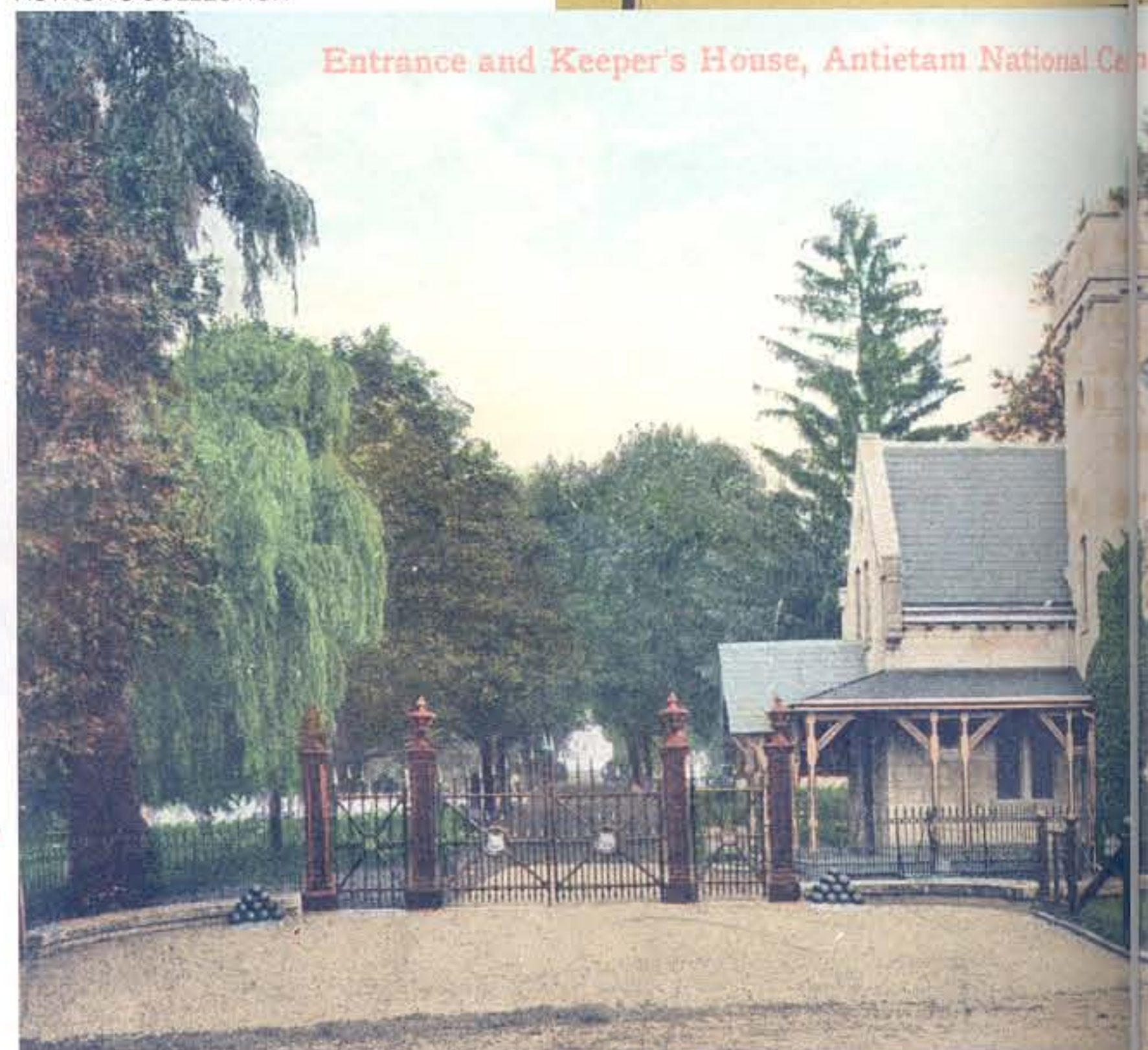


# Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation: The Creation of Antietam National Cemetery

**Susan Trail**

**T**he morning of September 17, 1867, dawned brightly, portending fair weather for the dedication of the recently completed national cemetery in Sharpsburg, Maryland. By noon, however, clouds had rolled in and heavy rain began falling on the large crowd assembled for the day's commemorative events. Although the sun had returned by the time the opening ceremonies had begun, the mood for the day had been set. Partisan politics ruled the day, as the dedication of

AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



Early twentieth-century postcard view of the entrance to Antietam National Cemetery.

