



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The True Cost of War

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Image: Alexandria National Cemetery, Andrew Russell. Photo, Library of Congress.

As the first photographer for the Union Army, Andrew Russell's duty in Alexandria primarily focused on documenting the extensive military assets found throughout the occupied city.

But the former landscape artist was not content with providing a simple inventory or routine status update on local resources. Far exceeding his superiors' objectives, his photographs provided a rare glimpse into the life-and-death nature of community during the Civil War. This Russell view of the Alexandria National Cemetery late



in the war documents the massive amount of military deaths that occurred within the city during a two-year period. The single mournful figure captured in the image, just to the right of the massive cross that once stood in the landscaped oval, appears stunned by the magnitude of the war's toll.

Action to create the nation's first national cemetery officially began on October 15, 1862, when the City of Alexandria formally leased land at the west end of Wilkes Street to the federal government. Before the war, the four-acre parcel was a privately owned plot known as Spring Garden Farm.

But with the rapid expansion of other community cemeteries and its location on what then was the outskirts of the city, the gently rolling site was a natural choice for fallen soldiers. At first, it housed soldiers who died in training or from illness at one of several hospitals developed in Alexandria at the start of the war. But—as recorded in this photograph—with the fighting in Northern Virginia intensifying by 1864 the hastily prepared cemetery grounds rapidly filled.

Adding to the crunch, slain black soldiers—members of the U.S. Colored Troops—were moved from Freedmen's Cemetery to the site after what may have been the nation's first civil rights appeal.

More land was acquired, but soon after burials also began on the grounds of Arlington House, home of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, which later became Arlington National Cemetery.

Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Alexandria National Cemetery is notable for its beautiful grounds, architecture and ornamental gate. In July 1922, a large, granite boulder



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

memorial was erected by the federal government to honor the burial site of the "Pursuers of President Lincoln's Assassin." The four men were Quartermaster Corps employees who drowned in the Potomac River on April 24, 1865, while pursuing John Wilkes Booth.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.