

INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST NATIONAL BURIAL GROUND

Congressional Cemetery, founded in 1807 and located on thirty acres of land in southeast Washington, D.C., is singular in its status as a U.S. national cemetery. It is, to begin, the first national burial ground. As a national cemetery, it is in a category of its own. It is not a national military cemetery, like Arlington across the Potomac River, but a one-of-a-kind national public cemetery, accessible to the broad sweep of the American community, including members of Congress, veterans of all U.S. wars, and everyone else. The burial ground has been owned since 1812 by Christ Church on Capitol Hill, which was established in 1794 as the first Episcopalian parish in the original city of Washington, D.C. The church operated the cemetery for use by the broader community, including the federal government, until 1976, when the Association for the Preservation of Historic Congressional Cemetery (APHCC), a volunteer organization, assumed management of the site.

Affirmations of the Legacy

During the antebellum period, the burial ground was identified as the cemetery of Congress and Congressional Cemetery. In *A New Guide to Washington* (1842), for example, George Watterston, the first Librarian of Congress, provided a substantial section entitled, "Congressional Burial Ground." This publication, along with many others, was instrumental in formulating the name by which the cemetery is recognized to this day.¹

The cemetery gained broader recognition as the first national burial ground in the decades following the Civil War. Two Quartermaster Generals of the United States Army—Montgomery C. Meigs (1816-1892) and Henry Gibbins (1877-1941)—acknowledged and enhanced this larger understanding of the site. In his 1881 annual report to the Secretary of War, Meigs, who was Quartermaster General during 1861-1882, observed that “the existing Congressional Cemetery is rapidly filling up” and recommended that Arlington be established as “the official national cemetery of the government,” to be used as had Congressional “for the interment of soldiers” and “for the burial of officers of the United States, legislative, judicial, civil, and military, who may die at the seat of government or whose friends may desire their interment in a public national cemetery.”² Henry Gibbins, Quartermaster General during 1936-1940, provided a more expansive assessment of the burial ground at the beginning of his 1939 “Memorandum on Congressional Cemetery” to Congress:

In reality, the Congressional Cemetery was the first National Cemetery created by the Government. It was fostered and developed by the Congress of the United States, most of the major construction and improvements being made through appropriations from Congress. Many of the patriots who guided the destiny of the Nation or defended it on land and sea are interred there, and cenotaphs and monuments have been erected to the memory of many illustrious names. More early historic interest is contained within its confines than in any other cemetery in the nation.³

The statements by Meigs and Gibbins are of particular import because they were responsible as Quartermaster Generals for both Arlington and the other national military cemeteries.

Congressional leaders emerged during the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries as forceful advocates of federal support for the burial ground.⁴ Among these legislators, Representative George Mahon (1900-1985) of Texas and Senator Byron Dorgan (1942-) of North Dakota offered particularly memorable observations. In testimony delivered in the House of Representa-

tives on July 2, 1960, Mahon, a legislator in twenty-two consecutive congresses (1935-1979), identified Congressional as likely the only national cemetery in the United States:

It is not surprising that this cemetery has been known almost from its establishment as Congressional Cemetery and is usually so designated in acts of Congress and by the public generally. It is often referred to as our first national cemetery and is perhaps our one true national cemetery due to the fact that Arlington and all other so-called national cemeteries are dedicated primarily for interment of the remains of those who have served in our Armed Forces, whereas Congressional Cemetery is primarily civilian.⁵

Senator Dorgan urged Congress to provide additional financial support for the burial ground in comments given in the Senate on June 27, 2003. In so doing, he presented his understanding of the site as a place of national memory:

I think all recognize that this is something to which we should pay some attention. I know there are many other very big issues we deal with here in the Senate. But this is something that I think is important to the memory of who we are, who served our country, how we treat them in death, and how we respect their memories. We can and should do better to bring a sense of repair and majesty to Congressional Cemetery.⁶

These statements and many others by congressional leaders focus on the status of the cemetery as the first national burial ground and its chronic state of decline and disrepair. These conflicting realities surface large, important questions not only about Congressional as an historic site but also about public memory and the sites that do and do not become fixtures within that larger sense of national history.

