

# World War I Veterans and Their Federal Burial Benefits

Sara Amy Leach

All images are NCA unless indicated.

The federal government has redesigned its iconic marble upright headstone only once since it was first authorized as a burial benefit for soldiers and sailors killed in the Civil War. It was 1922, four years after the Great War ended. More than 116,000 dead were in need of honorable, permanent interment abroad near where they perished, or if repatriated stateside at a private or national cemetery. The graves of repatriated World War I remains were permanently marked with a new "General"-style headstone, a memorial object designed to distinguish this service from nineteenth-century conflicts. Yet it was not until October 1946, after the World War II was fought and won, that the Under Secretary of War authorized "World War I" as a headstone inscription.<sup>1</sup> Today, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), National Cemetery Administration (NCA) 135 national cemeteries contain an estimated 300,000 World War I veterans. (Fig. 1)

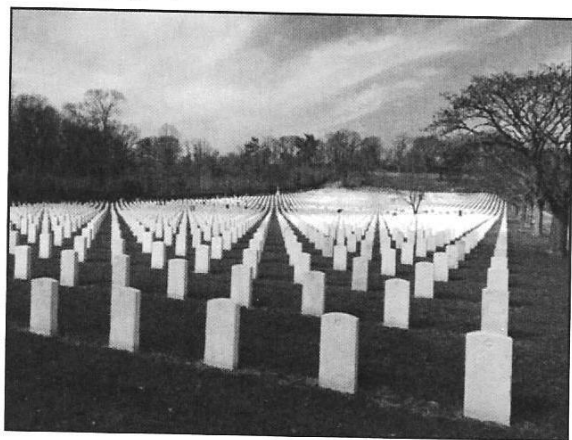


Fig. 1. View of Cypress Hills National Cemetery, NY. Graves of World War I dead.

In March 1919, the U.S. Army offered the next of kin repatriation—a local cemetery or Arlington National Cemetery—or one of the American Military Cemeteries in England, Belgium and France.<sup>2</sup> Sixty percent chose to have their loved one returned to the United States for burial. This three-year procedure spanned 1920 (11,534 bodies returned), 1921 (31,945),

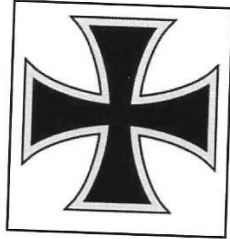
and 1922 (2,109).<sup>3</sup> Orchestrated by the Army's Graves Registration Service, it was the nation's first massive repatriation.

Meanwhile, "at that time, the question of adoption of a new style of headstone of slab design for graves of all veterans everywhere was under study within the War Department...There were strong protests from the veterans of the Civil and Spanish-American Wars since they had become sentimentally attached to the headstone with the sunken shield."<sup>4</sup> Despite the veterans' opposition, a new design was forthcoming.

More than 4.7 million individuals served as part of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in World War I. This service resulted in more than 4.6 million veterans who became eligible for burial in a national cemetery or a government headstone for placement on a grave in a private cemetery. Among the National Cemetery Administration's (NCA) 135 national cemeteries, today Long Island National Cemetery, New York, contains the most WWI graves: 65,252. However, almost every NCA cemetery has at least one. Long Island is one of several urban national cemeteries that contain more than 10,000 World War I graves, planned as new sites or as expansions of existing cemeteries during the 1930s; the locations, serving all regions of the country, were selected according to veteran population.