Antietam National Cemetery became caught up in post-Civil War political maneuvering over the meaning of that conflict.<sup>1</sup> Such divisive politics reflected the burial ground's location in a divided border state, and were part of the cemetery's story from the very beginning. This divisiveness stands in direct contrast to the unifying and uplifting dedication of Gettysburg National Cemetery three years earlier.



# ANTIETAM Cemetery

16, MARYLAND.

ed by  
S. M. D.

Genl Supt  
Sharpsh.

1866.



SHARPSBURG AND BOONSBORO TURNPIKE.

## REFERENCES.

- |     |    |                        |
|-----|----|------------------------|
| No. | 1  | Ohio.                  |
|     | 2  | Unknown U.S. Soldiers. |
|     | 3  | " " Soldiers.          |
|     | 4  | " " U.S. Soldiers.     |
|     | 5  | Minnesota.             |
|     | 6  | Iowa.                  |
|     | 7  | Illinois.              |
|     | 8  | Delaware.              |
|     | 9  | Maine.                 |
|     | 10 | Wisconsin.             |
|     | 11 | New Jersey.            |
|     | 12 | New Hampshire.         |
|     | 13 | Rhode Island.          |
|     | 14 | West Virginia.         |
|     | 15 | Unknown U.S. Soldiers. |
|     | 16 | Connecticut.           |
|     | 17 | Massachusetts.         |
|     | 18 | Michigan.              |
|     | 19 | Maryland.              |
|     | 20 | West Virginia.         |
|     | 21 | Vermont.               |
|     | 22 | Indiana.               |
|     | 23 | U.S. Officers.         |
|     | 24 | " Regulars.            |
|     | 25 | New York.              |
|     | 26 | Pennsylvania.          |
|     | 27 | Monument.              |
|     | 28 | Genl Lee's Rock.       |
|     | 29 | Porter's Lodge.        |

Surveyed and Drawn by  
Chas. P. Kahler, C.E.  
Baltimore.

1867.

Scale: 50 ft. to 1 inch.

Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1867 by the Board of Trustees of the Antietam National Cemetery in the Clerk's Office of the U.S. District Court for Maryland.

## Maryland Legislature Creates Cemetery

The Battle of Antietam, fought on the outskirts of the village of Sharpsburg in western Maryland on September 17, 1862, was the single bloodiest day of the Civil War and resulted in more than 23,000 casualties. Many of the soldiers killed during the engagement were interred in hastily dug graves on the battlefield; those who

died later from their wounds lay in scattered graveyards across the countryside.

The war was approaching the end of its third year when members of Maryland's General Assembly initiated discussions about establishing a national cemetery at Antietam battlefield, almost certainly in response to the recent dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg. In fact, the act passed by the Maryland legislature in March

▲ Plan of Antietam National Cemetery. Note "Lee's Rock" in the lower right quadrant of the map, above and to the right of the cemetery lodge.



1865 copied almost word for word the legislation passed in Pennsylvania one year earlier incorporating Gettysburg National Cemetery. Maryland added one additional clause, however, that never would have been considered by its staunchly Unionist neighbor—burial of Confederate soldiers in the cemetery, albeit in a separate section from the Federal dead. This provision, however, apparently received no notice or comment at the time the law was passed.<sup>2</sup>

The legislation named four trustees for Maryland: Democrats Thomas A. Boullt and Edward

for the new burial ground, determining as a result of this visit to enclose the cemetery in Sharpsburg with a similar stone wall. The most important decision made around this time by the four men, however, was not to include Confederate burials in the initial cemetery plans. For the time being they kept this resolution very quiet, not recording it in their minutes or published proceedings.<sup>4</sup>

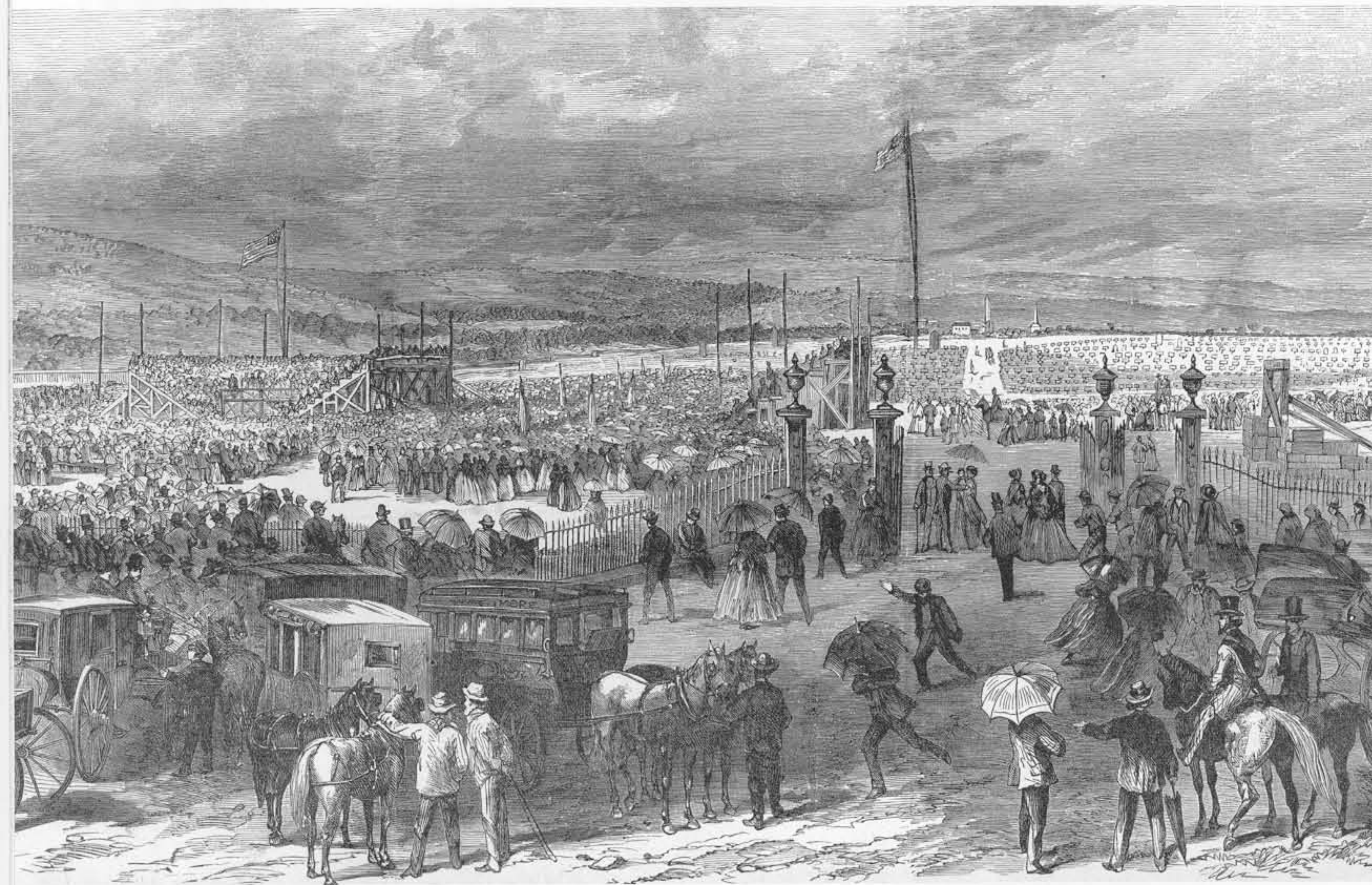
Over the next year the Marylanders worked diligently to construct the cemetery enclosure and grounds and to recruit trustees from the

other Union states. In the summer of 1866 the Association contracted with William Saunders, a well known landscape gardener who had designed the national cemetery at Gettysburg, to plan the layout of the burial ground at Sharpsburg. When Saunders defaulted on his contract, the trustees held a competition and selected a plan submitted by Charles G. Biggs, the 15-year-old son of Dr. Biggs. His design, a semi-ellipse around a central statue, closely resembled the one for Gettysburg and no doubt was

inspired by it. Many of the new trustees would have been very familiar with the Gettysburg plan, as five of them also served on that cemetery's commission.<sup>5</sup>

Following selection of the plan, a disagreement arose among the board members over an unassuming stone situated on the cemetery grounds known as "Lee's Rock." According to local lore, Gen. Robert E. Lee had stood on this rock during the Battle of Antietam to watch the progress of the battle. The Maryland trustees evidently had determined to retain it during the early grading of the grounds because of its historical curiosity. Many of the new board members

FROM FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED FAMOUS LEADERS & BATTLE SCENES OF THE CIVIL WAR [NEW YORK, 1896], AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.



Sketch of the dedication of Antietam National Cemetery on September 17, 1867. The speaker's stand is located on the far left, in the general vicinity of the present-day rostrum. The graves can be seen on the far right middle ground.

Shriver and Republicans Augustin A. Biggs and Charles C. Fulton. Boullt was a prominent and politically active Hagerstown businessman. Edward Shriver had led the Frederick County militia early in the war. Dr. Biggs was a well known Sharpsburg physician, and Fulton served as editor of the state's leading Republican newspaper, the *Baltimore American*. All four men were steadfast Unionists.<sup>3</sup>

The trustees held their first meeting toward the end of May 1865, electing Dr. Biggs president and Boullt secretary/treasurer of the Antietam National Cemetery Association. Two months later, they traveled to Gettysburg to gather ideas



from other northern states found the presence of this Confederate symbol offensive, however, and sought to remove it. When the board voted to keep the controversial stone, Augustin Biggs incorporated it into a revised cemetery plan that also included elaborate carriageways and walkways around the perimeter and through the center of the national cemetery.<sup>6</sup>

Removal of the dead to the cemetery began in early fall 1866. At the urging of the Quartermaster General, the Board of Trustees expanded the scope of the project to include all Union dead buried in western Maryland, not just those who had died as a result of the 1862 Maryland Campaign. This work was completed in early September 1867, and resulted in the interment of 4,667 remains in the cemetery. The rows of completed burials did not present a uniform appearance, however, as the graves were marked with temporary stones or headboards and, in some instances, decorated with flowers or shrubbery planted by relatives. Such lack of uniformity contrasted with Gettysburg, where standard stone headstone curbing was in place by mid-1865.<sup>7</sup>

### **Dedication of Antietam National Cemetery**

As the cemetery moved toward completion, the trustees prepared for its dedication on September 17, 1867, the fifth anniversary of the Battle of Antietam. They selected Maryland Governor Thomas Swann to preside over the event. Swann had entered this office in January 1866 as a Conservative Unionist, and, in an attempt to win over Democrats, favored the return of voting privileges to former Confederate soldiers and sympathizers, earning the enmity of the state's Unconditional Unionists and Republicans. Among the other dignitaries present at the dedication were President Andrew Johnson, former wartime governor of Maryland and featured orator Augustus W. Bradford, and a number of northern governors.<sup>8</sup>

Swann's opening speech called for a "speedy restoration of harmony and brotherly love throughout this broad land." Former governor Bradford, in his oration, also emphasized the hope of reconciliation. In addition, he implied that the Radical Republicans (who controlled

Congress at that time) were acting vindictively toward the South and concluded with a plea for moderation. Swann's and Bradford's speeches did not sit well with the audience, composed of large numbers of Union veterans, many from neighboring Pennsylvania, and local inhabitants from this strongly unionist section of Maryland. The final straw came when President Johnson, introduced "amidst very faint applause from a few Maryland and Virginia rebels," gave a short speech stressing that the living should follow the example of the dead, who reposed in peace in their tombs, "and live together in friendship and peace." According to the Board of Trustee's official history of the national cemetery, Johnson's speech was followed by a benediction and leave-taking of the dignitaries. In reality, the restive crowd called for "loyal" Republican Governor John W. Geary of Pennsylvania to take the stand, which he did to great applause. In a short address, Geary stressed the larger meaning of the Civil War as a fight to extend freedom to all men, something the previous speakers did not discuss at all.<sup>9</sup>

Condemnation of the dedication ceremony in the Republican press was swift. "Taken as a whole, a more stupidly farcical affair than that at Antietam could scarcely be imagined," sniped the *New York Tribune*. "A baser attempt to degrade a noble object and praiseworthy undertaking was never made." The dedication of Antietam National Cemetery occurred at the height of the conflict between Andrew Johnson and Congress over Reconstruction policy and the larger meaning of the war and emancipation, and had become caught up in its politics. The contrast between Johnson's perspective on the dead at Antietam and his predecessor's at Gettysburg four years earlier was striking. While Abraham Lincoln had used the cemetery at Gettysburg to create a powerful new meaning for the war that resonates down to the present day, Johnson pointedly ignored the reasons for which the soldiers at Antietam had died.<sup>10</sup>

### **Controversy over Confederate Dead at Antietam**

Shortly after the dedication, an even greater controversy arose when rumors began circulating regarding the burial of Rebel dead in the ceme-

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tery. Governor Swann's appointment of Maryland trustees more sympathetic to the Confederacy opened the door for reconsideration of the section of the charter calling for the reinterment of Southern dead within the cemetery. This move caught the trustees from the other states by surprise and split the board between those vehemently opposed to the burial of Confederates in the national cemetery and those who felt they had no other choice given the nature of the charter. Once again, reaction was swift in the Republican press. In Washington, D.C., the *Chronicle* observed "that the trustees of the Antietam cemetery had held a meeting, and, after a lengthy discussion, had resolved to set apart a portion of that cemetery for the burial of rebels, or to speak more plainly, to inter side by side with loyal men who perished to save the Government, the traitors who sought to destroy it."<sup>11</sup>

Pennsylvania, which had been lackluster in its support for the national cemetery from the beginning, was vehement in its opposition to the interment of Confederate remains on its grounds. In the face of criticism from this and other northern states, Maryland hardened its stance.

Attempting to reach a compromise, Dr. Biggs proposed the acquisition of property adjoining the national cemetery to accommodate the Confederate dead. When the Board of Trustees unanimously passed a motion in May 1868 to follow through on Biggs's recommendation, it appeared to lay the issue to rest.<sup>12</sup>

One month later, a small group of board members, evidently just enough to constitute a quorum, met in Sharpsburg to inspect the cemetery. After viewing the grounds and the proposed location of the Confederate burial plot, they acted upon a motion made by a Pennsylvania trustee and voted to table the resolution passed in May. In what can only be seen as a further expression of their displeasure over the state of affairs, this group of trustees also directed Biggs to remove all projecting rocks from the grounds, thus signaling the end of "Lee's Rock." Ironically, the infamous stone's demise was not even noted in the local press, the question of burying Rebel soldiers on these grounds having superseded the conflict over the symbolic importance of the large rock.<sup>13</sup>

The Confederate burial issue continued to simmer into the opening months of 1869. Pennsylvania withheld a vitally needed appropriation for the cemetery, Governor Geary informing the trustees that "while they persisted in . . . making Antietam a burial place for traitors, they could expect no appropriation from a loyal people in aid of such a project." Other states followed suit, placing the cemetery in a precarious financial situation. The Board of Trustees met twice that year to resolve the deadlock, but in the end it opted to do nothing.<sup>14</sup>

Thwarted in its attempt to bury the Confederate dead in Antietam National Cemetery, the State of Maryland began looking elsewhere. Trustee Thomas Boult urged that the legislature grant a charter for the establishment of a separate Confederate cemetery on the battlefield. With prodding by Democratic Governor Oden Bowie, the General Assembly obliged by passing an act on April 4, 1870, incorporating Washington Cemetery. To Boult's disappointment, however, the legislature mandated that this burial ground be located within a mile of Hagerstown, instead of on the battlefield. A section of Rose Hill Cemetery, located on the south end of the city, subsequently was selected and Confederate remains were moved there over the next couple of years.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Federal Government Assumes Control**

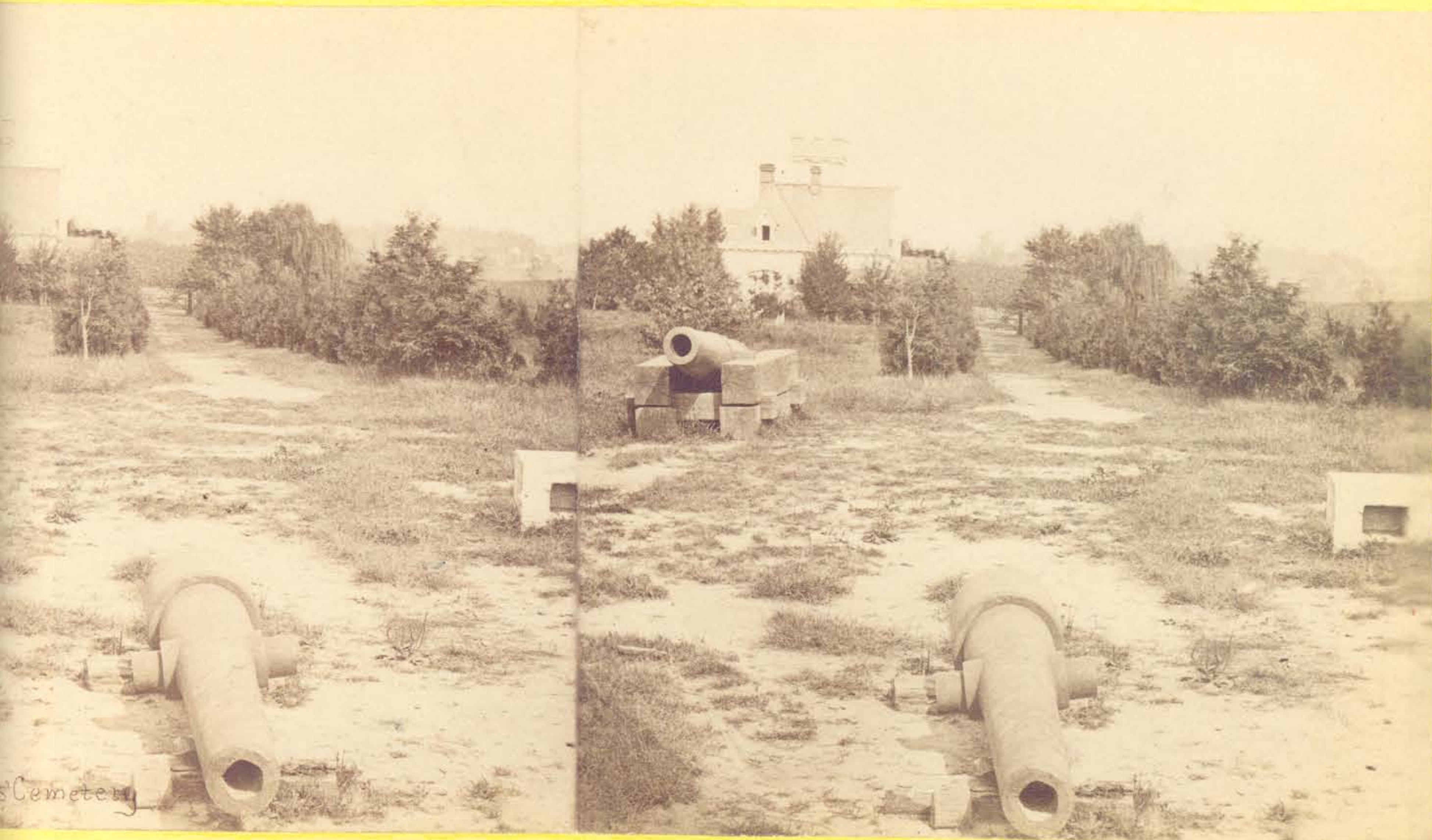
In mid-1870, the United States Congress authorized the transfer of the two cemeteries at Gettysburg and Antietam to federal ownership, to join the growing national cemetery system established by the War Department. In response, the association in Gettysburg turned its burial ground over to the federal government in 1872. In contrast, the Antietam trustees maintained control of their cemetery for much of the remainder of that decade. Only after Thomas Boult's death in October 1876 did Augustin Biggs contact the War Department about transferring the cemetery over to it. By that time the grounds were unkempt and trampled and the temporary headstones gone, little work having been accomplished in the cemetery for several years. The Board of Trustees transferred Antietam National



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BATTLE FIELD OF ANTIETAM.  
Copyrighted 1877.



Cemetery to the federal government in September 1877, formally ending the tenure of the Association.<sup>16</sup>

It took two years for the War Department to secure clear title to the cemetery, owing to the fact that each state involved in its creation had to consent to the transfer. In the meantime, War Department authorities moved ahead with cleaning up the dilapidated national cemetery and raising it to the standard of the others in the system. In 1878 they graded and resodded the burial plots, installed regulation headstones, erected a flagpole, and planted a large number of deciduous trees along the avenues and evergreens among the burial sections. The following year the department constructed a brick rostrum in the front part of the cemetery. "The improvement in the appearance and condition of the Antietam Cemetery since the Govt. assumed charge of it is great, and generally remarked by the visitors and neighborhood residents," observed civil engineer James Gall, Jr., in June

1880, "and each year will add to the beauty and attractiveness of the place." This resting place of the Union dead finally was beginning to look like a national cemetery.<sup>17</sup>

Once title to Antietam National Cemetery finally had been secured in June 1879, the Quartermaster Department officer in charge of it, Capt. A.F. Rockwell, lost no time in moving ahead with plans for erecting the soldiers' monument that had been part of the original cemetery design. The Board of Trustees had approved a statue design in September 1867, representing an American soldier at parade rest. As a result of the controversy surrounding Confederate burials, however, it had not signed a contract with the fabricator, James G. Batterson of Connecticut, until 1871. The trustees subsequently were unable to pay for the monument and it had remained with Batterson for the remainder of that decade.<sup>18</sup>

Installation of the monument in the national cemetery was delayed until January 1880, owing

▲ An 1877 stereoview of Antietam National Cemetery, looking west toward the cemetery lodge, from the general vicinity of the New York and Pennsylvania sections.





▲ Dedication of the Soldiers' Monument at Antietam National Cemetery, September 17, 1890. Photograph taken from the cemetery lodge tower, looking east.

to the fact that the top section of the monument had fallen into the Potomac River while being transferred to a canal boat and had to be retrieved from the river bottom before it could complete its journey up the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal to Sharpsburg. The dedication for the colossal statue was held later that year on the anniversary of the battle. Approximately 15,000 attended the ceremony, including large numbers of Union veterans. Unlike the earlier dedication of the cemetery, this event was dominated by Republicans and marked by speeches clearly laying blame for the war on the South.<sup>19</sup>

The dedication of the towering stone Union infantryman once and for all marked Antietam National Cemetery as northern ground. The decade-long struggle between Democratic interests in the State of Maryland, which had sought to use the battlefield to mediate its conflicted role during the Civil War, and northern and local Republicans, who wished to memorialize the victory of the Union over the rebellious South, had resulted in a resounding triumph for the latter.

## Conclusion

From the beginning, the creation of Antietam National Cemetery was fraught with controversy, as the State of Maryland's attempt to bury Confederate soldiers within its confines met stiff resistance from other states, as well as from some of its own board members. This resistance had been foreshadowed by the seemingly trivial dispute that arose over "Lee's Rock," the stone that became seen as a southern pollution needing to be removed from the landscape, and also by the negative reaction to the reconciliation-driven dedication ceremony.

The deep divisions separating the cemetery's host state from the northern states that supported it led to a lack of clear vision and meaning for Antietam National Cemetery in its early years, in great contrast to the other state-sponsored national cemetery at Gettysburg. This muddled sense of meaning continued until the War Department took charge of the burial ground and quickly transformed it into a symbol of Federal authority. By 1880, in fact,



Antietam essentially looked like the other national cemeteries established and managed by the War Department during the preceding two decades and had come to embody the power of the victorious North.

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- 1 The material for this article is taken from the author's dissertation: Susan W. Trail, "Remembering Antietam: Commemoration and Preservation of a Civil War Battlefield" (Ph.D. diss.: University of Maryland, 2005). *Baltimore American*, September 19, 1867.
- 2 Trail, "Remembering Antietam," 73-74; Chapter 203, Maryland Laws of 1865, *Archives of Maryland*, vol. 530, p. 383. The Maryland General Assembly initially approved a law on March 10, 1864, establishing Antietam National Cemetery, but this was repealed a year later when the new legislation was passed.
- 3 Trail, "Remembering Antietam," 74-75.
- 4 Hagerstown, *Herald and Torch Light*, May 31, 1865; Thomas A. Boult, Minutes of the National Cemetery Board of Trustees, May 25, 1865-September 16, 1867, Washington County Historical Society, Hagerstown, Maryland [WCHS]. According to the *Baltimore American*, reprinted in the Hagerstown *Herald and Torch Light*, December 27, 1867, the issue of Confederate burials had been "much discussed by the Commissioners of the Cemetery from the time of the formation of the Board," and that they had voted three to one "not to permit the burial of the Rebel dead in the enclosure."
- 5 Trail, "Remembering Antietam," 77-79; Board of Trustees of Antietam National Cemetery, *History of Antietam National Cemetery* (Baltimore: John W. Woods, Steam Printer, 1869), 13-15; Boult, Minutes, September 20, 1866, WCHS.
- 6 Boult, Minutes, September 20, 1866, WCHS; Steven R. Stotelmyer, *The Bivouacs of the Dead* (Baltimore: Toomey Press, 1992), 23.
- 7 Trail, "Remembering Antietam," 85-86; Board of Trustees, *History of Antietam National Cemetery*, 15-19; Thomas Boult to G.L. Cranmer, February 16, 1867, Antietam National Cemetery Correspondence, A.A. Biggs Collection, Washington County Free Library, Hagerstown, Maryland; Harlan D. Unrau, *Administrative History, Gettysburg National Military Park and Gettysburg National Cemetery, Pennsylvania* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1991), 20.
- 8 Boonsboro *Odd Fellow*, September 19, 1867; Charles L. Wagandt, "Redemption or Reaction?: Maryland in the Post-Civil War Years," in *Radicalism, Racism, and Party Realignment: The Border States during Reconstruction*, ed. Richard O. Curry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969).
- 9 Boonsboro *Odd Fellow*, September 19, 1867; Board of Trustees, *History of Antietam National Cemetery*, 22-23, 47, 54.
- 10 New York *Tribune*, reprinted in Boonsboro *Odd Fellow*, September 26, 1867.
- 11 Trail, "Remembering Antietam," 100-101; Washington, D.C., *Chronicle*, December 15, 1867, clipping filed in Antietam National Cemetery [ANC], Gen. Correspondence of the Office of the Quartermaster General [Entry 576], Office of the Quartermaster General, Record Group 92 [RG92], National Archives, Washington, D.C. [NA].
- 12 Boonsboro *Odd Fellow*, February 6, 1868; *Proceedings of the Trustees of the Antietam National Cemetery, at a Special Meeting held in Washington City, May 6th, 1868*, copy filed in ANC, Entry 576, RG 92, NA.
- 13 *Proceedings of a Meeting of the Trustees of the Antietam National Cemetery, held at the Lodge House on the Cemetery Grounds, June 17th, 1868*, copy in Alexander Ramsey Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- 14 Boonsboro *Odd Fellow*, February 26, 1869. *Proceedings of a Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Antietam National Cemetery, held at New York, June 2, 1869*, and *Proceedings of the Board of Trustees, Dec. 9, 1869*, copies on file in ANC, Entry 576, RG 92, NA.
- 15 Boult to Gov. Oden Bowie, November 3, 1869, box 118, folder 2, Gov. Misc. Papers, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, Maryland; Message of Gov. Bowie to the General Assembly, January 6, 1870, 115-117, *Proceedings of the Governor, 1869-1875*, MSA; Thomas J. Scharf, *History of Western Maryland* (Reprint; Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1968), 1102-1104.
- 16 *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 16, 390, quoted in Charles Snell and Sharon A. Brown, *Antietam National Battlefield, an Administrative History* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986), 22; Walter Woolcott to Capt. A.F. Rockwell, April 28, 1877, and James Gall, Jr., to Capt. A.F. Rockwell, September 26, 1877, ANC, Entry 576, RG 92, NA.
- 17 James Gall, Jr., to Capt. A.F. Rockwell, October 30, 1877, and June 28, 1880, H.S. Siess, Acting Supt., to Capt. A.F. Rockwell, January 9, 1878, ANC, Entry 576, RG 92, NA.
- 18 Boult, Minutes of the National Cemetery Board, September 16, 1867, WCHS; *Proceedings of a Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Antietam National Cemetery, held at Philadelphia, June 21, 1871*, copies on file in ANC, Entry 576, RG 92, NA. In 1876 Batterson transported the huge monument to Philadelphia, where it was prominently displayed at the Centennial Exhibition and may have been influential in spreading the popularity of the sentinel statue across the North [see Michael Wilson Panhorst, "Lest We Forget: Monuments and Memorial Sculpture in National Military Parks on Civil War Battlefields, 1861-1917" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1988), 220].
- 19 Susan Cooke Soderberg, *Lest We Forget: A Guide to Civil War Monuments in Maryland* (Shippensburg, Pa.: White Mane Publishing Co., 1995), 95-96.