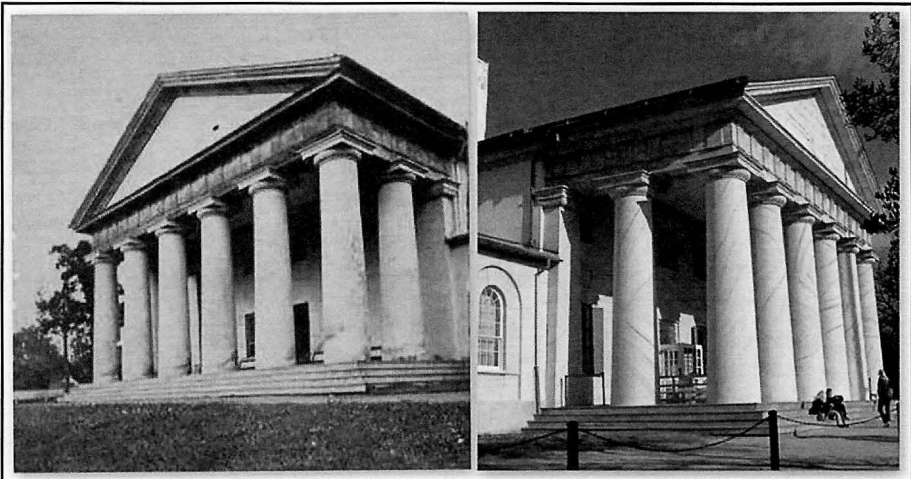


# Arlington National Cemetery: Then and Now

Period photographs and records of the first Memorial Day observances recall a forgotten pro-cessional pathway through the “Field of the Dead,” lined with poetic sign boards

*BY DEAN DEROSA*

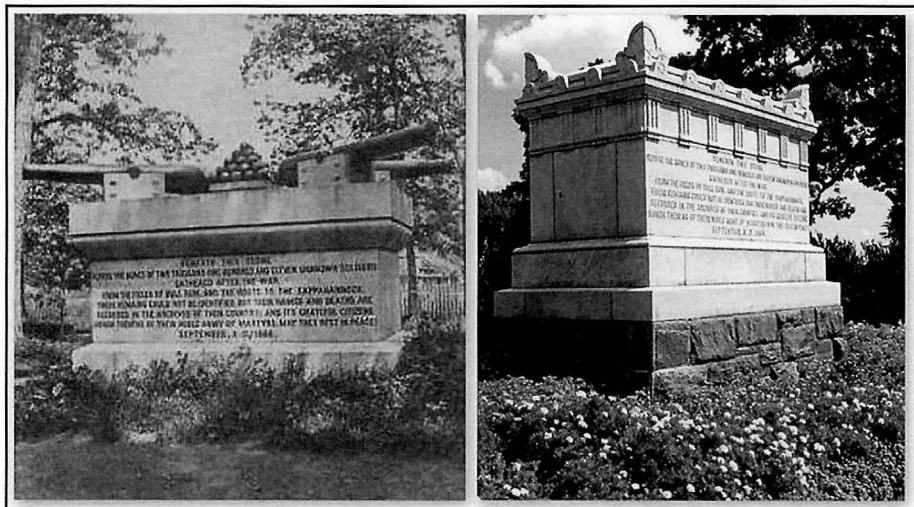
Arlington National Cemetery is sacred and hallowed ground, visited by millions of US and foreign citizens each year. Visitors come to pay their respects to the more than 400,000 US service men and women, and their spouses, who fought and in many cases gave their lives to pre-serve US liberty and freedom during the last 150 years. The cemetery dates to June 1864, when, in the midst of the Civil War, Quartermaster General of the Union Army, Montgomery C. Meigs, proposed establishing a US soldiers’ cemetery on the grounds of Arlington Plantation, the family seat of George Washington Parke Custis, the grandson of Martha Washington and the father-in-law of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.