## Proto-General Headstone

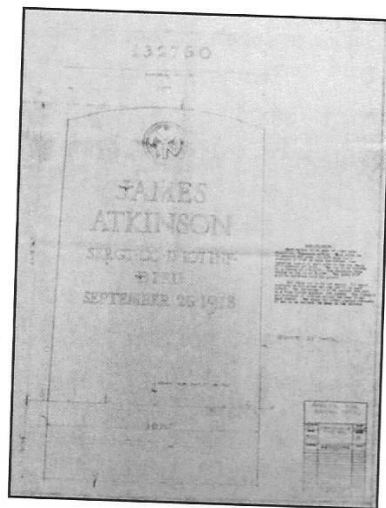
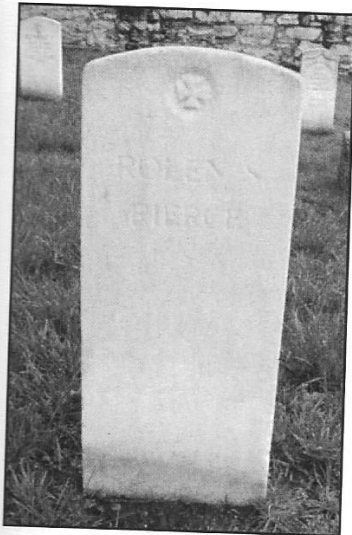
During the final months of the war, the Army developed its first headstone for service members in this conflict. The "proto-General" was short lived due to design flaws and material failures, but the headstone is notable as the first time an "emblem of belief" (EOB) appears on a government-issued grave marker. (Fig. 2) The Christian faith was represented by a Maltese cross. This graphic was changed to a Latin cross on the final design for the General headstone because of its similarity to the German Iron Cross. (Fig. 3)<sup>5</sup>



Figs. 2-3. The Maltese cross emblem of belief (left) on the proto-General headstone resembled the German iron cross (right). Berlin State Library Digital Collections:

digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht? PPN=PPN68002929X&PHYSID=PHYS\_0003&DMDID=DMDL0 G\_0001, accessed Dec.13, 2017.

Only 2,200 units of the proto-General were produced and placed on graves between mid-1918 and the late 1920s, based on information gathered in the field and written military records. Surviving examples of this headstone demonstrate the failures. Measuring 30" tall and 2.5" thick, the upright slab was too light and fragile to stay in place, despite a tapered width of 10" at the top and 10.5" at the base. (Figs. 4-5) The use of poor quality marble also led to illegibility.<sup>6</sup> Less than two dozen of these headstones have been located in NCA cemeteries, including Beaufort, South Carolina; Jefferson Barracks, Missouri; Natchez, Mississippi; and Richmond, Virginia. However, the number will dwindle as the headstones become illegible and "unserviceable," and NCA will replace them with the General upright.



Figs. 4-5. Proto-General headstone in a cemetery and on paper. NARA College Park.

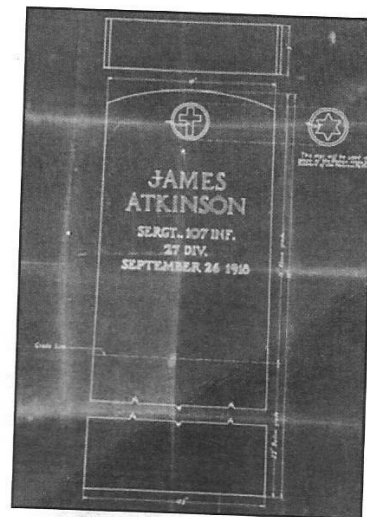


Fig. 7. Drawing of General headstone, 1920. NARA College Park.

### "General" Headstone

On April 26, 1922, a board of officers composed of Assistant Secretary of War J. M. Wainwright, Army Chief of Staff John J. Pershing, and Quartermaster General Harry L. Rogers, adopted a new headstone design to be used for all graves except those of the Civil War (Union and Confederate) and Spanish-American War.

At 230 pounds, the marble upright General is far more robust than its predecessors. (See sidebar, page 41, Fig. 6) It features the slightly rounded top, measures 42" long, 13" wide, and 4" thick. The original inscription on the front includes the name of the veteran, rank, regiment, division, date of birth and death; the state of origin was later dropped. (Figs. 7-8) Besides extended service information as compared to nineteenth-century inscriptions, the Army introduced final designs for two optional emblems of belief. A Latin cross for the Christian faith and a Star of David for the Hebrew faith were "accepted by all members" of the respective faiths. They were inscribed within a circle (or rosette) at the top center. (Fig. 9)<sup>7</sup> The inscription policy, revised in 1946, includes the conflict, "World War I," on headstones. The emblems of belief are raised within a recessed rosette or circle. (Figs. 10-11)



Fig 8. Two early General headstones for World I service, no conflict inscribed.

