectively established the Union’s general strategy for reducing Confederate strongpoints on the Mississippi. Stopping the Union naval force at Fort Pillow became such a high priority that the Confederacy assigned some of its top officers to the fort’s defense. Brigadier General John Villepique commanded the land defenses at Fort Pillow. Commander R. F. Pinkney, the former commander of Fort Norfolk, led the handful of wooden ships left behind.

On April 12, the Western Flotilla left New Madrid for Fort Pillow, arriving there the next day. Transports carrying Pope’s 20,000 troops followed the gunboats. Pope, with Assistant Secretary of War Thomas Scott, joined Foote on board U.S.S. Benton at 3 p.m. to plan the campaign. They agreed that Pope would land his army above Fort Pillow to try to turn the defenses on the Confederate right. Foote, meanwhile, would put pressure on the Confederate fort with his mortar boats and gunboats. Pope decided to use the same basic strategy that had succeeded at Island No. 10. This time, Pope’s engineers would dig a canal wide and deep enough for an ironclad. Foote planned to send three downriver. Thus, if the Confederates attacked either upriver or down, the Union naval force they encountered would be too strong for them. On the 15th, Union Major General Henry Halleck intervened in the campaign against Fort Pillow. He ordered Pope to bring the bulk of his Army of the Mississippi to Pittsburg Landing to join U. S. Grant’s and Don Carlos Buell’s armies, leaving behind enough men at Fort Pillow to take action if the Confederates retreated. Pope left behind two regiments, Colonel Graham Fitch’s Indiana Brigade, numbering about 1,200 men. Foote tried to develop a plan that would allow the navy to get past Fort Pillow. Fitch, on his own, tried to carry through with Pope’s general plan. On the 16th, Foote received additional motivation to moving down river quickly. Despite conflicting reports, he began to believe the Confederates would not attack him. The issue of his health came into play at the beginning of May. To assist him, Foote asked that Captain Charles H. Davis be appointed his second-in-command. Subsequently, Foote died from complications resulting from a wound just before he was to return to active duty. The night Foote left, the Confederate ram captains held another council of war and decided to attack the Union gunboat that guarded the mortar boat. At about 5 a.m., Acting Master T. B. Gregory on the mortar boat opened fire on Fort Pillow with the 13-inch mortar. At 6 a.m., they started upriver, with General Bragg ahead and seven more rams from the River Defense Fleet following. In the morning haze, the lookouts had trouble seeing the Confederate rams and the signal flags on the U.S.S. Cincinnati. On U.S.S. Carondelet, Henry Walke prepared for battle. Mound City started downriver, followed soon by Carondelet.

Commander R. N. Stembel brought Cincinnati into midstream before bringing her about to move closer to the mortar boat. On board Mortar Boat No. 16, Gregory put the mortar in an almost vertical position in a vain attempt to drive off the approaching rams. Meanwhile, Stembel opened fire with his bow gun. Union officers believed, erroneously, that the fire slowed the Confederate advance. Behind Cincinnati, Mound City and Carondelet steamed downriver. At a range of 700 yards, Walke opened fire with Carondelet's bow guns. Captain H. H. Leonard directed General Bragg straight at Cincinnati. The ironclad retaliated with a point-blank broadside into Bragg. In the struggle, a tiller rope on the Confederate ram was severed. She drifted down river out of the fight as the crew frantically tried to repair the damage. More Confederate rams entered the battle. Up river came the C.S.S. General Price and General Sumter. Price rammed Cincinnati a little aft of her starboard midships. The impact turned the gunboat's stern toward Sumter, which rammed her at top speed.

With the Confederate boats so close, Union officers believed they finally had the opportunity to capture them. As she steamed toward the fight, Van Dorn, under Captain Isaac Fulkerson, made a pass at the mortar boat. At a range of 60 feet, Van Dorn fired two 32-pounder shells through the blinds of the mortar boat and other shells that passed harmlessly overhead. Two volleys of musket fire tore into the Union craft. Mound City was the first reinforcement to reach Cincinnati. She fired a broadside at Sumter without doing any damage. Van Dorn turned on Mound City, but at the last minute the ironclad veered away and the Confederate ram struck her only a glancing blow that showered the Confederate boat with splinters. With water pouring into Mound City, Captain A. H. Kilty ran her up onto the Arkansas shore to keep her from sinking. By then, the Carondelet had dropped down below the rest of the ironclads. Montgomery thought the ironclads were moving into shallow water, where the rams would be at a disadvantage. The Union forces continued to put pressure on Fort Pillow. One mortar boat continued to lob shells into the fort, but Davis now positioned two gunboats nearby as protection.

