

Department of Veterans Affairs
National Cemetery Administration

Communications & Outreach Support Division (41C2)
Washington, DC 20420
(202) 461-6240
FAX (202) 273-6698

www.cem.va.gov
public.inquiry@va.gov

History and Development of the National Cemetery Administration

National cemeteries were first developed in the United States during the Civil War. Due to mounting war casualties, on July 17, 1862, Congress empowered President Abraham Lincoln, “to purchase cemetery grounds and cause them to be securely enclosed, to be used as a national cemetery for the soldiers who shall die in the service of the country.” This small but significant new presidential power was given in “An act to define the pay and emolument of certain officers of the Army, & for other purposes.” This was the first U.S. legislation to state and solidify the concept of a national cemetery.

The Army’s long-established system for managing soldiers’ burials was found to be inadequate for the large-scale burial of soldiers killed during the Civil War. Before national cemeteries were created, soldiers and officers were typically buried at the site of death, at a military post cemetery, or were transported for burial in a private cemetery selected by the soldier’s family. Due to the revolutionary nature of the American Civil War, Congress determined that defenders of the nation who volunteered to serve in the military, in order to keep the Union intact, were deemed worthy of special burial spaces for their sacrifices. Thus, national cemeteries were originally created as the final resting places for Union soldiers and officers killed during the Civil War.

The Civil War was the fiery result of passionate and divergent philosophies encompassing many issues that concerned citizens, slaves, states, and the country’s welfare and future. As a result, an unprecedented number of men enlisted for military service in both the Union and Confederate armies. Both armies were ill-prepared for the tremendous volume of dead and the consequent burials that would take place.

Early in the war, on September 11, 1861, the War Department issued General Orders No. 75 and directed that the Army’s Quartermaster General be given responsibility for the burial of officers and soldiers, and ordered that a register of all burials be kept. The order also directed that a headboard be placed at the head of each grave. The first headboards were made of wood and information was either painted on or written in chalk. The wooden boards did not survive long when left to the elements.

The urgent nature of the war necessitated the burial of soldiers on battlefields, near hospitals or camp-sites long before monies and deeds were exchanged to perfect titles to many of the earliest national cemeteries. For this reason, burial dates often pre-date the legal dates of establishment given for many of the early national cemeteries. The following 14 cemeteries (listed alphabetically) were the first national cemeteries to be officially established in 1862:

Alexandria National Cemetery, Alexandria, Va.
Annapolis National Cemetery, Annapolis, Md.

Antietam National Cemetery, Sharpsburg, Md.
Camp Butler National Cemetery, Springfield, Ill.
Cypress Hills National Cemetery, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Danville National Cemetery, Danville, Ky.
Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery, Ft. Leavenworth, Kan.
Fort Scott National Cemetery, Fort Scott, Kan.
Keokuk National Cemetery, Keokuk, Iowa
Loudon Park National Cemetery, Baltimore, Md.
Mill Springs National Cemetery, Nancy, Ky.
New Albany National Cemetery, New Albany, Ind.
Philadelphia National Cemetery, Philadelphia, Pa.
Soldier's Home National Cemetery, Washington, D.C.

Before the Civil War, the land where Arlington National Cemetery is now situated was inhabited by Robert E. Lee and his wife, Mary Anne Randolph Custis--a granddaughter of George and Martha Washington. Mary inherited the property from her father and it was known as Arlington Mansion. In May 1861, after Virginia ceded from the Union, the Union Army occupied the Custis property and used it as an encampment site for fortifications in defense of Washington, D.C.

As burial spaces at the Soldiers and Sailors Home National Cemetery, in Washington, D.C., and nearby Alexandria National Cemetery neared depletion, Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs recommended that the grounds of the Custis property be made available as burying grounds for the war dead. The first burial at Arlington took place on May 13, 1864, for Private William L. Christman of the 67th Pennsylvania Infantry, Company G. One month later, on June 15, 1864, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, officially designated that the Arlington Mansion and not more than 200 acres of the grounds be used as a cemetery and charged General Meigs with execution of the order.

