



# ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

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## FACT SHEET

### **Arlington National Cemetery: A Brief History**

Nearly 430,000 individuals are laid to rest 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 (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.

As wartime fatalities mounted and military cemeteries in the D.C. area ran out of space, Army Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs 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 merely ensured that service members whose families could not afford to bring them home for a funeral were given a proper burial. This began to change after the first official "Decoration Day," later renamed Memorial Day, was held at Arlington National Cemetery on May 30, 1868. The popularity of Decoration Day catalyzed Arlington's transformation into the nation's premier military cemetery. In 1873, an amphitheater (now called the James Tanner Amphitheater) was constructed to hold the official ceremonies. The overwhelming crowds that attended Decoration Day ceremonies at Arlington 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 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.

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/>.