



Richmond's Civil War Graves

Civil War preservationists work hard to explain to "non-believers" why battlefield land is significant. Sometimes describing the combat that raged across farms outside Richmond simply isn't enough. It leaves some landowners and opponents unimpressed. Isn't one battlefield just like another? they often ask. A powerful rebuttal to ill-informed arguments of that sort is to remind them that battlefields in Virginia are war graves. Even the most callous foe of preservation will not willfully advocate the destruction of human remains and the graves of soldiers.

For variety, this issue of "On Richmond's Front Line" looks at battlefield burials around Richmond, and at the cemeteries that hold the remains of some of the many thousands of men killed in battles outside the city.

Typically men killed outright in a Civil War battle wound up in graves only a few feet from where they fell. The vast numbers of men involved, the active pace of operations, the absence of any formal graves registration service, and the need to clear the battlefield of corpses for health reasons all contributed to hasty burials. Officers

in both armies received better treatment, but not always. Even some field officers (majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels) who died around Richmond occupy unmarked battlefield graves today.

The method used by the Confederate army to clean up the Gaines's Mill battlefield is typical. Work parties swarmed through the

the war.

At Seven Pines Union soldiers controlled the late battlefield. Swampy soil hindered their efforts at burying the battle's dead. A Michigan man described the scene in his diary: "At first great holes were dug into which large numbers were thrown but the stench soon became so great that they could not

be moved. A few shovels full of dirt were thrown over them & their feet, hands & often their heads were left uncovered."

Confronted with acres of dead on dozens of battlefields, the United States government took steps to care for the Union war dead. Even before the Seven Days battles in 1862, Federal

authorities urged the creation of special cemeteries for their own dead. On Richmond's battlefields work crews visited the sites in the summer of 1865. They mostly reburied Union dead who had received sloppy or imperfect original burials. The following year, with the creation of national cemeteries at Seven Pines, Cold Harbor, Fort Harrison, Glendale, and in the city of Richmond itself, more workers visited the battlefields. This



Veterans of both armies included the cemeteries in their nostalgic visits to the battlefields. Here Union veterans gather at the mass grave marker in Cold Harbor National Cemetery in the 1880's.

fields and woods interring as many men as they could find. "They buried friend & foe in the same trench," wrote a supervising officer in his journal. "They would dig large diches [sic]...and tumbled these dead men in without ceremony or decency even. It was shocking to one unaccustomed to the cruelties of war." Although written to describe burials in the vicinity of A. P. Hill's position at Gaines's Mill, those same sentences appear over and over in Civil War diaries and letters, on every major battlefield of

Continued on page 3

Fort Harrison Dead

Gentlemen, -- Will you do me the favor of calling the attention of the memorial societies and the public to the following fact: Hearing, on Thursday last, that the bones of numbers of the Confederate dead were exposed to the dogs and the heartless hands of the tenant of the farm known as "Burton's," on which stands Fort Harrison, I, in company with two friends, went thither, and we saw in a small field northwest of the fort a sad and sickening sight. Within about four hundred yards of the fort lay on the ground about fifty, or more, bodies, or, the bones of the bodies of our noble and brave Confederate dead, and in the adjacent bushes were four times the number. The skulls and other bones were gnawed by dogs; and, most horrible to relate, the tenant of the land had gathered up two large piles of the bones and burnt them to ashes.

My heart bleeds for the relatives of our forgotten dead. I will not ask those who remained at home, to enrich themselves, during the war to aid in burying these bones, but I appeal to those who fought the bat-

les to meet me at Fort Harrison as soon as possible, and discharge this honorable duty. I can be found opposite Fort Harrison at any time.

Respectfully, J. H. ALLEN for-

ans gathered at Fort Harrison on April 9 (the fourth anniversary of Appomattox) and gathered up all the exposed bones they could find. They carried their gruesome cargo



This famous 1865 photograph at Cold Harbor shows that some dead were not buried in pits, but instead covered with a thin layer of dirt. Note the entrenchments in front of the trees.

merly of Fifteenth Virginia regiment April 7, 1869.

[Editor's note: In response to Allen's plea in a Richmond newspaper, some of Richmond's veter-

into Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, and presumably buried everything under the stone in the Soldiers' Section there that reads only "Fort Harrison Dead."]

Other News

Late in August of last year, the Old Baldy Civil War Roundtable in Philadelphia devoted the proceeds of a preservation dinner to the RBA. Robert K. Krick of the RBA board delivered a talk on the Confederate Pattons, the Virginia ancestors of famous World War Two general George S. Patton. The RBA helped prime the pump by securing a signed print generously donated by Civil War artist Don Troiani. The Old Baldy preservation dinner is an annual event that has aided more than a few preservation organizations. Special thanks to Mike Cavanaugh, a grizzled veteran of the preservation wars, for steering the substantial funds raised at this event our way.

Annual Meeting Announcement

The Richmond Battlefields Association's annual meeting typically falls on the second Saturday in June. This year the date is June 12, 2004. At press time we have not secured a meeting location and thus cannot provide full details on the event. The particulars should be available long before the next newsletter is mailed, however, and anyone interested in attending should keep an eye on our website (www.saverichmondbattlefields.org). The annual meeting details will be posted there as soon as they become certain.

