
Headstone records for U.S. military veterans

Part I: Headstone design

In honor of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, this is the seventh in a series of articles about records at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., that are useful in researching the war and its participants.

The eruption of the American Civil War changed millions of lives and many governmental practices. For the first time, U.S. leaders were faced with the considerable task of burying thousands of military dead. The exigencies of war led to many poorly marked burials. Some soldiers pinned paper with name and address to their clothing, but thousands died without identification. (The U.S. Army adopted “dog tags” in 1906.)

In 1862, the Army’s Quartermaster General established the first military cemeteries for Union dead. The task of locating, identifying if possible, and exhuming the remains of three hundred thousand Union war-time dead for reburial in those cemeteries continued after war’s end. At first, graves were marked with wooden headboards costing \$1.23 each, but with a life expectancy of only five years, they were not cost effective. In 1873, Congress authorized \$1 million to mark graves in national cemeteries with marble or granite headstones.

Over the years, Congress enacted new benefits for veterans because of public pressure. The act of 3 March 1873 (17 Stat. 605) allowed burial in a national cemetery to all honorably discharged Union Civil War veterans. An act

of 3 February 1879 (20 Stat. 281) extended the privilege of government-provided headstones to all honorably discharged Union Civil War veterans, and required the Quartermaster General to keep record of their names and burial locations. Congress authorized government-provided headstones for Confederates who died in military prisons and hospitals in the North who were buried near their place of confinement by an act of 6 March 1906 (34 Stat. 56) and then extended the headstone privilege to all Confederate soldiers buried anywhere by an act of 26 February 1929 (45 Stat. 1307). Ultimately, the headstone privilege was authorized for any active duty or honorably discharged veteran buried in an unmarked grave, resulting in millions of government-provided, taxpayer-funded, headstones being carved or cast for placement on veterans’ graves. Recent statistics show that 372,700 headstones or markers were provided for veterans’ graves in fiscal year (FY) 2011, and 354,600 in FY 2012. The Quartermaster General’s Office (QMG) and its successors ran the headstone program until 1973, when it was transferred to the Veteran’s Administration, now called the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA).

This article will examine headstone design styles and elements because understanding the clues provided by them may assist researchers in locating related paper records in the National Archives (NARA). Part II will examine records for headstones requested from 1879 to 1925. Part III will examine records for headstones

requested from 1925 to 1985. Please note that all three articles will focus on records for headstones primarily in nonfederal cemeteries, not national military cemeteries.



Typical "shield" headstone for Civil War and pre-1925 veterans. Headstone for Edw'd Maltby, Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Geneva, Ohio. (This cemetery affixes "U.S. Veteran" stickers to veterans' gravestones.

Shield design

In 1873, the QMG adopted the shield design for Union Civil War dead. Each upright stone has a slightly rounded top. It is 4 inches thick, 10 inches wide, and 36 inches long (for burials south of Washington, D.C.) and 42 inches long (for burials north of Washington, D.C.).

When properly set in the ground, 12 inches of headstone should be revealed below the shield. In 1903, the width was changed to 12 inches and the

length standardized to 39 inches.

As an obvious military symbol, the shield was a logical design choice. The shield was personal military armament in ancient warfare, relatively uncomplicated to carve, and a significant United States symbol. The Great Seal of the United States, first used in 1782, includes a shield, as do the official seals of many U.S. government agencies. Shields were featured on nineteenth-century official government records, such as bounty land warrants. In 1925, the Joint Board on Interstate Highways adopted a shield shape for U.S. highway signs that is nearly identical to the shield headstone.

Shield design headstones were used for Union Civil War veterans, Spanish-American War

veterans, and all other veterans who died before May 1925. Information carved into the stone includes the veteran's name, unit, war (if other than Civil War), rank (if above private), and dates of birth and death on newer stones.

Confederate design

The design adopted by the QMG for Confederate headstones features a pointed top and a simplified Confederate Medal of Honor (also known as the Southern Cross of Honor). Information carved into the stone includes the veteran's name, unit, "CSA" for Confederate States of America, rank (if above private) on newer stones, and dates of birth and death on newer stones. The original wartime Confederate Medal of Honor was a military decoration authorized in 1862 by the Confederate Congress to honor officers and privates for their valor.



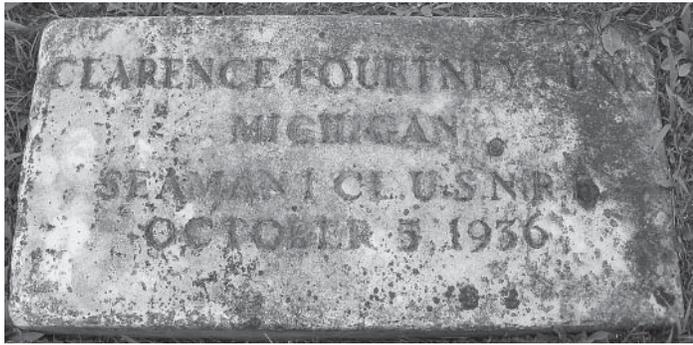
Confederate headstone. John H. Allison. Washington Street United Methodist Church Cemetery, Alexandria, Virginia.

