

This Day in History... June 15, 1864

Arlington National Cemetery

On June 15, 1864, Arlington National Cemetery was officially established. Arlington was created to provide a burial site for the increasing number of fallen soldiers during the Civil War.

In the early 1800s, John Parke Custis's son, George Washington Parke Custis (stepson of President Washington) arrived at Arlington with about 60 enslaved people. They began constructing a Greek revival mansion on the property as a memorial to the first president. George's only surviving child, Mary, met and married Robert E. Lee at Arlington. The couple spent the next 30 years traveling between US Army outposts and the mansion, where six of the seven Lee children were born.

Robert E. Lee was offered the command of the Union's Army of the Potomac at the outbreak of the Civil War. He refused, citing his loyalty to his home state of Virginia and its neutrality in the war. When Virginia joined the Confederacy, Lee took command of the Confederate forces.

Lee wrote his letter of resignation in the early morning hours of April 20, 1861, in his bedroom on the second floor of Arlington House and left his home two days later. With Virginia's secession and Lee's resignation, Arlington suddenly became a threat to the capital because of its strategic location overlooking the National Mall.



Civil War-era George Washington stamp

From his field station, Lee convinced Mary to leave the property. Mary sent many of the family's valuables to Richmond or to the family's Ravensworth plantation and fled in advance of the Union invasion. On May 24, 1861, Brigadier General Irvin McDowell occupied Arlington and set up headquarters for the Army of the Potomac. To the Union troops, Arlington House was the home of the rebel commander, and their contempt could be seen in the broken windows and graves that were dug within the yards of the mansion.

On June 7, 1862, the US Congress passed the Act for the Collection of Taxes in the Insurrectionary Districts. The act imposed a property tax on land in rebel states, including Arlington. Knowing few Confederate sympathizers would come to pay the tax, Congress made payment in person mandatory. This requirement allowed the Federal government to seize and auction property in Rebel states to raise money for the war effort.

A tax of \$92.07 was levied against Arlington House. Suffering severe rheumatoid arthritis and married to the Confederacy's most prominent officer, Mary Lee sent the payment with her cousin. The tax collectors refused the payment and seized the entire estate, which was purchased at auction by the US government.



Secretary of War Edwin Stanton approved the cemetery's creation.

Since the beginning of the war, soldiers who died in battle near Washington, DC, were buried in the US Soldiers' Cemetery or the Alexandria Cemetery. These cemeteries were filling up rapidly, so in 1862, Congress passed legislation permitting the government to purchase land for national cemeteries. The Arlington property was among those examined and concluded to be the most suitable for its size, location, and aesthetics.

The first military burial at Arlington occurred on May 13, 1864. However, it wasn't until June 15 of that year that 200 acres of the property were officially set aside as a National Cemetery. A portion of the property was also made into a settlement for freed slaves that became known as "Freedman's Village."

A decade later, the Lee family sued the United States for ownership of the property. In 1882, the Supreme Court ruled five to four in the Lee family's favor, deciding that Arlington had been confiscated improperly. The property was returned to the Lee family, who then sold it back to the government for \$150,000.

While the cemetery originally occupied about 200 acres, it was later expanded to 624 acres and today is the final resting place for about 400,000 military servicemen and women. Among the additions to the property are the Arlington Memorial Amphitheater and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The amphitheater often hosts Veterans and Memorial Day services.



From the 1922-25 Flat Plate Printing.



Stamp honors George Washington & Robert E. Lee and their roles in shaping Liberty Hall, which was later renamed in both of their honors.



From the 1931 Rotary Press Printing.

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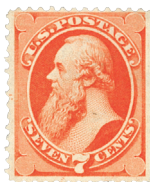


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