Left: Period photograph by G.D. Wakely  
Right: Contemporary photograph by Dean DeRosa

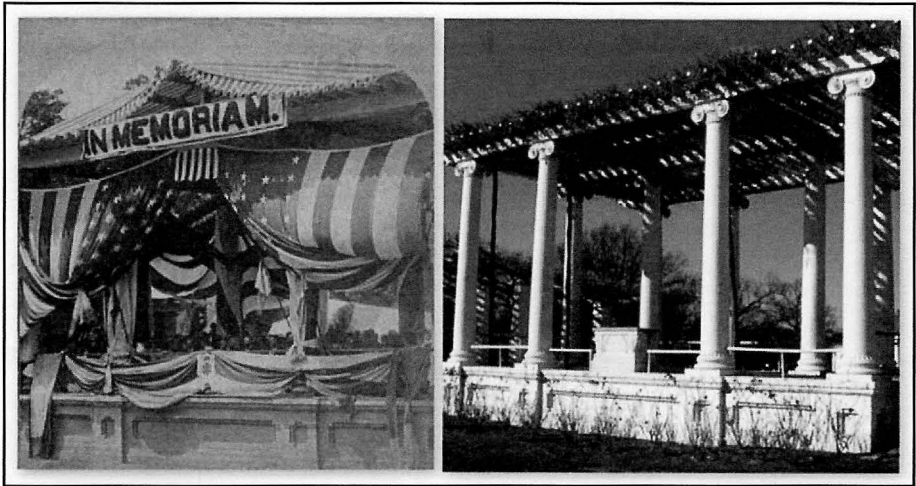
**Fig. 1. Arlington House, c.1866 and Today.**

By some accounts, General Meigs pitched his proposal for the cemetery directly to President Abraham Lincoln. However, official US records indicate that the proposal was submitted to and approved (on the same day!) by Ewin M. Stanton, the Secretary of War. Upon receiving the approval, General Meigs quickly carried out his plan for the cemetery to occupy a parcel of two hundred acres of the former plantation. Out of animosity towards the Lees and to discourage the family from ever returning, he directed that bodies of Union officers be placed around Mrs. Lee's treasured flower garden located just south of the plantation mansion, Arlington House (Fig. 1), where Mrs. Lee and her mother before her cultivated a variety of flowers -- and especially a number of species of roses famously admired by guests before the outbreak of the war. Further, in 1866, General Meigs designed and oversaw the construction of the Tomb of the Civil War Unknown Dead (Fig. 2), adjacent to the flower garden. More than a thousand Union casualties soon populated a nearby field. And, like other final resting places of soldiers killed during the Civil War around the country, Arlington Cemetery became an important focal point of mourning families whose husbands, fathers and sons perished during the long years of bitter national strife. Indeed, soon after the war, communities across the war-torn South and in the North began to pay homage to their fallen heroes by visiting and decorating graves with flowers gathered in the spring when blossoms are



Left: Period photograph by G.D. Wakely  
 Right: Contemporary photograph by Dean DeRosa

**Fig. 2. Tomb of the Civil War Unknown Dead, c.1866 and Today.**



Left: Period photograph by J.F. Jarvis

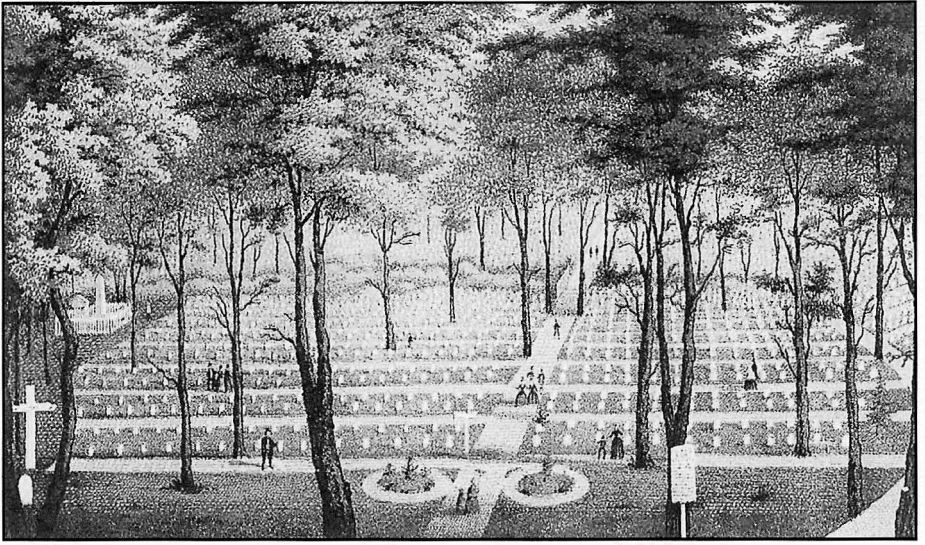
Right: Contemporary photograph by Dean DeRosa

**Fig. 3. Dignitaries Platform, Tanner Amphitheatre, c.1869 and Today.**

most plentiful, making Memorial Days -- or Decoration Days – very solemn but widely observed occasions.

