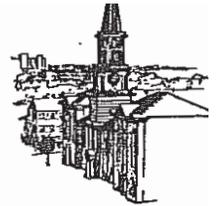




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Volunteers for Freedom: Black Civil War Soldiers in Alexandria National Cemetery, Part I

by
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It is in a quiet corner of Alexandria, and few know of it. The Alexandria National Cemetery is overshadowed by nearby Arlington National Cemetery, yet the Alexandria National Cemetery is of great significance for it is the last resting place of approximately 280 African-American soldiers. This article will explain the processes by which African Americans became soldiers, how these soldiers ended up spending their last days in Alexandria, and how the African-American section of the National Cemetery came to be. A list of African-American soldiers buried at the National Cemetery will be included in Part II.

Like Arlington Cemetery, The Alexandria National Cemetery was begun during the Civil War when Washington was on the front line between Union and Confederate territories. At that time, Alexandria was a major Union Army supply center and the site of many army general hospitals to which sick and injured soldiers were evacuated from battlefields and camps in the field. Alexandria medical facilities eventually provided the Union Army with 6,500 beds. Death rates were high from combat wounds and disease. Most casualties were from illnesses which were often caused by the imperfectly understood consequences of poor sanitation. In those days, the dead soldiers' bodies were not returned to relatives at government expense, instead, the army had to find a burial place for them.



*"Contraband" Laborers.
(The National Archives)*

The Alexandria burial ground, a five-and-a-half-acre plot, was acquired by the local army quartermaster in May 1862. During the war, and in a few years after it approximately 3,500 soldiers were interred there. Over 250 of these were African American, and they were placed in their own corner of the cemetery. Had black troops been enlisted in the army from the beginning of the war, rather than mostly during its last year, there would have been more burials because of the high death rates in the battles they engaged in. For these troops, the process of finding acceptance in the white army was neither rapid nor straightforward because of complex political, legal, and racial issues.

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