

Records of Burial Flags for Veterans

In honor of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War and its aftermath, this is the twentieth 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.

When a U.S. military veteran dies, we take it for granted that the federal government will provide the next of kin with a U.S. flag to drape over the casket during funeral services.¹ Obtaining a government-provided flag is one of the many routine tasks performed by funeral homes for grieving families. However, this tradition of federally-funded flags for most veterans dates back only to the 1920s. This article examines the history of the burial flag and the records created to document its issuance to next of kin.

Nineteenth century

The burial flag custom is made possible by modern mass production manufacturing that enables cloth to be cheaply made, dyed, cut, and sewn. Cloth articles of all kinds

were significantly more expensive and time-consuming to make before the advent of automation. President Abraham Lincoln's casket was draped with an American flag² but that luxury was out of the question for the common Civil War soldier. For example, a stereograph of the burial of Federal dead at Fredericksburg, Virginia, on 12 May 1864, shows a funeral ceremony involving two bodies covered with ordinary cloth plus one or two caskets. No flags of any kind are in sight.³ A drawing by Alfred Rudolph Waud of an 1862 funeral for a man in the 1st Massachusetts Artillery at Harrison's Landing, Virginia, shows no flag on the casket or elsewhere.⁴

Twentieth century

By the time of the Spanish-American War, it was both desirable and feasible to drape American flags over the caskets of ordinary servicemen who died during their military service. A stereoview dated 28 December 1899 shows rows of flag-draped caskets of men who died on the U.S.S. *Maine* at Havana, Cuba, lined up and

1. The veteran must have been honorably discharged or died while under orders. Current requirements are found in 38 U.S. Code Sec. 2301, <http://uscode.house.gov>.

2. "A Flag That Draped Lincoln's Casket," Trenton, New Jersey, *Evening Times* (30 July 1889), 4, *GenealogyBank* (<http://www.GenealogyBank.com>). Websites in this article were accessed on 15 August 2016.

3. "Fredericksburg, Virginia. Burial of Federal dead," 1864, *Library of Congress*, Control No. cwp2003004858/PP (<http://www.loc.gov>).

4. "Funeral 1st Mass Arty Harrison's landing," 1862, *Library of Congress*, Reproduction No. LC-DIG-ppmsca-21171 (<http://www.loc.gov>).



Burial of the victims of the "Maine"... Arlington, Virginia, 28 December 1899.

ready for burial at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.⁵ Likewise, a photograph of caskets of World War I dead being received at Arlington shows flag-draped caskets.⁶ These flags were given to the next of kin upon request,⁷ and when the War Department shipped a body to relatives for a private burial, the flag which draped the shipping case was turned over to relatives to be used at the funeral and retained by them afterwards.⁸

Before 1923, a flag might have been draped on the casket of a veteran who died after completion of military service if his family or a patriotic organization provided one. For example, the United Spanish War Veterans' 1912 funeral ritual directed the local organization's senior vice-commander to place "a small national flag on the casket" while stating that the flag was "in honor of [the veteran's] patriotic service as a loyal defender of our republic."⁹

Congressional action

Congress first authorized funding for burial flags for veterans with limited assets on 4 March 1923 in amendments to the War Risk Insurance Act of 1914. The new language in Section 301(g) (2) read: "Where a veteran of any war dies after discharge or resignation from the service and does not leave sufficient assets to meet the expense of his burial and the transportation of his body... the United States Veterans' Bureau shall pay the following sums: For a flag to drape the casket, and after burial to be given to the next of kin of the deceased, a sum not exceeding \$5; also for burial expenses, a sum not exceeding \$100." On 4 March 1925, Congress increased the flag allowance to \$7. On 29 May 1928, Congress increased the burial allowance to \$107 but omitted mention of the flag.¹⁰ Next of kin purchased the flag and included its cost on the application to the Veterans' Bureau (later, Veterans Administration [VA]) for reimbursement of burial expenses.

The privilege of receiving a government-provided burial flag was given to all veterans, regardless of financial need, by an Act of Congress of 3 July 1930 which amended the World War Veterans' Act of 1924, section 201(f) (1). The new language read, "Where a veteran of any war, including those women who served as Army nurses under contracts between April 21, 1898, and February 2, 1901, who was not dishonorably discharged, dies after discharge or resignation from the service, the director [of

5. "Burial of the victims of the "Maine" in their final resting place—Arlington Cemetery, Va., Dec. 28, 1899," *Library of Congress*, Reproduction No. LC-USZ62-104735 (<http://www.loc.gov>).

6. "Scene at Arlington National Cemetery today at the burial of returned bodies of the A.E.F. from France..." 1914, *Library of Congress*, Reproduction No. LC-USZ62-97684 (<http://www.loc.gov>).

7. "Questions and Answers." Flint, *Michigan Journal*, 28 June 1921, 11.

8. Army Training Manual No. 2000-25, *Citizenship* (Washington: War Department, 1928), 124 (http://constitution.org/mil/tm/tm_2000-25/tm_2000-25.pdf).

