THE FINAL HONOR

UNITED STATES MILITARY GRAVESTONES

Most American cemeteries include a veterans' section. These lots typically feature standard white marble gravestones, with metal or plastic flag markers designating a branch of service, war, or military campaign for each veteran. Some variations can be found, including granite gravestones of the same style and marble, granite, or bronze flat foot markers. The United States government provides these grave markers at no cost for any honorably discharged veteran, a tradition that began about a decade after the end of the Civil War.

As early as the Revolutionary War, military post quartermasters were charged with keeping records of burials and providing wooden headboards for deceased veterans. This practice of supplying a simple headboard continued through the Civil War era. The name of the deceased and the state, company, and regiment number—or naval vessel—was painted on the headboard, along with a number referencing the burial location.

Soldiers from earlier wars had gravestones, of course, but these were not issued by a government agency. Families often included the former rank and the name of the conflict even decades after a soldier's service.

Research to verify veteran status may be necessary. In some cemeteries I have seen flags placed at the gravestones of *potential* war veterans—simply men of the right age to have served in a conflict. My ancestor, Pattee Gale, buried at Crawford Cemetery in Alexandria, New Hampshire, had the rank of major inscribed on his tombstone—but he never fought in a war. The designation was based on his service in the town militia. That misleading gravestone inscription led to the installation of a graveside Civil War military flag marker—even though he didn't serve in the war and would have been in his mid-sixties at the end of the conflict.

Not all of the Civil War dead were identifiable and many wooden headboards in military lots are marked as unknown. Some soldiers could be identified simply as Union or Confederate based on their uniforms, buttons, or insignia. Of the 300,000 remains found at Civil War battlefields and reinterred, only 58% were estimated to have been identified. Information about the Union dead buried in each national cemetery was reported by various quartermasters and published by the office of the Quartermaster General between 1865 and 1871 as a twenty-seven volume set, *Roll of Honor: Names of Soldiers who Died in Defense of the American Union*.

The wooden headboards that were initially installed began to deteriorate after a few years. As the cost of regularly replacing individual markers in national cemeteries became increasingly expensive, an alternative solution was sought. On March 3, 1873, the U.S. Congress passed an appropriation of a million dollars to replace the wooden headboards with more permanent marble or granite markers.

At first marble was used more frequently than granite. Inscriptions often included only an initial for the veteran's first name, his (or later her) surname, and name of the

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associated unit or vessel. Beginning in the first quarter of the twentieth century, flat markers of granite, bronze, or marble were used in some veterans and public cemeteries. Information on veterans' markers varied but, unlike before, often included birth and death dates. To learn what appears on a relative's military marker, search the "headstone" databases (see box) or contact the cemetery department or veterans' agent in the town or city of burial.

I placed my first military gravestone orders from the Veterans Administration more than twenty years ago. In one case I wanted to honor my ancestor's brother, Charles Henry Gale (1843–1924), a corporal with Co. C., 12th New Hampshire Infantry, during the Civil War. He was buried at the Woodside Cemetery in Cohasset, Massachusetts, but the only marker on the lot was for his brother's family. I was a Civil War reenactor for the 12th Massachusetts Infantry at the time and felt a close connection to this ancestral uncle.

I was also responsible for re-marking faded Civil War gravestones in my hometown of Stoughton, Massachusetts. Thomas F. Bancroft (1821–1903), a veteran of Native American (Punkapoag) and African American heritage, was buried in Stoughton's Maple Grove Cemetery. Bancroft served with the African American unit of the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry. As the tribal historian for the Massachusett Punkapoag, I was especially pleased to see a new gravestone for him.

Nearly 150 years after its original appropriation, the U.S. Veterans Administration continues to assist with marking or re-marking graves of American veterans from the Revolutionary War to the present. For assistance with ordering (or replacing) a gravestone for an honorably discharged U.S. veteran, contact the veterans' agent in the town or city of burial. More details on obtaining military gravestones from the Veterans Administration can be found at va.gov/burials-memorials/memorial-items/headstones-markers-medallions. ◆

Resources for researching military gravestones and burial locations

U.S., Civil War Roll of Honor, 1861–1865
Ancestry.com/search/collections/61388

Roll of Honor: Names of Soldiers Who Died in Defense of the American Union
FamilySearch.org/search/catalog/200058?availability=Family%20History%20Library

The two collections listed above are taken from *Roll of Honor: Names of Soldiers Who Died in Defense of the American Union*, published by the Quartermaster General's Office, 1865–1871. The searchable Ancestry version includes volumes 8 to 27; the browsable FamilySearch version has volumes 1 to 27.

United States, Burial Registers for Military Posts, Camps, and Stations, 1768–1921
FamilySearch.org/search/collection/2250027

United States Records of Headstones of Deceased Union Veterans, 1879–1903
FamilySearch.org/search/collection/1913388

United States Headstone Applications for U.S. Military Veterans, 1925–1949
FamilySearch.org/search/collection/1916249

American Battle Monuments Commission database
abmc.gov/database-search

The American Battle Monuments Commission, an agency of the executive branch of the federal government established by Congress in 1923, provides a free searchable database of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam veterans buried in overseas military cemeteries.

Interment.net
interment.net/us/nat/veterans.htm

A searchable database of U.S. veterans cemeteries

FindAGrave.com and BillionGraves.com

Millions of gravestones—including markers from various military cemeteries in both the United States and abroad—can be searched by name on FindAGrave.com and BillionGraves.com.

Opposite page: Memorial Day 2018, Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia. Photo by SavidgeMichael, Wikimedia Commons. *Above:* Fort Amanda Cemetery, Auglaize Co., Ohio. Photo by Nyttend, Wikimedia Commons.