



Arlington National Cemetery: A Brief History

Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) is the nation's premier active military cemetery. Connected to every part of American history, this memorial landscape embodies the diversity of the United States.

Arlington National Cemetery originated from the mass carnage of the Civil War. The cemetery's property was previously a plantation owned by George Washington Parke Custis, who dedicated his mansion on the plantation, called Arlington House, as a memorial to his step-grandfather, George Washington. Completed in 1818, the estate consisted of land worked by enslaved African Americans. The property eventually passed to Custis's daughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee, the wife of U.S. Army officer Robert E. Lee. After the Civil War began in 1861 and Lee resigned his commission in the U.S. Army to fight with the Confederacy, he and his family fled south. The U.S. Army then seized the estate because its high ground offered protection for Washington, D.C.—not, as is sometimes claimed, to punish the Custis-Lee family. The Army built three forts on the property and, in 1863, established [Freedman's Village](#), a refugee camp for formerly enslaved people.

As wartime fatalities mounted and military cemeteries in the D.C. area ran out of space, the U.S. Army also began to bury the dead here. Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs, who was responsible for the burial of soldiers, ordered part of Arlington Estate to be used as a cemetery. On May 13, 1864, the first military burial was conducted for Private William Christman. Arlington officially became a national cemetery on June 15, 1864.

Initially, being buried at a national cemetery was not considered an honor, but it ensured that service members whose families could not afford to bring them home for a funeral were given a proper burial. The first official "[Decoration Day](#)," later renamed Memorial Day, was held at Arlington National Cemetery on May 30, 1868. This tradition [continues today](#), and is one reason why Arlington transformed from being one of many national cemeteries into the premier national military cemetery. The event was so popular that in 1873, an amphitheater was constructed to hold the official ceremonies. (Renamed the [James Tanner Amphitheater](#), it reopened in 2019 after restoration.) Still, crowds overwhelmed this amphitheater every May and prompted the creation of the larger [Memorial Amphitheater](#), dedicated in May 1920.

The [Tomb of the Unknown Soldier](#), on Memorial Amphitheater's east plaza, was dedicated on November 11, 1921, with the burial of the Unknown from World War I. In 1958, Unknowns from World War II and the Korean War were added to crypts in front of the Tomb. An Unknown service member from the Vietnam War was buried in a third crypt in 1984; fourteen years later, however, he was disinterred and identified (through DNA analysis) as U.S. Air Force 1st Lt. Michael J. Blassie. Blassie's family chose to rebury him at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in Missouri. The empty crypt now honors all missing and unknown Americans who served in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era.



ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

HONOR · REMEMBER · EXPLORE

FACT SHEET

NOVEMBER 2021

President William Howard Taft was buried at Arlington in 1930, becoming one of only two presidents buried here. President John F. Kennedy became the second on November 25, 1963. For years after President Kennedy's televised state funeral, the number of requests for burial at Arlington grew exponentially. By the 1980s, to prevent the cemetery from running out of space, the U.S. government authorized expansion and established new regulations to restrict eligibility for in-ground burial. Columbarium courts were also created for above-ground inurnments.

Today, approximately 400,000 veterans and their eligible dependents are buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Service members from every one of America's major wars, from the Revolutionary War to today's conflicts, are interred at ANC. As a result, the history of our nation is reflected on the grounds of the cemetery.

- To learn more, please visit <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/History-of-Arlington-National-Cemetery>.
- On the history of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, check out "[A Century of Honor: A Commemorative Guide to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier](#)," researched and written by the ANC History Office.