

Fort Harrison National Cemetery
8620 Varina Road
Richmond, Virginia 23231

Description

The Fort Harrison National Cemetery, established in 1866, is located in eastern Henrico County, eight miles southeast of the city of Richmond. The site is rectangular in shape and is enclosed by a brick wall approximately four feet, six inches high (1,102 linear feet). The main entrance is located along the east wall facing Varina Road. It consists of two pedestrian iron gates that are part of the original wall and a 10-foot-wide vehicular iron gate that was added in 1941. In the center of the cemetery is a 30-foot grass circle, on which a flagpole has been erected. Graves are marked with upright marble headstones.



The superintendent's lodge was constructed in 1871 from a design by Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs and is Second Empire in style. It is an L-shaped, rubble stone structure with a slate mansard roof. The main portion is one and one-half stories high with dormer windows projecting from the mansard roof. The first floor contains a living room, dining room, kitchen, hallway, office, and a screened porch. The ceilings are approximately 11 feet high. The upper story contains two bedrooms and a bath. The lodge also contains a basement. The windows are six-over-six double-hung sash on the first story, while the upper story windows are casement with two panes in each casement. A single lean-to kitchen was added around 1900.

At the rear of the cemetery is a brick service building, 13 feet, 6 inches by 45 feet, 6 inches, constructed in 1932. The roof is clad with asphalt shingles. Public restrooms are also located in this building. A brick oil house, 8 feet, 5 inches by 8 feet, was constructed in 1936. Its roof is also clad with asphalt shingles.

Noted Burials

There is one Medal of Honor recipient buried in the Fort Harrison National Cemetery: Private George A. Buchanan, Company G, 148th New York Infantry. He is buried in Section A, Grave 224. 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."

Significant Monuments/Memorials

There is a monument, seven feet, six inches in height, made of an original cast iron sea-coast artillery tube, secured by a concrete base. The cast bronze plaque formerly affixed to the monument, which has since been stolen, contained the following inscription:

UNITED STATES NATIONAL MILITARY CEMETERY
FORT HARRISON
ESTABLISHED MAY 1866
INTERMENTS 814
KNOWN 239
UNKNOWN 575

Civil War Activity in Area

From June 1864 until April 1865, siege operations before Petersburg commanded the chief attention of General Ulysses S. Grant and the Army of the Potomac. Several attempts were made to reach Richmond from north of the James River. Forts Harrison and Gilmer, two strongly fortified positions in the outer defense of the city, were the objectives of a surprise attack made by Union forces during the early morning hours of September 29, 1864. General Grant had also sent the 10th and 18th Corps north of the James River to keep General Robert E. Lee's army busy, so that the Confederates could not send reinforcements either to the South Side Railroad or to Lieutenant General Jubal Early in the Shenandoah Valley. The 18th Corps advanced rapidly and, before 8 a.m. that day, General George Stannard's division took Fort Harrison, a major Confederate bastion in the defense line, and some of the surrounding entrenchments. The following day, Confederates prepared to counterattack, with Lee personally directing the assaults. Despite repeated counterattacks by the Confederate troops under Lee, Fort Harrison would remain in Union hands until the evacuation of Richmond in April 1865.



The fort was renamed Fort Burnham, in honor of Union General Hiram Burnham, who was killed at Chaffin's Farm during the Federal attack on Fort Harrison. This battle was significant, as it was one of the first times black soldiers had been used in battle. It was by the orders of General Benjamin Butler, and they proved they were fit soldiers. With the cessation of hostilities, a site near Fort Harrison was appropriated for use by the United States as a national cemetery. Remains interred in the cemetery after its establishment were recovered from the battlefields of Forts Harrison and Gilmer, and from some forty locations within a five-mile area. Many of those buried at Fort Harrison are black Union soldiers who fell at the battle.