Questions Relevant to Congressional Cemetery

Despite its historic significance, Congressional Cemetery does not have a clear and secure place in the broader public understanding of national historic sites. It is not part of the federal system of national cemeteries, as is Arlington, nor is it maintained by the National Park Service, as are the burial grounds at Gettysburg, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. It is not regularly featured in televised broadcasts of Memorial Day ceremonies in the national capital, nor is it generally considered a site that must be visited on initial tours of federal Washington, D.C. Why is this the case? What transpired over the preceding two centuries that excluded this “first national cemetery” from the galaxy of federal sites that are familiar to the general public and that are generally considered, in the words of Senator Dorgan, “important to the memory of who we are” as a nation?

In addressing these questions, the authors focused on the three primary stages in the history of Congressional Cemetery: (1) the years 1812 to the Civil War, when the burial ground functioned as the first national cemetery and was used by the federal establishment, particularly the U.S. Congress, and by the broader community; (2) the complicated, increasingly difficult period extending from the end of the Civil War into the 1970s, when the infrastructure of the cemetery continued to deteriorate as the burial ground lost status as a place of national significance; and (3) the current period, beginning in 1976, when the APHCC leased the burial ground from Christ Church and embarked upon ongoing efforts to restore, maintain, and preserve it as an historic site.

Each of the three stages in the long history of Congressional Cemetery raises fascinating questions relevant to its status as an historic site. During the initial stage, the hybrid identity of the cemetery posed numerous questions. Owned and operated by Christ Church on Capitol Hill, Congressional Cemetery served the federal government, as well as the parish and the broader community of Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, the federal government provided critical funding for key infrastructure developments at the burial ground. Viewed from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, this informal partnership between the church and the federal government might appear unusual, irregular, perhaps even a breach in the historic separation of church and state.

The establishment of the national military cemeteries during the Civil War raised profound questions about the very identity of Congressional Cemetery during the extended second stage of its long life. Arlington National Cemetery in particular challenged and ultimately overwhelmed the status of Congressional as the first national burial ground. To both legislators and the general public, national cemetery became synonymous with national military cemetery. This general shift in definition surfaced queries about the legacy of Congressional as not only a national public burial ground but as likely the only such cemetery in the United States. The singularity of Congressional constituted its problem in that it was not reducible to any one category of generally accepted U.S. historic sites. Thus, it was difficult to sort out the possible federal responsibilities for Congressional Cemetery. During its extended period of decline, the unanswered questions about the burial ground lingered as an important part of its historic legacy.

The third and ongoing period in the saga of Congressional Cemetery raises another set of intriguing questions. They focus, for example, on the respective responsibilities of the federal government and the APHCC in preserving the first national burial ground. How much can be expected over the long term of a volunteer organization in preserving the first national cemetery? What responsibility does the U.S. government have in helping to assure the continuation of the one burial ground in the United States directly linked by its very name with the U.S. Congress? The most important question of all is as follows: what gains will be realized by the preservation of Congressional Cemetery for future generations of Americans?

An historic burial ground, such as Congressional Cemetery, is a resonant text for various readings of the surrounding culture. Some studies present cultural analyses of gravestones, as does *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture* (1992), edited by Richard E. Meyer. Others concentrate on the larger meanings associated with particular cemetery grounds. Blanche Linden offers one such reading in her *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery* (rev. ed., 2007). While this history of Congressional Cemetery provides commentary on the grounds and monuments,⁷ it concentrates on the dominant narrative associated

with the site: its legacy as the first national burial ground. Rich, powerful narratives are invariably associated with historic burial grounds. This is particularly so with Congressional Cemetery, situated as it is both geographically and figuratively in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol.