

A stylized graphic of the American flag, featuring a blue field with white stars and red and white stripes, positioned on the left side of the image.

DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS AT ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY





DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS



Headstones in Sections 60 and 59. (Arlington National Cemetery/Elizabeth Fraser, 2019)

When most people think of Arlington National Cemetery, they imagine uniform rows of white marble headstones. As you explore the cemetery, however, you will discover that there is actually wide variation in the types of grave markers. This is due both to changes in the style of headstones provided by the government and to the fact that until December 2017, families could purchase custom grave markers. These variations in style reflect the long history and evolution of Arlington National Cemetery.





DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS



Two 1867 photos show the wooden boards originally used as grave markers in Arlington National Cemetery. (Library of Congress)

When Arlington National Cemetery was founded in 1864, graves were initially marked with wooden boards. Because these boards deteriorated quickly, the War Department soon began to experiment with more durable materials such as metal and stone.





Civil War type headstones and marble blocks for unknowns are both visible in this 1900 photo of children visiting Arlington National Cemetery. (Library of Congress/Charles L. Wasson)

In 1873, the War Department began to replace wooden grave markers with permanent headstones at all national cemeteries. At Arlington National Cemetery, the graves of known soldiers received white marble slabs 4" thick, 10" wide and 12" tall, with a slightly curved top and a sunken shield carved into the front. This design, referred to as the "Civil War" type, was used for veterans of the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, except for Civil War Confederate soldiers.

The graves of unknown soldiers at this time received a block of marble 6" square and 30" long, with the grave number carved into the top.





DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS



Headstones for Confederate soldiers circle the Confederate Memorial in Section 16. (Arlington National Cemetery/Rachel Larue, 2015)

In 1906, Congress authorized the furnishing of headstones for the graves of Confederate soldiers buried in national cemeteries. These headstones were the same size and material as the Civil War type, but with pointed tops and without the carved shield.





DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS



Government-furnished headstones in Section 60. (Arlington National Cemetery/Elizabeth Fraser, 2017)

The headstone design used today was adopted after World War I. Like the Civil War type, the current government-furnished headstone is made of white marble and is slightly rounded at the top, but the stone is 3" wider and 12" taller and no longer features a shield. The inscriptions include the deceased's name, rank, branch of service, date of birth and date of death, and may also include combat service, significant awards, a term of endearment or reference or a religious emblem.





DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS



The Department of Veterans Affairs currently permits the following emblems of belief on government-furnished grave markers.



(1) LATIN
(CHRISTIAN)
CROSS



(2) BUDDHIST



(3) JUDAISM
(STAR OF DAVID)



(4) PRESBYTERIAN
CROSS



(5) RUSSIAN
ORTHODOX CROSS



(6) LUTHERAN
CROSS



(7) EPISCOPAL
CROSS



(8) UNITARIAN
(FLAMING CHALICE)



(9) UNITED
METHODIST



(10) AARONIC
ORDER
CHURCH



(11) MORMON
(ANGEL MORONI)



(12) NATIVE AMERICAN
CHURCH OF NORTH
AMERICA



(13) SERBIAN
ORTHODOX



(14) GREEK CROSS



(15) BAHAI
(9-POINTED STAR)



(16) ATHEIST



(17) MUSLIM
(CRESCENT AND STAR)



(18) HINDU



(19) KONKO-KYO
FAITH



(20) COMMUNITY
OF CHRIST



(21) SUFISM
REORIENTED



(22) TENRIKYO
CHURCH



(23) SEICHO-NO-IE



(24) THE CHURCH
OF WORLD
MESSIANITY



(25) UNITED CHURCH
OF RELIGIOUS
SCIENCE



(26) CHRISTIAN
REFORMED
CHURCH



(27) UNITED
MORAVIAN
CHURCH



(28) ECKANKAR



(29) CHRISTIAN
CHURCH



(30) CHRISTIAN
& MISSIONARY
ALLIANCE



(31) UNITED
CHURCH OF
CHRIST



(32) HUMANIST
EMBLEM OF
SPIRIT



(33) PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH (USA)



(34) IZUMO
TAISHAKYO
MISSION OF HAWAII



(35) SOKA GAKKAI
INTERNATIONAL
(USA)



(36) SIKH
(KHANDA)



(37) WICCA
(PENTACLE)



DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS



(38) LUTHERAN
CHURCH
MISSOURI SYNOD



(39) NEW
APOSTOLIC



(40) SEVENTH DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH



(41) CELTIC
CROSS



(42) ARMENIAN
CROSS



(43) FAROHAR



(44) MESSIANIC
JEWISH



(45) KOHEN HANDS



(46) CATHOLIC
CELTIC CROSS



(47) FIRST CHURCH OF
CHRIST, SCIENTIST
(CROSS & CROWN)



(48) MEDICINE
WHEEL



(49) INFINITY



(51) LUTHER
ROSE



(52) LANDING
EAGLE



(53) FOUR
DIRECTIONS



(54) CHURCH
OF NAZARENE



(55) HAMMER
OF THOR



(56) UNIFICATION
CHURCH



(57) SANDHILL
CRANE



(58) CHURCH OF
GOD



(59) POMEGRANATE



(60) MESSIANIC



(61) SHINTO



(62) SACRED HEART



(63) AFRICAN
ANCESTRAL
TRADITIONALIST



(64) MALTESE
CROSS



(65) DRUID (AWEN)



(66) WISCONSIN
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN
SYNOD



(67) POLISH NATIONAL
CATHOLIC CHURCH



(68) GUARDIAN ANGEL



(69) HEART



(70) SHEPHERD AND
FLAG



(71) AFRICAN METHODIST
EPISCOPAL



(72) EVANGELICAL
LUTHERAN CHURCH



(73) UNIVERSALIST
CROSS



(74) FAITH AND PRAYER



DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS



A member of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) places flags in Columbarium Court 6 in preparation for Memorial Day. (Arlington National Cemetery/Elizabeth Fraser, 2018)

In addition to in-ground burial sites, Arlington National Cemetery also features a number of columbariums with niches for storing cremated remains. Each niche is sealed with a white marble niche cover, which features the same types of inscriptions allowed on government-furnished headstones.





DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS



The names of some military dependents can be seen on the back of headstones in Section 60. (Arlington National Cemetery/Elizabeth Fraser, 2019)

Many civilians are buried within Arlington National Cemetery, including military family members and freed slaves who lived in and around Washington, D.C. in the 1860s.

For a time, dependents could be buried in their own gravesites and receive their own headstones. The style of these headstones matched the style of the military service member's headstone and often included the designation "Wife of _____" or "Child of _____." Dependents are now buried in the same gravesite as the military service member and all names are inscribed on a single headstone or niche cover.





The grave of William H. Johnson, one of the African American civilians buried in Section 27. (Arlington National Cemetery, 2013)

From 1864 to 1867, thousands of African American civilians known as “freedmen” were buried in Section 27 of Arlington National Cemetery. During that time, the U.S. government provided gravesites and grave markers for those “freedmen” whose families could not afford burials for their loved ones. When the original wooden grave markers were replaced, these graves received white marble headstones that featured no special markings but included the inscription “Citizen” or “Civilian.”





A mix of government-provided and private grave markers can be seen in Section 17. (Arlington National Cemetery/Elizabeth Fraser, 2018)

When Arlington National Cemetery opened, families could choose to use a government-provided grave marker or to purchase their own custom headstone. Prior to 1947, there were almost no restrictions on the design and size of private grave markers other than a family's budget. Because of this, some of the older sections of the cemetery feature a wide variety of grave markers. The size and style of a grave marker does not indicate the person's rank or status; in fact, there are a number of four-star generals and Medal of Honor recipients whose families chose to use a government-provided headstone.





DIFFERENCES IN GRAVE MARKERS



Private grave markers in Section 3. (Arlington National Cemetery/Elizabeth Fraser, 2018)

Since 1947, private grave markers were permitted only in select sections of the cemetery and required approval by Arlington National Cemetery. In December 2017, the cemetery reached capacity for private markers, and all in-ground burials now receive government-furnished headstones. Private headstones are no longer permitted.





A weathered headstone in Section 13. (Arlington National Cemetery/Rachel Larue, 2016)

Families who purchased private grave markers are responsible for the perpetual upkeep of those markers at their own expense, whereas the government is responsible for the maintenance of all government-provided headstones. Arlington National Cemetery staff monitor the condition of headstones and replace those that are badly deteriorated or illegible. Current policy requires that a grave marker be replaced with one of the same type used at the time of the person's death. Prior to this policy, stones were sometimes replaced with ones that reflected the style being used at the time, or a hybrid style. These changes in policy contributed to the variation in styles found throughout the cemetery.





The differences in grave markers reflect Arlington National Cemetery's history of honoring and caring for the dead over many eras in American history. As you explore the cemetery and observe the many styles and types of grave markers, keep these general points in mind:

- White marble slab headstones and niche covers were provided by the government at no cost to the family, while more elaborate grave markers were privately purchased by families.
- Government headstones with engraved shields were used for Civil War Union soldiers and Spanish-American War dead.
- Government headstones with a pointed top were used for Confederate soldiers.
- A block of marble with only a number carved in the top reflects an unknown Civil War soldier.
- Headstones are replaced as they deteriorate, so the age of the headstone itself does not always reflect the time of the burial.





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Images:

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Page 3: National Cemetery, Arlington, Va. Photograph. Washington, D.C.: Bell & Bro. ca. 1867. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/stereo.1s09688/>

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Page 5: Larue, Rachel. Jackson Circle in Bloom. Photograph. Arlington, Virginia: Arlington National Cemetery, April 7, 2015. <https://flic.kr/p/rKEZoo>

Page 6: Fraser, Elizabeth. Section 60. Photograph. Arlington, Virginia: Arlington National Cemetery, July 24, 2017. <https://flic.kr/p/LomkCG>

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Page 13: Fraser, Elizabeth. Gravesite of Jonathan Letterman. Photograph. Arlington, Virginia: Arlington National Cemetery, February 27, 2018. <https://flic.kr/p/2gBCyEE>

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