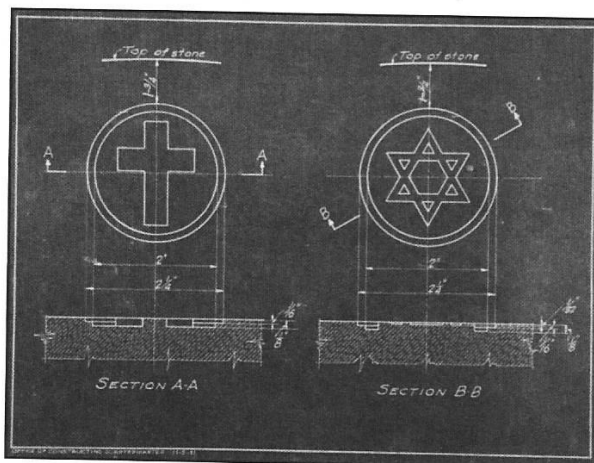
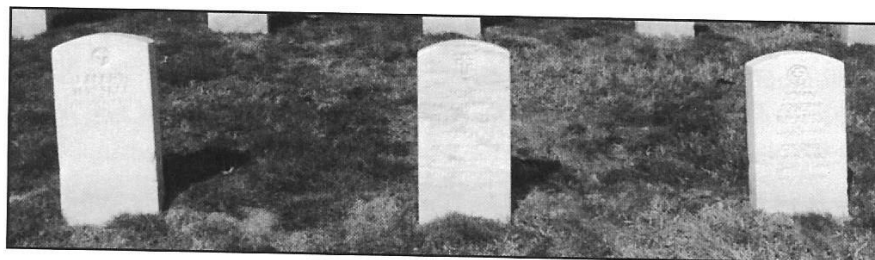
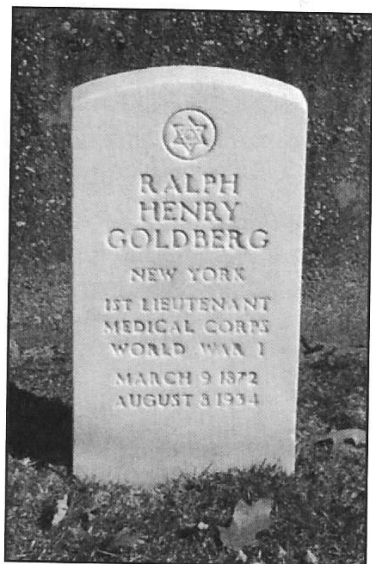


Fig. 9. Specifications for the first permanent emblem of beliefs authorized for government headstones in 1922, a Latin Cross and Star of David. NARA College Park.



Figs. 10-11. World War I headstones at Cypress Hills National Cemetery, NY, with conflict inscribed and emblems of belief, from left: encircled Star of David, and a Latin Cross in three formats—recessed rosette with raised cross, outlined cross, and outlined cross in a circle—indicating that they are not original.

Emblems of belief appear on the permanent headstones designed for the Army's domestic national cemeteries and the eight American Military Cemeteries developed in the 1920s at European battle sites. U.S. government authorities agreed in 1924 that permanent headstones of white marble should be "the same general forms as the temporary headstones" as designed by architect Paul Cret.<sup>8</sup> They feature makers in the shape of a Latin cross or Star of David. (Fig 12) The American cemeteries were transferred from the Army to the American Battle Monuments Commission in 1934.