9. *Book of Ceremonies of the United Spanish War Veterans Adopted by the Ninth National Encampment, in Stated Convention Assembled at Atlantic City, New Jersey, September 9, 10, 11, 1912* (Washington, DC: The Terminal Press, Inc., 1924), 91, *HathiTrust* (<http://www.hathitrust.org>).

10. Acts of 7 June 1924, Ch. 320, Sec. 201 (43 Stat. 616); 4 March 1925, Ch. 553, Sec. 7 (43 Stat. 1305); 29 May 1928, Ch. 875, Sec. 7 (45 Stat. 965). For analysis, see *Federal Laws Relating to Veterans of Wars of the United States (Annotated)*, August 1, 1932 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1932), 72nd Cong., 1st Sess., Senate Document 131), 241-248, *HathiTrust* (<http://www.hathitrust.org>).

the U.S. Veterans' Bureau] shall furnish a flag to drape the casket of such veteran and afterwards to be given to his next of kin regardless of the cause of death of such veteran."¹¹ Over the years, the law's wording has been changed, but the basic premise remains: all veterans, except those dishonorably discharged, are entitled to a burial flag requested before the funeral takes place.

Although Congress enacted the law on 3 July 1930, it was not until the summer of 1931 that flags actually became available to most families, because of the logistics of purchasing thousands of flags and distributing them to postmasters, who provided the flags upon proper application. For example, the Bellingham, Washington, post office did not receive its supply of flags until late June 1931.¹²

Records of applications for burial flags

To obtain a burial flag, the VA Form 2008, "Application for Burial Flag,"¹³ had to be completed and submitted before the burial. The application can often be found in the pension files of veterans of the Civil War, Spanish-American War, Philippine Insurrection, and so forth, who died after June 1931. Three examples follow.

The pension file of Civil War soldier Henry C. Andrus, Co. H, 1st Michigan Light Artillery (SC-784,007), who died 15 July 1932, has an application by his son, Homer C. Andrus, who indicated that the funeral would be held in Aberdeen, South Dakota, on 17 July 1932, at 7 p.m. Aberdeen postmaster B. A. Williams issued the flag.

The pension file of Civil War soldier John F. Beaumont, Co. A, 3rd Michigan Cavalry (XC-2,568,681), who died in the hospital at Goodrich, Michigan, on 7 April 1940, has an application by Davisburg, Michigan, postmaster W. J. Garrison, who indicated the burial would be at Highland,

Form 2008, Application for Burial Flag, Civil War Pension File of John F. Beaumont, Co. A, 3rd Michigan Cavalry (XC-2,568,681), NARA, Washington, DC.

Michigan, on 10 April 1940. The flag was issued by Pontiac, Michigan, postmaster T. W. Jackson.

The pension file of Spanish-American War soldier John W. Richards, Co. C, 20th U.S. Infantry (XC-2,313,880), who died at the Lake City, Florida, Veterans Administration facility on 20 March 1937, has an application by Jerry M. Hopkins, the manager of Sherrill's Funeral Home, Lake City, Florida, who indicated the body would be shipped to Mrs. John W. Richards, Sylacauga, Alabama, on 22 March 1937. The flag was issued by W. H. Gaines of the Lake City Veterans Affairs facility on 22 March 1937, so it could cover the casket's shipping case during transit home for burial.

Form 2008, "Application for Burial Flag," was undoubtedly filled out in duplicate or perhaps even in triplicate. A second copy appears to have been filed separately at the Veterans Administration (VA), but was retained only temporarily. As early as 1938, the VA,

11. Act of 3 July 1930, Ch. 849, Sec. 12 (46 Stat. 97).

12. "Burial Flag Here – Supply Is Received By Postoffice From Vets' Bureau," Bellingham (Washington) *Herald*, Vol. XLI, No. 174 (24 June 1931), 4, *GenealogyBank* (<http://www.GenealogyBank.com>).

13. Currently VA Form 27-2008, "Application for United States Flag for Burial Purposes."


the National Archives, and Congress together decided that the Form 2008s filed separately between 1931 and 1933 were temporary records that should be destroyed.¹⁴ This decision was logical since one copy of the form had been placed in the veteran's pension file.

Conclusion

The content of every Civil War (and later) pension file is different, depending upon the individual circumstances of the veteran or his widow or dependents. Pension files for veterans who died from 1923 to 1931 may include applications for burial expenses that list "burial flag" as a specific line item expense.

Pension files for veterans who died circa June 1931 and afterwards may include Form 2008, "Application for Burial Flag." While this record is unlikely to give any new information about the veteran or his family, it provides evidence

that the veteran's casket was draped with an American flag for the funeral.

Pension files of Civil War and later veterans are available from the National Archives and Records Administration, and can be ordered at <https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline>. Many thousands of pension files have been digitized and are available at Fold3, while a smaller number are online in the National Archives Catalog at <https://catalog.archives.gov>. 

Claire Prechtel-Klusken, a senior reference and projects archivist at NARA, served as NGS registrar (1996–98) and director (1998–2000). She can be reached at cklusken@verizon.net and blogs at twelvekey.com.

14. "Disposition of Records in the Veterans' Administration," 75th Cong., 3rd Sess., H. Rept. 1670, pp. 1-2, 14 January 1938, *HathiTrust* (<http://www.hathitrust.org>).