Immediately after General Lee's surrender to General Grant on April 9, 1865, the Quartermaster Department embarked on an ambitious program to search for, recover, and identify the remains of all Union soldiers. Selected Quartermaster staff spent four years walking nearly every inch of ground at major and minor battlefield sites, hospital and prison sites, entrenchment sites, along lines of march, and miles of shoreline in search of bodies. All soldiers found were buried in national cemeteries unless claimed by friends or family for private interment elsewhere. This program was commonly referred to as the Reburial Program or the Federal Reburial Program. The task was an impossible one from its onset.

Due to the chaotic nature of war and the amount of time lapsed since many of the early and hurried burials, accounting for all Union soldiers did not happen. Many soldiers were hastily buried between battles with little or no means of marking their bodies or graves. Numerous naval tragedies occurred in which bodies were often not recovered and many make-shift or shallow burials were desecrated by "the enemy" or animals. Landscapes changed drastically by the ravages of war often failed to yield the clues recorded earlier by a fellow soldier of where his friend or comrade was buried. Some quartermaster and hospital staff kept poor death and burial records and the resulting records were often contradictory, incomplete, missing, or erroneous. Several statements made by soldiers to Quartermaster staff during the reburial program indicated that some remains were witnessed to have been eaten by alligators or the bodies or coffins had floated out to sea. War atrocities occurred that prevented some soldiers from ever being found.

Government-issued “dog tags” or identification tags did not exist during the Civil War, so soldiers often fashioned their own means for identification: some wrote their names on paper, placed the paper in a sealed bottle and carried it in their pocket; some made handwritten name tags on cloth or paper and pinned them to their uniforms; some carved information on a piece of board or wood. Sadly, most make-shift forms of identification were created on impermanent substances and consequently, the soldier’s identify was forever lost. Civilian provisioners, known as sutlers, offered commercially manufactured identification tags for sale, but few soldiers purchased them.

As a result of reports from Quartermaster staff during the first year of the Reburial Program, on April 13, 1866, a Joint Resolution of the Senate and House of Representatives authorized and required the Secretary of War “to take immediate measures to preserve from desecration the graves of soldiers of the United States who fell in battle or died of disease in hospitals; to secure suitable burial places in which they may be properly interred; and to have the graves enclosed so that the resting places of the honored dead may be kept sacred forever.” Quartermaster staff encountered many obstacles in trying to locate Union soldier remains, especially in the deep South.

The first National Cemetery Act was enacted by Congress on February 22, 1867. It was the first substantive legislation to provide funds and specific guidance for the national cemeteries. Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars (\$750,000) was appropriated for the construction of national cemeteries and appurtenances such as superintendent lodges, perimeter walls, fencing, and headstones. It provided funds for superintendents’ salaries and to purchase cemetery land. The act also declared that “any person who shall willfully destroy, mutilate, deface, injure, or remove any monument, gravestone. . . or shrub within the limits of any said national cemetery” would be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor. Superintendents were empowered and authorized by this act of Congress to arrest any violators.

The Reburial Program concluded in 1870, nearly five years after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. At the program’s end, remains of 299,696 Union soldiers and officers had been located and re-interred in 73 national cemeteries. Despite concerted efforts by Quartermaster staff to find and identify all Union soldier remains, identification was made for only about 58 percent of them.

Sites for the national cemeteries were generally selected by Assistant Quartermaster Generals within the regional departments of the Army. National cemeteries were established at battle sites, among them, Cold Harbor (VA), Mill Springs (KY), Port Hudson (LA) and Springfield (MO); near field or general hospitals, such as Beverly (NJ), Loudon Park (MD), and New Albany (IN); at former prisoner-of-war prison sites, including Andersonville (GA), Florence (SC), and Salisbury (NC), and Woodlawn (NY); at former post or garrison cemeteries such as Ft. Leavenworth (KS), Fort Gibson (OK), or Fort Donelson (TN). By 1870, nearly all of the discovered Union dead had been interred either in national cemeteries or in private cemeteries. Included as one of the 73 national cemeteries was the American military cemetery in Mexico City, Mexico, established on September 28, 1850 as a result of the Mexican War.

Congress passed several amendments to the National Cemetery Act of 1867 during the 1870s to accommodate the venerated Union veterans who had served in the Civil War. On June 1, 1872, the act was amended so that “all soldiers and sailors honorably discharged from the service of the United States who may die in a destitute condition, shall be allowed burial in the national cemeteries of the United States.” The following year, on March 3, 1873, the act was amended to permit “the interment of honorably discharged Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines” in national cemeteries.

As a result of these amendments to the National Cemetery Act, a number of national cemeteries were established far beyond the Civil War battlefields situated predominantly in the East and Southeast. The new cemeteries included Fort McPherson (NE), Santa Fe (NM) and San Francisco (CA), among others. San Francisco National Cemetery, located on the grounds of the historic Presidio, was the first national cemetery established on the Pacific Coast.

In 1865, a concurrent program of the federal government established “homes” to care for disabled veterans of the Civil War. Known initially as Asylums for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, the name was later changed to National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (NHDVS). The homes were designed as campuses that featured dormitories, kitchens and bakeries, hospitals, and theatres in a park-like setting. The first National Home was built at Togus, Maine. Homes in Milwaukee (WI), Leavenworth (KS), Bath (NY), Dayton (OH), and Hampton (VA) followed. Veterans often died while in residence at the soldiers’ homes, so cemeteries were developed on site. These cemeteries would later be designated as national cemeteries.

The 1870s marked a significant period of change for national cemeteries. Not only were a record 47 new national cemeteries established during this period, improvements were made to the cemeteries that cemented their permanence in America’s cultural landscape. No longer were make-shift burial grounds created in the hurried haste of war; instead, reverent and conscientious planning shaped what we now recognize as American national cemeteries. One of the first major changes was the replacement of original wooden headboards with permanent and more durable marble headstones.

National cemeteries had been supervised largely by Army Quartermaster staff until the 1870s when Congress authorized the hiring of veterans to serve as national cemetery superintendents. Permanent superintendent offices and quarters, known as “lodges,” were authorized and built to house them. Temporary lodges built before 1870 were simple one-story wooden structures with 2-3 rooms. These were replaced by larger stone or brick lodges which were considered to be fashionable and permanent structures. The 1870s-era permanent lodges were designed by Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs. Many of the original frame lodges were moved elsewhere on the cemetery property and used as storage, maintenance, or kitchen buildings.

In 1870, Meigs consulted with noted landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, regarding the appearance of national cemeteries. Olmsted suggested that they be “studiously simple . . . the main object should be to establish permanent dignity and tranquility . . . a sacred grove--sacredness being expressed in the enclosing wall and in the perfect tranquility of the trees within.” As a result of Olmsted’s recommendations, trees, shrubs, and flowers beds embellished the sacred grounds of national cemeteries. Greenhouses were constructed at numerous national cemeteries in order to maintain a constant supply of plantings for cemetery landscaping. Wooden rail fences were replaced by stone or brick walls with iron gates. Excess artillery from the war were installed as “gun monuments” and many decorative private headstones and monuments were erected to honor fallen comrades.

With the brief Spanish-American War of 1898 and the Philippine Insurrection of 1900-1901, America spread its military involvement and commitments beyond the continental United States which expanded the role of national cemeteries and created new challenges for the Army’s Quartermaster Burial Corps. On June 11, 1899, Secretary of War Russell Alger interpreted the laws and customs, at that time, to extend the right of burial in a national cemetery to honorably discharged veterans of the Spanish-American War. As a result, for the first time, the remains of soldiers who died abroad—specifically in Puerto Rico and the Philippines--were shipped home to the United States for burial.

During the Philippine Insurrection, the first official advocacy for systemic use of identification tags took place. Army chaplain Charles C. Pierce was tasked with establishing the Quartermaster Office of Identification in the Philippines and he recommended that an identify disc be included in each soldier's combat kit. Not until 1913 did Army regulations make identification tags mandatory.

As the end of the 19th century approached, a spirit of national unity and reconciliation between former Union and Confederate soldiers gained momentum. This sense of national healing was felt in Washington and made evident in 1901 when 264 Confederate soldiers were re-interred into a newly created "Confederate section" at Arlington National Cemetery. This action inspired Ohio Senator Joseph B. Foraker to introduce a bill, in the following year, that would permit the Federal government to mark the graves of Confederates soldiers, as they had done for Union soldiers a quarter of a century ago. Although the "Foraker Bill" was introduced in 1902, haggling over appropriations delayed its passing into law until March 9, 1906. This was the first legislation to embrace marking the graves of former Confederate soldiers—but only "those who died as prisoners of war in Federal prisons and military hospitals in the North." The Confederate headstones were designed to be distinguishable from the Union soldiers' headstones and were similar in design to the Confederate veteran-designed markers erected at Arlington National Cemetery. Confederate soldiers interred at Woodlawn National Cemetery in New York were the first to receive the new government-issued Confederate headstones in October 1907. The government maintained other Confederate Cemeteries at former prison sites located at Camp Chase (OH), Crown Hill (IN), Johnson's Island (OH), North Alton (IL), Rock Island (IL), and Point Lookout (MD).

The United States' participation in World War I further extended the rights to burial in national cemeteries. Legislation approved on April 20, 1920, provided that:

all soldiers, sailors or marines dying in the service of the United States. . . or who served or hereafter shall have served during any war in which the United States has been or hereafter be engaged, and, with the consent of the Secretary of War, any citizen of the United States who served in the Army or Navy of any government at war with Germany or Austria during the World War and who died in such service or after honorable discharge therefrom, may be buried in any national cemetery free of charge.

American soldiers had been buried on foreign soil since the Mexican War, but it was not until after World War I that a program was developed to provide permanent government burial spaces for American soldiers who died abroad. In 1923, Congress created the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) in order to control the construction of military monuments and markers erected to honor Americans killed on foreign soil and, in particular, those who died in Europe during World War I.

The 1930s brought about the first re-alignment in America's system of military and national cemeteries. As a result of Executive Order No. 6166, Sec. 2, on June 10, 1933, the following eleven national cemeteries associated with Civil War battlefields were transferred from custody of the War Department and Army to the National Park Service (NPS) under the Department of the Interior (DOI):

Antietam (Maryland)
Battleground (District of Columbia)
Chattanooga (Tennessee)
Fort Donelson (Tennessee)

Fredericksburg (Virginia)
Gettysburg (Pennsylvania)
Poplar Grove (Virginia)
Shiloh (Tennessee)
Stones River (Tennessee)
Vicksburg (Mississippi)
Yorktown (Virginia)

Chattanooga National Cemetery was returned to Army jurisdiction during the 1940s due to its continued volume of interments. The NPS acquired four (4) additional national cemeteries in later years: Andrew Johnson National Cemetery (1935), Chalmette National Cemetery (1939), Custer Battlefield/Little Bighorn National Cemetery (1946) and Andersonville National Cemetery (1971). The National Park Service continues to maintain these 14 national cemeteries.

The Army continued to maintain military cemeteries abroad until 1934, when Congress transferred custody of eight World War I American military cemeteries established in Europe to the ABMC. Earlier American military cemeteries established in Mexico City, Mexico; Coruzal, Panama; and Manila, Philippines became part of the ABMC at that time. Fourteen World War II-era military cemeteries established abroad, later, also became part of the ABMC. The ABMC continues to maintain 24 American military cemeteries in 10 foreign countries.

The generation from 1930-1950 marked the second significant period of change and expansion for the national cemetery system. It was also the final period of expansion for the cemeteries while under the Army's jurisdiction. Two existing military cemeteries in Alton, Illinois, and at Fort Logan in Denver, Colorado, grew in size and were elevated to the status of national cemeteries in 1948 and 1950, respectively.