### Diversity & Heroism. World War I

World War I attracted a more diverse group of enlistments than previous conflicts, and this is reflected in the national cemeteries; minorities included Native Americans, African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Women could join the military for the first time, many as nurses, and more than 1,500 are buried in NCA national cemeteries. (Fig. 13) So, too, are thirty-two brave men who received the Medal of Honor (MoH), the highest U.S. military decoration.

The achievements of service members of color were recognized less often than white soldiers—and often belatedly. Private David Barkley, for example,

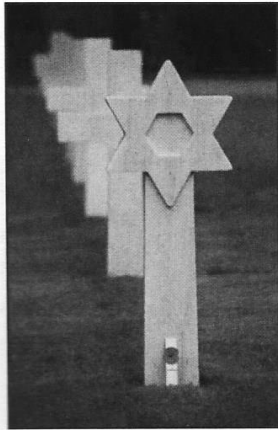


Fig. 12. American military cemetery upright marble headstones with a Star of David and Latin cross. ABMC. (Also see cover photo).



Fig. 13. Flat grave marker for World War I nurse, Wilamette National Cemetery, OR. Flat marble markers were introduced in 1935, granite flats two years later, for cemeteries that did not allow upright headstones.

volunteered to reconnoiter an enemy position but he drowned in the Meuse River. Because of inconsistent surname spellings and its Anglo character, it was decades before his Hispanic ancestry was discovered. In 1989 he was recognized as the first MoH recipient of Hispanic descent. Otis Beverly Duncan's career started with the National Guard in 1902, continued with the 1916 Mexican Border conflict, and culminated in the 370<sup>th</sup> Infantry in World War I. Lieutenant Colonel Duncan, the highest-ranking African-American AEF officer, received the French Croix de Guerre (equivalent to the MoH). First Lieutenant Aurelious P. Alberga was one of the first black army officers in World War I, and later he helped found the Northern California branch of the NAACP.

African Americans made up nearly 11 percent of the army, 404,000 officers and enlisted men, in part through segregated drafts. Racial prejudice led to the 92nd Infantry Division and four regiments of the 93rd

Infantry Division to fight with France's 4th Army.<sup>9</sup> However, honorable service could not transform the views of some Americans who feared black veterans would demand civilian equality based on their military experience.

During summer and fall 1919, twenty-five American cities experienced major anti-black race riots. The Houston Riot of 1917 foreshadowed these tragic events. When the war broke out in April 1917, the War Department ordered two military installations built at Harris County, Texas. African-American soldiers in the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry were sent to protect the construction work. A false rumor that one soldier had been jailed erupted into a riot that left sixteen white civilians and four soldiers dead. Three court martials were held between November 1917 and March 1918. Only black soldiers were charged with wrongdoing, later considered a lapse of procedure and miscarriage of justice. Of the nineteen African-American soldiers hanged for their role, all but two are interred at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, Texas.

#### Foreign Nationals

Foreign national prisoners who died on American soil are interred in national cemeteries. World War I German prisoners of war were confined in the United States to work in agriculture industries during the war. Per the Hague Convention, anyone who died during the war was buried at federal expense.<sup>10</sup> Approximately 860 German prisoners of war are buried at forty-three cemeteries in the United States, according to the German War Graves Commission. Most died of disease or accidents.

Chattanooga National Cemetery, Tennessee, contains seventy-eight graves, the largest number of POWs in one cemetery. A monument recognizing the men buried here, erected in 1935, is inscribed in German: "During the war years / Here died far from home," followed by individual names. The base is inscribed: "Germany will remember you always." The monument is surrounded with individual recessed-shield headstones, in contrast to those provided to World War I veterans. (Fig. 14) Germans who died as World War II POWs were subsequently buried in this section, too.