Before the war, Union engineer Charles Ellet had suggested constructing steam rams after hearing of the sinking of a ship following a collision. After Ellet wrote a pamphlet in early 1862 reaffirming the idea, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton made him a colonel and authorized him to buy river steamers and to convert them to rams. He was also authorized to refit, man and command, any number of vessels deemed in his judgment to be necessary to encounter and defeat the iron-clad rams then known to be in process of construction on the lower Mississippi River. Colonel Ellet purchased a number of steamboats at different points on the Ohio River. He took some old and nearly worn-out boats, strengthened their hulls and bows with heavy timbers, raised bulkheads of timber around the boilers, and started them down the river to Cairo. They were the U.S.S. Dick Fulton, Lancaster, Lioness, Mingo, Monarch, Queen of the West, Samson, Switzerland, and T.D. Horner. The Confederate fleet had come out from under the batteries at Fort Pillow, had attacked the Federal fleet of gunboats lying near Craighead's Point, and had disabled two of them. Five of them were immediately dispatched down the river, under the command of his son, Lieutenant Colonel Alfred W. Ellet. Work upon them was being continued as they proceeded and for several days after their arrival at Fort Pillow. The other rams followed, and about May 25, 1862, Colonel Ellet joined the fleet on board the U.S.S. Switzerland, and the ram-fleet was now ready for action. Immediate preparations were begun for running the batteries with the entire ram fleet. The ram fleet proceeded without incident to within about 25 miles of Memphis, where they all tied up for the night, with orders of sailing issued to each commander; instructions to be ready to round out at the signal from the flagship, and that "each board should go into the anticipated fight in the same order they maintained in sailing." At the first light of day

(June 6), the fleet moved down the river and at sunrise the flagship rounded the bend at "Paddy's Hen and Chickens," and immediately after, came in sight of the Federal gun-boats anchored in line across the river, about a mile above Memphis.

The Queen of the West came first, followed by the Monarch and other rams in regular succession. The report of gunfire was heard from around the point and down the river. It was the first gun from the Confederate River Defense Fleet moving to attack. Without delay, the Queen moved out gracefully, and the Monarch followed. By this time, gunboats had opened their batteries, and gunfire on both sides was heavy and rapid. The Queen plunged forward, under a full head of steam, right into the wall of smoke. The Monarch, followed and Colonel Ellet signaled that he wanted the Monarch to attack the General Price. For himself, he selected the General Lovell and directed the Queen straight for her, she being about the middle of the enemy's advancing line. At the critical moment the General Lovell began to turn, and that moment sealed her fate. The Queen came on and plunged straight into the Lovell's exposed broadside; the vessel was cut almost in two and disappeared under the dark waters. The Monarch next struck the General Price a glancing blow which cut her starboard wheel clean off, and completely disabled her from further participation in the fight.



As soon as the Queen was freed from the wreck of the sinking Lovell, she was attacked on both sides by the enemy's vessels, the Beauregard on one side and the Sumter on the other. Colonel Ellet, while still standing on the deck to view the effects of the encounter with the General Lovell, received a pistol ball in his knee, and gave orders for the Queen to be run on her one remaining wheel to the Arkansas shore, whither she was soon followed by the General Price in a sinking condition.

As soon as she could recover headway after her conflict with the General Price, the Monarch, drove down upon the Beauregard which, after her encounter with the Queen of the West, was endeavoring to escape. She was thwarted by the Monarch coming down upon her with a well-directed blow which crushed in her side and completely disabled her from further hope of escape. Men on the deck waved a white flag in token of surrender, and the Monarch passed on down to intercept the Little Rebel, the enemy's flagship. Leaving the Little Rebel fast aground, the Monarch turned her attention to the sinking Beauregard. The Beauregard was towed by the Monarch to the bar, where she sank to her boiler deck and became a total loss.

The Jeff. Thompson burned and blew up with a tremendous report; the General Bragg was secured by gunboats before the fire gained headway, and was saved. The Van Dorn alone made her escape and was afterward burned by the enemy at Liverpool Landing. Two other rebel boats were burned at the same time—the Polk and the Livingston.

At the battle of Memphis, there were no firearms on board the ram fleet except a few short carbines and some pocket revolvers; Colonel Ellet's reliance was upon the prow of his vessel. The enemy concentrated their fire upon the Queen of the West and the Monarch, but their missiles passed harmlessly by. Not a man sustained the slightest injury except Colonel Ellet, whose

fatal wound was received from a pistol ball. The Battle of Memphis was, in many respects, one of the most remarkable naval victories on record.