Eleven new national cemeteries were designed and built by the Army during this period:

Baltimore National Cemetery, Baltimore, Maryland (1936)
Black Hills National Cemetery, Sturgis, South Dakota (1948)
Fort Bliss National Cemetery, Fort Bliss, Texas (1936)
Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, San Diego, California (1934)
Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, San Antonio, Texas (1937)
Fort Snelling National Cemetery, Minneapolis, Minnesota (1939)
Golden Gate National Cemetery, San Bruno, California (1938)
Long Island National Cemetery, Farmingdale, New York (1936)
National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, Honolulu, Hawaii (1948)
Puerto Rico National Cemetery, Bayamon, Puerto Rico (1948)
Willamette National Cemetery, Portland, Oregon (1950)

The 1930s-1950s was also a significant period for the Veteran's Administration (VA). Established by Congress in 1930, the VA assumed care and responsibility for the soldier's homes, known as the National Homes for Disabled Veterans (NHDVS), and for the cemeteries operated on those properties. The new agency constructed many VA medical facilities across the country and some included cemeteries within their boundaries.

VA cemeteries at these facilities were later designated as national cemeteries. The dates given indicate when they became part of the VA system; those marked with an asterisk (*) indicate the facilities that were once National Homes for Disabled Veterans (listed alphabetically):

Bath National Cemetery, Bath, New York (1930)
Bay Pines National Cemetery, Bay Pines, Florida (1933)
Biloxi National Cemetery, Biloxi, Mississippi (1934)
Danville National Cemetery, Danville, Illinois (1930)*
Dayton National Cemetery, Dayton, Ohio (1930)*
Fort Bayard National Cemetery, Fort Bayard, New Mexico (1930)
Fort Lyon National Cemetery, Fort Lyon, Colorado (1930)
Hampton (VAMC) National Cemetery, Hampton, Virginia (1930)*
Hot Springs National Cemetery, Hot Springs, South Dakota (1930)*
Kerrville National Cemetery, Kerrville, Texas (1943)
Leavenworth National Cemetery, Leavenworth (1930)*
Los Angeles National Cemetery, Los Angeles, California (1930)*
Marion National Cemetery, Marion, Ohio (1930)*
Mountain Home National Cemetery, Mountain Home, Tennessee (1930)*
Prescott National Cemetery, Prescott, Arizona (1931)
Roseburg National Cemetery, Roseburg, Oregon (1933)
Togus National Cemetery, Togus, Maine (1930)*

The battlefields of World War II were virtually everywhere—in Europe, Asia, India, Africa, Russia, and United States territories. The required use of identification tags or “dog tags,” greatly aided the Army’s Graves Registration Service in its geographical and logistical challenges. After the tragic number of unidentified remains from the Civil War, the Army’s use of dog tags, fingerprinting, temporary grave marking and registration system during 20th century wars ensured that the number of “unknowns” was kept to a minimum.

On May 14, 1948, Public Law 80-526 Congress passed a law that authorized four classifications of people as being eligible for the privilege of burial in national cemeteries:

- 1) those who died while serving honorably in the armed forces of the United States;
- 2) former members of the armed forces who were honorably discharged;
- 3) citizens of the United States who have served honorably or may serve in the armed forces of a nation allied with the United States during war; and
- 4) the wife, husband, widow, widower and minor (or dependent) children of those who meet the basic requirements.

This law was amended on September 14, 1959, as Public Law 80-260, to permit national cemetery burial for any member of a reserve component of the armed forces and any member of the Army National Guard or Air National Guard whose death occurred under honorable conditions while serving on active duty training, authorized inactive duty training, or whose death occurred while hospitalized for injury or disease contracted on that duty or service.

The 1959 amendment also extended the eligibility for burial in a national cemetery to any member of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) of the Army, Navy, or Air Force, whose death occurred under honorable conditions while attending authorized training camp or an authorized practice cruise, while

performing authorized travel to and from camp or cruise, or who died while hospitalized or while undergoing treatment for injury or disease contacted while in attendance at the camp or cruise.