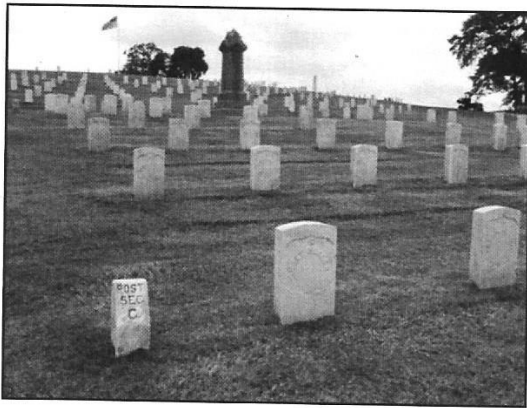


Fig. 14. Chattanooga National Cemetery, TN, contains 78 World War I German POW graves marked with a recessed-shield headstone, which is inconsistent with American decedents. Amid the Post Section C graves is a German POW Monument, erected 1935.

### Veteran Services

Veterans' benefits extended to domiciliary care. Veterans unable to care for themselves due to illness or poverty could take up residence in one of the branches of the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, established in 1867. Congress authorized to "all men who have served in the war with Germany," access to the homes in October 1917, where they would live with Civil War and Spanish American War veterans.<sup>11</sup> Each National Home maintained a cemetery where deceased residents were buried; later these were designed national cemeteries.

To assure that returning World War I service members would be served at home, in 1919 Congress chartered the American Legion as a patriotic veteran-service organization whose lobbying efforts resulted in the creation of the U.S. Veterans Bureau, forerunner of V.A.<sup>12</sup>

Frank Buckles, the last World War I veteran, died in 2011 at age 110. As of 2017, there were 1,055 surviving spouses and 1,434 dependent children of these veterans receiving benefits.<sup>13</sup> NCA has provided the General headstone and other memorial products to veterans of all subsequent conflicts buried worldwide, since responsibility for this benefit transferred from the U.S. Army to what is now the V.A. in 1973.

### Notes

1. "National Cemetery News Letter." Typed copy, p. 15.
2. Lisa Budreau, "Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919-1933." Lecture given at the U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center, July 23, 2014; accessed Dec. 7, 2017; 30,973 Americans are interred at ABMC military cemeteries and 4,456 are commemorated on Tablets of the Missing as missing in action, lost or buried at sea. Approximately half are buried at Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery. <https://www.abmc.gov/node/1273>. Accessed Nov. 28, 2017.
3. Quartermaster Corps in Europe, *History of the American Graves Registration Service*, Vol. III (1922), p. 101; part of a consolidated reprint of volumes I-III (no date).
4. Typed report, Headstone Service, Veterans Administration, National Cemetery Administration, Washington, DC (October 29, 1976) 3-4. NCA files.
5. Michael Sledge, *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury & Honor Our Military Fallen* (Columbia, New York UP, 2005) 205; the Cross of Iron medal originated with King Frederick William III in 1813, was reinstated during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and again by Kaiser Wilhelm II on 5 August 1914 for use in the First World War. <http://militaryhistorynow.com/2016/01/03/cross-of-iron-11-amazing-facts-about-germanys-best-known-military-medal/>, accessed Dec. 12, 2017.
6. Typed report, Headstone Service, Veterans Administration, National Cemetery Administration, Washington, DC (October 29, 1976) 4.
7. After WWII the number of EOBs changed. Families may pay the government for inscribing other symbols, but over time the federal government both approved many more emblems and inscribes them at no cost.
8. *Annual Report of the American Battle Monuments Commission*, Fiscal Year 1925 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1926) 57-58.
9. Though Native Americans were not U.S. citizens until 1924, more than 10,000 volunteered to fight in WWI.

10. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Treaty.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=CD0F6C83F96FB459C12563CD002D66A1>. Accessed December 13, 2017.

11. *NHDVS Proceedings of the Board of Managers*, Vol. 4, December 1916-June 1930, March 24, 1919, pp. 100-101.

12. American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic veterans organization. Focusing on service to veterans, service members and communities, the Legion evolved from a group of war-weary veterans of World War I into one of the most influential nonprofit groups in the United States. <https://www.legion.org/history> accessed Nov. 28, 2017.

13. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public Affairs, *America's Wars Fact Sheet* (May 2017). [https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs\\_americas\\_wars.pdf](https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf).

14. For the purpose of VA entitlements, the Civil War period is April 15, 1861 through August 20, 1866; Spanish-American War period is April 21, 1898 through July 15, 1903.

15. Typed report, Headstone Service, Veterans Administration, National Cemetery Administration, Washington, DC (October 29, 1976) 3. NCA files.

*Sara Amy Leach is the senior historian at the National Cemetery Administration, VA, where she has worked since 2001. For more information about veteran burial benefits visit: <https://www.cem.va.gov/>. Her email address is [sara.leach@va.gov](mailto:sara.leach@va.gov).*

### SIDEBAR

#### Pre-World War I Government-issued Headstones

The Army marked the graves of Civil War (1861-65) soldiers, sailors, and veterans buried in national cemeteries and private cemeteries alike, since the mid-1870s with an upright, marble design. The front face of the headstone was initially plain, in keeping with written specifications, but by the end of the century its inscription featured a recessed shield and inside this, raised letters with name, unit and service. "Civil War" was never historically inscribed on government-issued headstones; but after the Spanish-American War (1899-1901) ended, the graves of repatriated servicemen were marked with the same shield-headstone but the inscription included the conflict: "SP-AM," "SP AM War" or "War with Spain." The round-topped upright marble slab was inscribed with a recessed federal shield starting sometime in the 1890, and the thickness grew from 3" to 4" in 1903.

Despite revised government policy, changing practice in the field was more gradual, and it appears that into the late 1910s the graves of peacetime soldiers and men who fought in early wars—including the Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and Indian Campaigns—received the recessed shield-type headstone. It is unknown how many of these might have been produced.

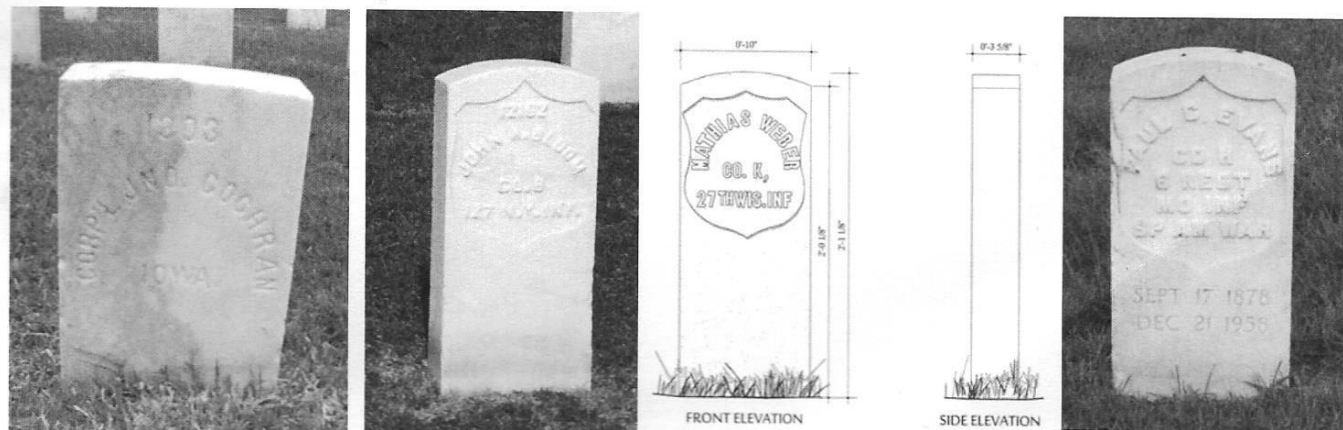


Fig. 6. Left to right: Civil War-era early pre-shield headstone; Civil War with shield; drawing of recessed-shield headstone, HALS; and recessed-shield inscribed for Spanish American War service, with birth and death dates below.