



# ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

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### Arlington National Cemetery: A Brief History

Over 400,000 individuals are buried at Arlington National Cemetery. As the nation's premier active military cemetery, Arlington is a microcosm of the United States, representing those who have served and sacrificed from the Revolutionary War through the present.

Arlington National Cemetery originated from the mass carnage of the Civil War. The property was originally a plantation owned by George Washington Parke Custis, who dedicated his mansion on the plantation (Arlington House, now managed by the National Park Service) as a memorial to his step-grandfather, George Washington. 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 the property 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; 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



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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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.

[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 Nov. 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 interments.

Today, Arlington National Cemetery stands at a crossroads in its history. The cemetery will run out of interment space without changes to eligibility by 2041 and, with the [Southern Expansion project](#), by 2060. In order to significantly extend ANC's capacity, changes to eligibility criteria and/or expansion of the cemetery's geographic footprint are required.

Plans to expand the cemetery began in 1998, when the ANC Master Plan first identified the former Navy Annex site (now known as the Southern Expansion site) as suitable interment space, due to its location and existing Department of Defense ownership. The project broke ground in September 2021; construction is expected to last through 2027. The 50-acre Southern Expansion site will add more than 80,000 interment opportunities and integrate the Air Force Memorial into the cemetery's landscape. The project will also enhance the experience of visitors while preserving the iconic look and feel of this national shrine.

Arlington National Cemetery embodies the history of our nation. To learn more about the cemetery and those honored within these hallowed grounds, explore our Education Program:

<https://education.arlingtoncemetery.mil/>.