The first organized Memorial Day ceremony at Arlington Cemetery was held on the portico of Arlington House in May 1868. The first Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), John A. Logan, presided over the ceremony, and future US President, James Garfield, was the principal speaker, both Union Army veterans. With its commanding view of the nation's capital just across the Potomac River, the former home of Confederate General Robert E. Lee was no doubt thought an appropriate venue for the first ceremony, attended principally by veterans and bereaved family members of the victorious Union Army.

The mansion would provide an important backdrop for Memorial Day observances at Arlington Cemetery for many years to come. However, in 1869 – a year marked by Memorial Day observances around the nation orchestrated by the GAR for May 29 and 30, 1869 – the main observances were moved from Arlington House, to a dignitaries' platform constructed at the site of the "Old Memorial Amphitheater," named the Tanner Amphitheater in recent years in honor of James Tanner, a disabled Union Army veteran and government stenographer who was present at the death bed of President Lincoln and later worked tirelessly as an advocate for veterans and North-South reconciliation. Located immediately southwest of the Tomb of the Civil War Un-known Dead,



Period engraving by Sachse & Co., Baltimore, 1870

**Fig. 4. View of National Cemetery at Arlington.**

the dignitaries' platform and the later constructed, pergola-style, memorial amphitheater were designed again by the hand of General Meigs.

Accompanied by solemn music and prayers, the Memorial Day ceremonies in 1869 featured most importantly the attendance of the newly elected US President, Ulysses S. Grant. President Grant's attendance was a strong drawing card: reportedly, 25 to 30 thousand Civil War veterans, widows and orphans, and their families attended the event. Included in the crowd were not only news reporters but also a number of photographers – one of whom, J.F. Jarvis, captured the accompanying photograph (Fig. 3) of the President and several top US Government officials and military notables seated on the dignitaries' platform.

The 1869 Memorial Day observances at Arlington Cemetery were widely noted and reported, but some interesting period engravings and photographs related to the observances also left an important mark. Today, these images enrich our appreciation of the depth of feeling of the organizers and attendees for the Civil War fallen honored by the first Memorial Day observances at the cemetery. An engraving entitled "View of National Cemetery at Arlington," published in 1870 by Sachse and Co (Fig. 4), is particularly interesting. It shows the central pathway through what the official GAR record of the 1869 Memorial Day observances called the "Field of the Dead."

This pathway was used by the procession of mourners who marched to the field and decorated graves after the main ceremonies were concluded at

the nearby dignitaries' platform and Tomb of the Civil War Unknown Dead.

Today, the "Field of the Dead" is Section 13 of Arlington National Cemetery. It is the final resting place of a thousand or more Union soldiers who gave their lives during the overland campaigns of 1864-65 led by General Grant, which culminated in the surrender of General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Courthouse in April 1865. That Section 13 is the former "Field of the Dead" is apparent from the inclusion in the period engraving of the fenced gravesite of George Washington Parke Custis and his wife. Today, the Custis graves are still enclosed by a fence in Section 13, but surrounded by fewer trees than in the engraving.

Another landmark in the period engraving is an interesting and unique memorial in the form of a cross. Presumably wooden, the memorial is no longer standing. However, it is captured in the accompanying 1869 photograph by John P. Soule (Fig. 5). The GAR record of the 1869 Memorial Day observances at Arlington Cemetery describes the memorial as about eight feet in height, with the inscription: "In memory of the heroes of Antietam, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Shiloh, Fair Oaks, Corinth, Bull Run, Stone River, Vicksburg, Cedar Creek, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Cold Harbor, Petersburg." On either arm of the cross were designs of arms stacked and crossed sabers, and at the center of the cross was depicted a cannon. On the footboard was inscribed "Fort Fisher—Five Forks," two prominent last battles of the Civil War. Additionally, the memorial was surmounted by a crown of evergreens, and the vacant spaces were covered by Union Army badges formed by flowers and evergreens.

Finally, the period engraving points to the actual location of the entrance to the main pathway through the "Field of the Dead," namely, where two circular paths and a signboard are seen in the engraving. This processional entrance to Section 13 is captured in a period photograph of the cemetery by C.M. Chase (Fig. 6). The photograph not only shows the circular paths and signboard, but additionally reveals the sign board was wreathed and bore a poetic inscription:



Period photograph by John P. Soule

Fig. 5. Memorial in Honor of Heroes, c.1869.



Left: Period photograph by C.M. Chase

Right: Contemporary photograph by Dean DeRosa

**Fig. 6. Entrance to the "Field of the Dead," c.1869 and Today. Reference grave: John Igo, d. July 1864, 13-5261.**

The Hopes, the fears, the blood, the tears,  
 That marked the bitter strife,  
 And now all crowned by victory  
 That saved the nation's life.

This stanza is from a popular post-Civil War anthem, *The Heroes and Martyrs* by Henry O'Reilly. The resolution of the photograph by C.M. Chase is sufficient to identify the inscription of one of the headstones near the wreathed signboard, making it possible to locate the historic entrance to Section 13 today as seen in the modern companion photograph.

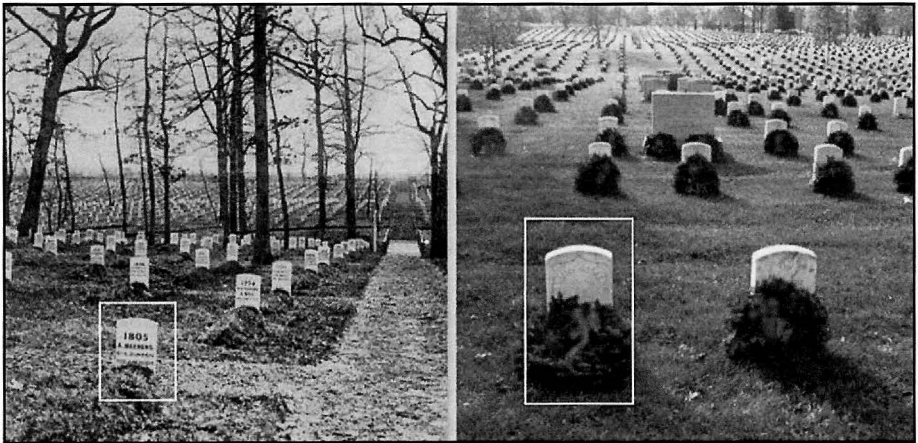
The GAR record of the 1869 Memorial Day observances at Arlington Cemetery and period photographs of the cemetery document that, in fact, a series of six wreathed, poetic sign-boards lined the central pathway through the "Field of the Dead." The five additional signboards were inscribed with the following verses drawn from not only the anthem by Henry O'Reilly, but also a popular post-Mexican War poem whose popularity soared higher after Civil War, *The Biv-ouac of the Dead*, by Theodore O'Hara:

Rest on, embalmed and sainted dead,  
 Dear as the blood ye gave,  
 No impious footsteps here shall tread  
 The herbage of your grave.

Now, 'neath their parent turf they rest,  
 Far from the gory field,  
 Borne to a Spartan mother's breast  
 On many a bloody shield.  
 A thousand battle-fields have drunk  
 The blood of warriors brave,  
 And countless homes are dark and drear  
 Through the land they died to save.  
 The neighing troop, the flashing blade,  
 The bugle's stirring blasts,  
 The charge, the dreadful cannonade,  
 The din and shout are past.  
 These faithful herald tablets,  
 With mournful pride shall tell,  
 (When many a vanished age hath flown,)  
 The story how ye fell.

The GAR record and period photographs also document that the expanse of graves in Section 13 was divided by a small ravine and creek, spanned by a small foot bridge along the pathway. Again, the inscriptions of some headstones can be deciphered from period photographs, enabling the entire path followed by the procession of mourners and attendees of the first Memorial Day ceremonies to be traced.

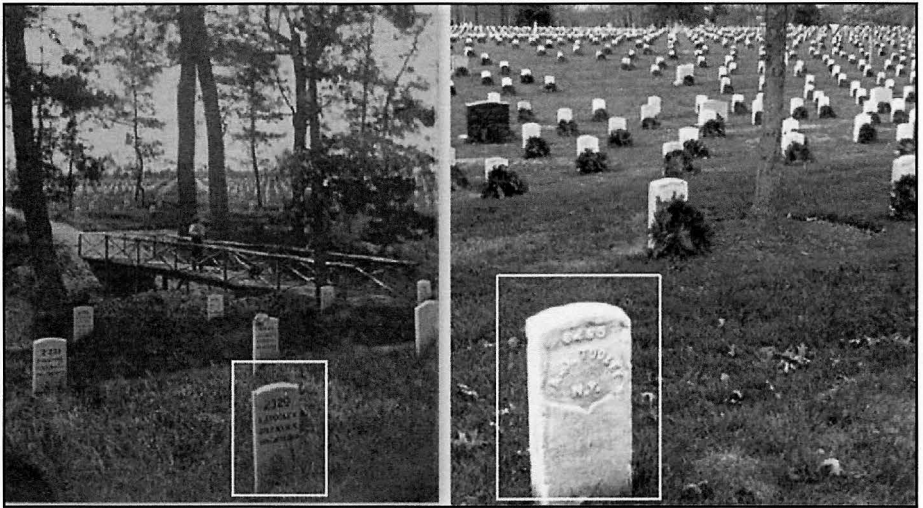
Figs. 7 through 9 present early images of the central pathway through



Left: Period photograph by Bell Brothers

Right: Contemporary photograph by Dean DeRosaX

**Fig. 7. Path through the "Field of the Dead," c.1869 and Today. Reference grave: Adrian Beerens, d. June 1864, 13-5784).**



Left: Period photograph by G.O. Brown

Right: Contemporary photograph by Dean DeRosa

**Fig. 8. Path through the "Field of the Dead," c.1880 and Today. Reference grave: A.J. Tooley, d. June 1864, 13-6465.**

the "Field of the Dead," side-by-side with images of the proximate same locations today based on the inscriptions of selected grave markers in the period photographs. To the discerning eye, two of the period photographs show the erect poetic signboards along the central pathway, and, more clearly, the modern photographs show the historic pathway is now populated by relatively new graves, dating to the 1970s and 1980s. The modern photographs also reveal that the ravine and creek originally traversing the field of graves after the Civil War have been replaced by a culvert system to control the natural flow of water through Section 13, and that some smoothing of the landscape of the cemetery has taken place during the intervening years. Finally, very few original trees re-main standing along the central pathway followed by the attendees of the first Memorial Day observances at Arlington Cemetery and by the mourners who each spring continued to honor the Civil War fallen for a number of decades afterwards.

"Time marches on!" Today, the historic entrance to Section 13 and its formerly well-trodden central pathway are largely by-passed and simply go unrecognized by visitors to Arlington National Cemetery, including many Civil War buffs. The Tomb of the Civil War Unknown Dead and the Tanner Amphitheatre have been replaced as the focal point of present-day Memorial Day observances, namely, by the post-World War I Tomb of the Unknown





Left: Period photograph by Kilburn Brothers

Right: Contemporary photograph by Dean DeRosa

**Fig. 9.** Path through the "Field of the Dead," c.1869 and Today. Reference grave: **Thomas Webb,** d. June 1864, 13-5511).

Soldier and the modern Arlington Memorial Amphitheater, both located within the cemetery at some distance from historic area surrounding Arlington House.

These changes in the focus and interest of visitors to Arlington National Cemetery and the now lost and forgotten processional pathway through Section 13 are not meant to be be-moaned or terribly lamented here. Yet, an historical marker might fittingly be erected at the former entrance to Section 13, to draw greater attention to the location and its significance, in conjunction with the Tomb of the Civil War Unknown Dead and the Tanner Amphitheater, for the first Memorial Day observances held at Arlington Cemetery. Consideration might also be given to placing a series of permanent, either erect or ground-level, poetic sign boards along the former central pathway through Section 13, inscribed with the same verses recorded by the period accounts and photographs of the first Memorial Day observances at Arlington Cemetery. In these ways, the early history of Arlington National Cemetery and especially the memory of those who died on the nation's battlefields one hundred and fifty-three years ago to preserve the Union might be better preserved.

### *About the Author*

Dean DeRosa is a National Park Service volunteer at Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, and a history interpreter at George Washington's Mount Vernon. This article is based on a guest post by the author on the blog

site of Preservation Arlington ([www.PreservationArlington.org](http://www.PreservationArlington.org)) and an invited presentation to the Arlington Historical Society ([www.ArlingtonHistoricalSociety.org](http://www.ArlingtonHistoricalSociety.org)). These presentations involved discussion of several period and modern stereoviews of Arlington National Cemetery capturing the venue and focal points of the first Memorial Day ceremonies at the cemetery. The author's collection of period stereoviews of Arlington National Cemetery can be viewed at [www.VirginiaLens.com](http://www.VirginiaLens.com). Helpful comments on early drafts of this article received from Nancy Summers and Timothy Frank are gratefully acknowledged.

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### *Sources*

The period engraving and photographs were gathered from the online digital collections of the US Library of Congress ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)) and the New York Public Library ([www.nypl.org](http://www.nypl.org)). The accompanying modern photographs are by the author.

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