Ironically, the new changes that expanded eligibility for national cemetery burial occurred just when the Army adopted a “non-expansion” policy for its national cemeteries. No new national cemeteries were built by the Army after 1950. Instead, on October 1, 1961, the Army implemented a “one-gravesite-per-family-unit” policy at Arlington National Cemetery. Under this policy, graves for the initial interment were excavated to a seven-and-one-half foot depth instead of the customary five-foot depth. The change allowed the same interment space to accommodate future decedents and the rule was expanded throughout the Army’s system of 85 national cemeteries in 1962--the centennial anniversary of America’s first national cemeteries. In addition, they maintained several soldier’s lots and government lots throughout the country, as well as a number of monument sites.

The following year, in 1963, the VA set a precedent and broke ground on the construction of its largest veterans’ cemetery, up to this time, in Texas. The expansive 419+ acre cemetery, named the Houston Veteran’s Cemetery, was the first of its kind and modeled loosely on Arlington National Cemetery: It even featured a hemicycle like Arlington. At the time, this was not a national cemetery, so criteria for burial in the VA cemetery differed from national cemetery eligibility: only veterans eligible for hospitalization in VA hospitals or facilities who died while hospitalized or veterans who died indigent and deserted by their families were eligible for burial.

The Army’s cemetery non-expansion policy continued throughout President Dwight Eisenhower’s second term and the Kennedy years. In January 1967, President Lyndon Johnson tasked the administrator of the Veteran’s Administration with responsibility for conducting a survey of all veteran’s programs—including the Army’s national cemeteries.

The VA Administrator and the Veterans Advisory Committee completed the survey and submitted their report on March 18, 1968. The report made several recommendations: 1) that the Army transfer its cemetery functions to the VA; 2) that the VA study methods for convenient burials; 3) and that the Administrator establish uniform burial eligibility criteria. As a result of the committee’s recommendations, the national cemeteries were eventually transferred out of the Army’s hands.

On July 1, 1971, Congress approved the transfer of Andersonville National Cemetery, along with the “prison park,” from the Army to the National Park Service. This transfer brought the number of Army-operated national cemeteries in 1971 down to 84.

As a result of the 1968 report submitted to Congress by the VA Administrator and Veterans Advisory Committee, on June 18, 1973, the National Cemeteries Act of 1973 (Public Law 93-43) was signed into law. This law ordered the transfer of 82 of the Army’s 84 existing national cemeteries to the custody of the Veteran’s Administration. The law ordered the Army to continue maintenance and responsibility for Arlington National Cemetery (VA) and Soldiers’ Home National Cemetery (DC). Along with the Army’s transfer of 82 national cemeteries, the VA was given jurisdiction over 32 soldiers’ lots (in private cemeteries), Confederate cemeteries, monument sites and various government cemetery lots that the Army had maintained. The law also transferred the procurement and supply of government headstones and markers to the VA.

As new purveyor for the 111-year-old national cemetery system, the VA elevated the status of its own 21 cemeteries to that of national cemeteries. The former VA and Army cemeteries were combined into one organic system under VA's newly created Department of Memorial Affairs. When the official transfer took effect on September 1, 1973, the new system consisted of 103 national cemeteries composed of 4,136 acres of land. Of this, 2,663 acres had been developed for cemetery purposes and 1,293,481 interments had been made.

The 1973 Act also permanently established the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials; directed the VA Administrator to conduct a study and develop criteria for the government and operations of a national cemetery network within the VA; and provided the VA with authority to acquire land by many means so that the existing system could be brought up to the recommended criteria.

The VA study recommended that the network of national cemeteries be expanded. The expansion was to be implemented by constructing regional national cemeteries within each of the ten Standard Federal Regions and by creating a grant program for the construction of state veteran's cemeteries. The grant program was to be a 50-percent matching grant with state governments for the establishment, development, and expansion of state veteran's cemeteries.

The study reaffirmed that Arlington National Cemetery and Soldiers' Home National Cemetery should not be included in the National Cemetery System and that the restrictive eligibility requirements continue in effect at Arlington. It also recommended that an additional national cemetery be established in or near the District of Columbia.

