

AT A GLANCE

- Established 1862, among the first national cemeteries. The City bought two acres from John H. and Margaret Baggett for \$800 on June 1, 1862, then leased the ground to the United States for 999 years at one dollar; title passed to the government in 1875.
- First known as the Soldiers' Cemetery. The first burial came on May 16, 1862, two months before Congress authorized national cemeteries.
- About 4,242 burials, 117 of them unknown. Roughly 78 percent date from the Civil War era (Pippenger).
- The first integrated national cemetery: 118 United States Colored Troops were reburied here in January 1865 after 443 Black soldiers petitioned for equal burial.
- Wooden headboards gave way to marble headstones beginning in August 1876.
- Superintendent's lodge of 1887 built of local Seneca sandstone, one of only two in the system.
- Closed to casket burials in 1967. Today the 5.5-acre cemetery is managed by the National Cemetery Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.



The cast-iron gates of 1892 at Wilkes Street.

GETTING HERE

1450 Wilkes Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. Open daily, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours on Memorial Day. The cemetery sits at the west end of the Wilkes Street Cemetery Complex, thirteen historic burial grounds in one walkable landscape.

From King Street Metro: walk east on King Street, turn right on Daingerfield Road, cross Duke Street, and follow the bicycle path along Hooff Run. Turn left at Jamieson Avenue for the pedestrian gate, or continue to the main gate on Wilkes Street.

GRAVESTONE STORIES



The tribute plaque overlooking Section B, with the Presbyterian Cemetery beyond the wall. Photo: Michelle Bartels, @soussiaphotography.

This guide was written by David Heiby, a public historian who has documented more than 35,000 burials across the thirteen cemeteries of the Wilkes Street Cemetery Complex. Every stop is drawn from his research into the cemetery's own records, wartime newspapers, hospital letters and pension files, and it corrects several errors carried in earlier brochures.

Alexandria National Cemetery is open to all at no charge. This walk is self-guided and free.



FREE GUIDES & MAPS

Scan for the Wilkes Street self-guided map, the full stories behind these stones, and every free Gravestone Stories guide.
gravestonestories.com/free-guides

The soldiers named here, and dozens more, are profiled at length on the Gravestone Stories page "Interesting Burials in the Alexandria National Cemetery," with sources for every claim.

SOURCES

Wesley E. Pippenger, *Tombstone Inscriptions of Alexandria, Virginia*; Report of Quartermaster General M. C. Meigs to Secretary of War Stanton, January 22, 1865; *Alexandria Gazette*, 1862–1876; the L'Ouverture Hospital petition, December 27, 1864; National Cemetery Administration history files; Gravestone Stories research, 2022–2026.

Walking Tour of Alexandria National Cemetery

Eight stops among the Union dead of Alexandria's hospitals, the men lost in the hunt for Lincoln's assassin, and the soldiers whose petition made this the first integrated national cemetery.



The entrance about 1865. The wooden arch is gone, but the flagpole still stands where it stood then.

1450 WILKES STREET
 ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA 22314
 ESTABLISHED 1862

4,242

BURIALS

249

U.S. COLORED
TROOPS

First

INTEGRATED
NATIONAL
CEMETERY

"We are not contrabands, but soldiers of the U.S. Army."

Petition of 443 Black soldiers, L'Ouverture Hospital, December 27, 1864

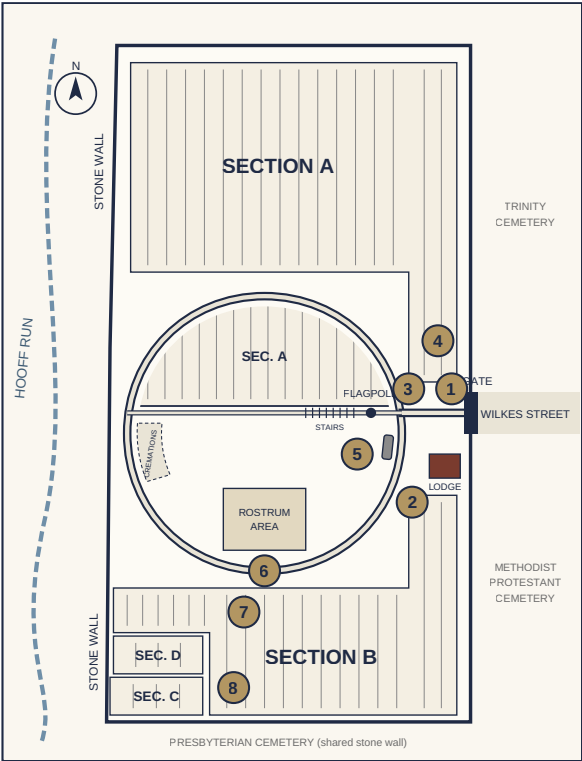
FREE · SELF-GUIDED

GRAVESTONE STORIES

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

THE WALK

ROUTE MAP



1 Gate & first burial 2 Lodge 3 Fort Lyon row, Row 10 4 Edward French, Row 3 5 Flagpole & Black Diamond boulder, Circle South Row 1 6 Rostrum 7 USCT, Section B Rows 13–18 8 Buffalo Soldiers, Rows 14–18

Rows are counted from the gate. Graves are numbered in sequence within each section; the number is cut into the top of each stone. Allow 45 minutes to an hour. Please stay on walks and drives and treat every grave as you would a family plot.



Stop 5: the boulder, with the four Black Diamond graves marked.



Stop 3: the Fort Lyon row, A:818 to A:838, along the drive.

STOPS 1–4

FROM THE GATE

1 The Wilkes Street Gate and the First Burial

The cast-iron gates of 1892, with their eagles, flags and cannon, replaced the wooden arch of the wartime photographs. Just inside, immediately to your right, lies Private Reuben Rowell, Company H, 22nd Massachusetts Infantry, a 21-year-old machinist from Biddeford, Maine, who died of disease in Alexandria on May 16, 1862. His was the cemetery’s first burial, two months before Congress created the national cemetery system.

2 The Superintendent’s Lodge

A lodge was built here in 1871, gutted by fire in 1878, and rebuilt in 1887 under Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs in the Second Empire style used at dozens of national cemeteries. It is built of locally quarried Seneca red sandstone, the “brownstone” of the Smithsonian Castle, and today serves as the lodge of VFW Post 609.

3 The Fort Lyon Explosion Row, Row 10

On June 9, 1863, eight tons of gunpowder and ammunition detonated in the magazine at Fort Lyon, south of the city. The blast shattered windows as far away as Georgetown. Twenty-one men of the 3rd New York Heavy Artillery were killed outright and others died of their wounds in the days that followed. They were buried side by side in Section A, beginning with Private Ferdinand Wetterer of Company D at A:818 and running along the row to Lieutenant Leo Kuchns at A:838.

4 Edward French, an Irish Zouave, Row 3, A:233

Born in County Galway in 1841, French enlisted in the 10th New York, the National Zouaves. Shot through the lung on the last day of Second Bull Run, he lay two days on the field, stripped even of his shoes, and reached the King Street Hospital on September 3, 1862. He died there six days later, aged 21. Two letters written from the hospital to his mother and sister survive: a nurse had made him lemonade; a soldier in the next bed called his death “a quiet passing away.” His grave, they promised the family, “you can find at any time.” You still can.



The graves as French’s family would have found them: painted wooden headboards, replaced by marble from August 1876. Library of Congress.

STOPS 5–8

TO THE FLAGPOLE AND BEYOND

5 The Flagpole and the Black Diamond Boulder

The granite boulder beside the flagpole, with its bronze tablet of 1922, honors four civilian employees of the Quartermaster Department: Peter Carroll (A:3177), George W. Huntington (A:3176), Christopher Farley (A:3175) and Samuel N. Gosnell (A:3174), whose stones flank the rock. They were on the Potomac River, part of the search for Lincoln’s assassin, when the steamer Massachusetts (also called the J. W. Pentz) struck the coal barge Black Diamond off Blackstone Island just before 1 a.m. on April 24, 1865. Eighty-seven people were lost. Earlier guides placed the disaster on the Rappahannock; it happened on the Potomac. (A Circle South, Row 1.)

6 The Rostrum

The marble rostrum of 1945 stands where an ornate brick and wrought-iron rostrum of 1890 once served Decoration Day speakers. By 1871 the grounds already boasted a cobblestone avenue, graveled walks, a fountain, a small pond and a greenhouse. The rostrum is thought to be the only surviving example of the 1944 “Standard Rostrum Type A” in the national cemetery system.

7 Section B, Rows 13–18: The Petition of 1864

Private Shadrack Murphy of the 23rd U.S. Colored Infantry died on Christmas Day 1864 and was buried in the segregated Freedmen’s Cemetery. Two days later, 443 Black soldiers, many of them patients at L’Ouverture Hospital, signed a petition: “We are not contrabands, but soldiers of the U.S. Army.” Meigs agreed. In January 1865 Murphy and 117 comrades were reburied here, making this the first integrated national cemetery. Murphy rests in Row 14 at B:3330. Private John Cooley of the 27th U.S. Colored Infantry, the first USCT soldier buried at Freedmen’s in May 1864, was among the last brought over; he lies in Row 16. Some 249 USCT soldiers now rest in these rows.

8 The Buffalo Soldiers

The USCT regiments were disbanded after the war, but their legacy passed to the Army’s new Black regiments, the 9th and 10th Cavalry and 24th and 25th Infantry, nicknamed the Buffalo Soldiers on the western frontier. Six of them rest in Section B, Rows 14 to 18: Conny Gray, 25th Infantry (Row 14, B:3587); Corporal Lorenzo Foster, 10th Cavalry (Row 15, B:3581); John T. Stevenson, 10th Cavalry (Row 16, B:3592); and in Row 18, Lewis J. Cook, 9th Cavalry (B:3560), George Foster, 10th Cavalry (B:3565), and Joseph F. Whelen, 24th Infantry (B:3606), buried with his wife, Annie B.