Plain upright

The plain upright headstone was introduced in May 1925 with the option of a religious symbol (Christian, Hebrew, or none). Information carved into the stone includes the veteran's name, unit, date of



Typical plain upright with religious symbol. George S. Stanclift, Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Geneva, Ohio.



Flat headstone requested before June 1944. Clarence Fournety Funk. Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Geneva, Ohio.



Pre-1973 bronze marker, Curtis Joseph Odill, Norway Cemetery, Norway, Michigan.

death, and, for stones requested in June 1944 or later, the date of birth. The choice of granite or marble was allowed from July 1942 until April 1947, when the granite option was eliminated.

Flat marble or granite

The flat headstone was introduced in February 1937, with the option to choose granite or marble added in July 1940. Information carved into the stone includes the veteran's name, unit, date of death, and, for stones requested in June 1944 or later, the date of birth. The QMG's design placed the optional religious symbol centered at the top of the stone (1937–ca. 1973), while the DVA's design centered it at the bottom of the stone (ca. 1973–present).

Flat bronze marker

The flat bronze marker, intended to be affixed to a stone, was introduced in July 1940, discontinued from July 1942 to November 1945 because of material needs of World War II, then reinstated as an option in November 1945.

Information cast into the marker includes the veteran's name, unit, date of death, and, for markers requested June 1944 or later, the date of birth. The QMG's design had plain edges with the religious symbol centered at the top of the stone (1940–ca. 1973), while the DVA's design has a beveled edge and the religious symbol centered at the bottom of the marker.

Religious symbol variations

The manner of presentation of the religious symbol changed over time, and also seems to have varied between different government contractors (quarries) that supplied the headstones. For example, on upright or flat headstones, I have seen the Christian symbol (Latin Cross) rise out of a single sunken circle (1941), rise out of a two-level sunken circle (1942), outlined and surrounded by a circle outline (1960s), and outlined without a circle (2000s). Similar variations have been noted on bronze markers: the Latin Cross rising from a two-level circle (1957) or rising from the background without any circle (1970s–present). Today, the DVA offers about forty different religious symbols to represent the decedent's beliefs, or a new one can be proposed as long as it can reproduce well in a production-line environment.

Date of death

When the Quartermaster General began offering the plain upright headstone in 1925, it began adding the date of death as a standard headstone feature. Likewise, when the flat headstone option was added in February 1937 and the flat bronze in 1940, the death date was included as a standard feature. Today, the DVA includes the date of death on shield headstones requested for Civil War or Spanish-American War veterans, as well as on the Confederate design.

Date of birth

In June 1944, the QMG began adding the date of birth to upright, flat stone, and bronze markers. Today, the DVA includes the date of birth on

shield headstones requested for Civil War or Spanish-American War veterans, as well as on the Confederate design.

Terms of endearment and other options

The DVA allows additional information on headstones and markers if space allows, such as terms of endearment, nicknames, military or civilian credentials or accomplishments (such as Rev. or Dr.), and special unit designations (such as Women's Army Corps, Army Air Corps, Army Nurse Corps, or Seabees). For decedents whose remains were not recovered or identified, donated to science, or cremated with their ashes scattered, DVA will issue a headstone or marker whose first line reads "In Memory of." For veterans who died on or after 1 November 1990, whose grave is marked with a privately purchased headstone, DVA will provide a 1.5-, 3-, or 5-inch medallion to affix to the stone. A columbarium niche marker can be requested instead of a headstone.

Beware of companion stones

Companion stones are copycats. They are headstones that have the "look and feel" of U.S.-government issued headstones but were actually



Early example of a "companion stone" privately made to match style of husband's government headstone. Amelia Maltby, Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Geneva, Ohio.

made by private monument companies. For example, a veteran's widow is not entitled to a U.S. government headstone (unless she's buried at a national military cemetery with her military spouse), so her heirs may have a private monument company make a stone that looks like her husband's stone or bronze marker. How can you tell the difference? The non-military spouse's

stone won't mention a military unit. If it is bronze, the person's dates of birth and death will be screwed on to the rest of the marker. Some veterans even have bronze markers that were privately-made but look like U.S. government markers. Again, you can tell if it was privately made if the veteran's birth and death dates were screwed on. This is important to understand because, if it was privately made, there's no federal record about that headstone.

Conclusion

Design matters! Understanding design changes in U.S. government-provided headstones for military veterans will add meaning to your next walk through a cemetery (either in person or in surfing online images). The clues you get from design elements will help you locate the record for that gravestone in records in the NARA that we'll discuss in the next two issues. Until then, if you're dying for more information, see Claire Kluskens, "Research Guide for Headstone Records for U.S. Military Veterans Buried in Nonfederal Cemeteries, 1879-1985" online at <http://www.archives.gov/dc-metro/know-your-records/genealogy-fair/2011/handouts/headstone-records-us-military-veterans.pdf>. 

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