The criteria for burial in a national cemetery remained largely unchanged. The old criteria required that the veteran's last service must have been terminated under honorable conditions. The new criteria stated that any veteran, who was discharged from active service under conditions other than dishonorable, was eligible.

As a result of the 1973 Act and the subsequent VA study, four existing national cemeteries met the criteria for classification as regional facilities within the ten Standard Federal Regions and were so designated:

- Fort Logan National Cemetery, Denver, Colorado
- Houston National Cemetery, Houston, Texas
- Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery, St. Louis, Missouri
- Willamette National Cemetery, Willamette, Oregon

Within its first decade of operation under the VA, the National Cemetery System (NCS) underwent its largest expansion--in terms of acreage--since the Civil War period. Six new regional national cemeteries were established:

- Calverton National Cemetery, Long Island, New York
- Fort Custer National Cemetery, Augusta, Michigan
- Fort Mitchell National Cemetery, Seale, Alabama
- Indiantown Gap National Cemetery, Annville, Pennsylvania
- Massachusetts National Cemetery, Bourne, Massachusetts
- Riverside National Cemetery, Riverside, California

Quantico National Cemetery, Triangle, Virginia, was established in 1977 to serve the Washington, D.C., area, but it was not considered to be a regional national cemetery. In addition, a number of previously closed cemeteries were re-opened and expanded—thanks to land donations. In 1978, VA removed the Perryville National Cemetery from the national cemetery system and transferred the property to the state of Kentucky.

Compared to the first fourteen national cemeteries established in 1862, the new 1970s-1980s era national cemeteries were enormous in size. The 1862 national cemeteries averaged about 10 acres—the largest being Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery at 36.10 acres; the smallest, Loudon Park National Cemetery, contained only 1.12 acres. Combined total acreage for all original 14 national cemeteries was slightly greater than 137 acres. Whereas, the largest national cemetery constructed under jurisdiction of the Army was Long Island National Cemetery at 364.72 acres.

In contrast, the smallest national cemetery constructed by the VA's National Cemetery System (NCS) during the 1970-80s was Indiantown Gap National Cemetery at 677.1 acres: the largest was Calverton National Cemetery at 1,045 acres. Combined total acreage for the first 5 national cemeteries established by the VA during the 1970s was 3,938.3 acres.

The larger VA-designed national cemeteries began to take on park-like appearances and incorporated modern features such as columbaria and committal shelters. Landscape architects designed the cemeteries so that much of the land's natural topography and features were retained. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, memorial pathways or trails were created within the national cemeteries in order to provide commemorative spaces for memorials donated by veterans groups and individuals.

In 1984, the Army donated the post cemetery at Fort Richardson, Alaska, to the VA which, in turn, elevated it to national cemetery status. The following facilities were built and opened in 1987: Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, Florida, and West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown, West Virginia.

The Veterans' Benefits Improvement and Health Care Authorization Act of 1986 (PL 99-576) ordered that the VA conduct a study and identify geographic areas within the United States where the greatest burial needs for veterans existed. The report was submitted to Congress in 1987 and identified ten areas of highest need: Albany, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas; Detroit, Michigan; Miami, Florida; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; greater San Francisco area, California; Seattle, Washington.

The National Cemetery System continued to grow through transfers as well as new construction. The state-operated Arizona Veterans Memorial Cemetery, located in Phoenix, was transferred to the VA to become a national cemetery on April 15, 1989 and it was renamed as the National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona. Seven new national cemeteries were established during the 1980s.

In 1991, the VA relinquished ownership of the Fort Phil Kearny Monument Site and returned it to the custody of the State of Wyoming. The property was one of 32 miscellaneous sites originally transferred to VA from the Army in 1973.

As a follow-up to the 1987 report, a needs assessment was conducted by the VA in 1994 using a revised methodology. As a result, there were changes to the list of states identified originally in the 1987 report as having the most need for veteran burial spaces. The 1994 report stated:

Oklahoma City and Pittsburgh were identified in the 1987 Report to Congress. Based on current demographic data, these areas are not on the list of 10 most in need. However, in the time since the release of the 1987 report, Congress has earmarked funding for advance planning and completion of EISs (Environmental Impact Statements) at these sites. VA has proceeded with EIS contracts and plans to include these areas in the NCS planning process for future consideration.