CWPT's Most Endangered List

The Civil War Preservation Trust has included the battlefield of Glendale (Frayser's Farm) on its list of the ten most endangered battlefields in America. The Trust announced this year's list just before our newsletter went to the printer. Their decision to include this key battlefield of the Seven Days campaign doubtless stems from the increasing development pressures on the battlefield's boundaries, and from the relatively small percentage of the battlefield that is preserved. The Gaines's Mill and Cold Harbor battlefields were on this same list two years ago. Visit www.civilwar.org for more.

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Continued from page 1

time they labored for the Quartermaster General, who assumed responsibility for removing Union dead from the fields to the new national cemeteries.

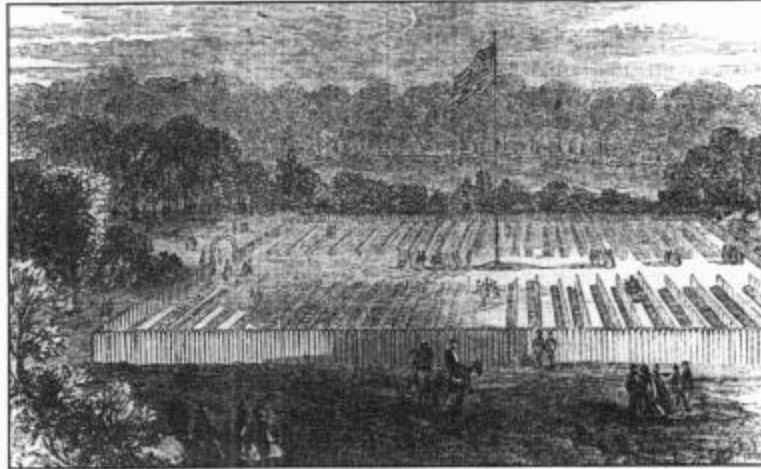
Only a tiny percentage of the dead could be identified by 1866. Most ended up in mass graves at the new cemeteries. The situation at the Glendale National Cemetery illustrates the difficulty in identifying the dead. There is not a single Union soldier killed at Glendale/Frayser's Farm or at Malvern Hill who occupies an identified grave in that cemetery. One New Hampshire man killed in the artillery fight at White Oak Swamp fills a marked grave. The other 1500 or so Union dead from June 30-July 1 are in the mass grave, or still out on the battlefields.

The remains of Confederate dead faced an even bleaker future. Some families succeeded in removing bodies from the various battlefields, but the enormous majority of Confederate dead lay unclaimed. They were not eligible for inclusion in the national cemeteries. The ladies' associations at Hollywood and Oakwood cemeteries in Richmond did what they could, and periodically transferred dead in unknown quantities into mass graves at their cemeteries. Even so, horror stories abounded. A post-war newspaper correspondent visited Cold Harbor and toured the national cemetery there. "It has been supposed," he wrote, "that the

Union dead were all buried in the cemeteries by the government and that all the respect due the dead was now shown. But far is this from the case." He then went to the battle-

sumably, is not too different on other area battlefields.

Battlefields would be worth saving even if every soldier's body had been removed. The fact that many



Civilians visiting the Seven Pines National Cemetery just after the war. Marble stones have replaced the original wooden headboards in all the national cemeteries.

field, where he found "in all parts of the field that skulls, ribs, leg, and arm-bones lay scattered about in fearful array, while the bones of many a poor soldier lay partially exposed through the action of the rain."

It is neither deceit nor exaggeration to argue that Richmond's battlefields are cemeteries. Relic hunters have excavated (and not reported) as many as 30 to 40 Confederate bodies at Gaines's Mill in the past five years. Most of the remains were of North Carolina and Alabama soldiers. Another half-dozen or so Union dead have been found in the same area in recent memory. The situation, pre-

unmarked graves exist makes these places that much more meaningful and unique.

On *Richmond's* FRONT LINE

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Approximate numbers of Union soldiers buried in Richmond's five national cemeteries

Cold Harbor

1950 soldiers, 680 of whom are identified

Fort Harrison

815 soldiers, 240 of whom are identified

Glendale (Frayser's Farm)

1190 soldiers, 235 of whom are identified

Richmond

6325 soldiers, 815 of whom are identified

Seven Pines (Fair Oaks)

1360 soldiers, 150 of whom are identified

Group Participation - Getting Involved

• Reenactors, roundtables, and school groups continue to demonstrate enthusiasm for preserving Richmond's battlefields. Here are a few recent examples.

• The Independent Volunteer Rifles, a living history organization based in the Richmond area, kindly contributed a substantial sum left over from an event at the Malvern Hill battlefield. The Independent Volunteer Rifles consists of several units based in central Virginia.

• Don Harrelson, another frequent

supporter of local preservation, sent in a donation from a school in Chesapeake, Virginia, where he



provided a historical program at that school's Pioneer Day.

• The fifth graders at Nuckols

Farm Elementary School in Henrico County donated nearly \$200 to our organization through

reenactors of the 23rd Virginia Infantry. Hopefully this money will be directed toward saving more battlefield land in their own Henrico County. The accompanying photograph shows the students beneath the flags of the 23rd after drilling.

• Sincere thanks to all of these folks for their commitment to the local battlefields.

YES! I WANT TO HELP PRESERVE OUR NATION'S HERITAGE, PLEASE SIGN ME UP.

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