The new methodology ranked the areas of need based on veteran population. It was clear that demand would be greatest in the coming decades with an aging World War II, Korean and Vietnam War veteran population. The 1994 report revised the list of the 10 areas most in need of veteran burial places: Atlanta, Georgia; Albany, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas; Detroit, Michigan; Miami, Florida; Sacramento, California; St. Louis, Missouri; and Seattle, Washington.

Following recommendations of the 1987 and revised 1994 reports, seven new national cemeteries were constructed starting in the 1990s and continuing into the early 2000s:

San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery, California (June 1992)
Tahoma National Cemetery, Washington (October 1997)
Gerald B.H. Solomon Saratoga National Cemetery, New York (July 1999)
Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery, Illinois (October 1999)
Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery, Texas (May 2000)
Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery, Ohio (June 2000)
Fort Sill National Cemetery, Oklahoma (November 2001)

On November 11, 1998, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 (Public Law 105-368). This law officially re-designated the National Cemetery System (NCS) and changed its name to the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). It elevated the National Cemetery System's directors' position to that of Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Memorial Affairs. The law also extended the right of burial in a national cemetery to qualified Merchant Marine veterans.

The following year, the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, Public Law 106-117, was signed into law on November 30, 1999. The law ordered that VA undertake additional studies to assess future burial needs for veterans and mandated that six new national cemeteries be built within the following most needed areas (listed alphabetically):

Atlanta, Georgia (Georgia National Cemetery - opened 2006)
Detroit, Michigan (Great Lakes National Cemetery - opened 2005)
Miami, Florida (South Florida VA National Cemetery - opened 2007)
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (Fort Sill National Cemetery - opened 2001)
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (National Cemetery of the Alleghenies - opened 2005)
Sacramento, California (Sacramento Valley VA National Cemetery - opened 2006)

Based on 1990 census statistics, annual veteran deaths would peak at 620,000 in 2008. In order to meet these burial needs, as identified earlier in the 1987 and 1994 reports, Congress authorized the establishment of six additional new national cemeteries on November 11, 2003 in the National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2003, Public Law 108-109:

- Bakersfield area, California
- Birmingham area, Alabama
- Greenville/Columbia area, South Carolina
- Jacksonville area, Florida
- Sarasota area, Florida
- Southeastern region, Pennsylvania

Later that same year, the Veteran’s Benefits Act of 2003 became law on December 16, 2003. This law extended national cemetery burial benefits to new Philippine Scouts residing in the U.S., authorized a burial plot allowance for each veteran interred in a state veterans cemetery at no cost to the veteran’s estate or survivors; allowed surviving spouses who later remarried non-veterans, the right to burial in a national cemetery based on their marriage to a former, eligible veteran; and provided permanent authority for the National Cemetery Administration’s State Cemetery Grants Program.

Twelve new national cemeteries will have been constructed from 2001 to 2010 to accommodate the burial needs of America’s veterans. The millennium-era national cemeteries will mark the fifth significant period of growth and development for America’s national cemeteries and marks the largest expansion period for the system, in total acreage, since the Civil War era:

Period	Cemeteries	Acres
1862-1870	61 cemeteries established	747.5
1930-1950	7 cemeteries established	1,221
1970s	5 cemeteries established	3,938
1990s	6 cemeteries established	2,795
2000s	9 cemeteries established; 3 cemeteries under construction	5,468

Since 1862, more than three million burials have taken place in national cemeteries now under jurisdiction of the National Cemetery Administration. Currently, the 128 existing national cemeteries contain over 16,000 acres of land. Remains of approximately 100,000 burials in the national cemeteries are unknowns.

Building upon this revered and honorable tradition that spans nearly 150 years, America’s national cemeteries will continue to serve as hallowed and venerated final resting places for the men and women in our nation’s armed forces, many who make the ultimate sacrifice so that we may continue to live in freedom.