

## Antietam National Cemetery, Sharpsburg, Maryland

The Battle of Antietam, fought on September 17, 1862, was the bloodiest single day of the Civil War. Over 23,000 soldiers were killed, wounded, or listed as missing. Approximately 4,000 from each side lost their lives on that day, and many more died in the days following from wounds and disease. Antietam National Cemetery commemorates those Union soldiers who were killed at Antietam as well as in other nearby military actions during the Civil War. Although veterans from later wars are buried in the cemetery, the cemetery is now closed to further burials.

A few casualties of Antietam were claimed by relatives who carried them home. Most of the dead, however, were buried hurriedly where they fell in shallow graves. By the time the war ended in 1865, mid-Maryland was dotted with the graves of the casualties of local battles, such as South Mountain, Antietam, and Monocacy. The Union dead would be reinterred in Antietam National Cemetery, while the remains of Confederate soldiers were reburied in local cemeteries in Frederick, Hagerstown, and Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

*Antietam National Cemetery is located in Sharpsburg, Maryland, on Route 34 on the northeast side of the town. It is maintained by Antietam National Battlefield as part of the National Cemetery System. Parking is available on the street on in a lot across the street from the cemetery entrance. A guidebook to the cemetery is mounted next to the cemetery gatehouse, and a more extensive brochure can be obtained at the nearby Antietam National Battlefield Visitor Center on Route 65.*

The elaborate iron **entrance gates** to the cemetery, featuring four posts topped with urns, were manufactured by Robert Wood and Company of Philadelphia and erected in 1866. The cemetery **lodge** sits to the right just inside these gates. This gothic-style building was designed in 1867 by Paul J. Peltz of Washington, DC, who also designed the Library of Congress. The lodge was originally the residence of the cemetery superintendent and later housed the cemetery's administrative offices. A new residence for the superintendent was built in 1927, and the lodge building now houses park administrative offices.



Entrance gates to the cemetery (Dean Herrin)

Inside the cemetery grounds, the **rostrum** on the left was built in 1879. It was completed for the Memorial Day observance of that year, and has been used every Memorial Day since then as a speaker's platform and commemorative gathering place.

Behind the lodge building and near the first row of gravestones on the right is the approximate former location of "**Lee's Rock.**" It was claimed that this small boulder had been used by Confederate General Robert E. Lee as an observation point during the Battle of Antietam. The rock had been retained in the cemetery's original plan, but after bitter disputes in the late 1860s regarding the presence of a Confederate symbol in a cemetery honoring the Union dead, cemetery trustees considered the rock inappropriate and had it removed.



Solemn rows of graves bear witness to the carnage of the Civil War (Keith Snyder, National Park Service)

Antietam National Cemetery is the final resting place for 4,776 Union remains from the Battle of Antietam and other local engagements. Over two hundred veterans of other American wars are also buried in the cemetery, including U.S. Navy Fireman Patrick Howard Roy, a native of nearby Keedysville, who was killed in the *U.S.S. Cole* explosion in 2000. The **graves** of the soldiers are arrayed in a broad semi-ellipse, arranged primarily according to the state in whose unit the soldier served. In the back left part of the cemetery are located the graves of 1,835 unknown soldiers. In the back right, apart from the

other graves, are the remains of several African American veterans of World War I, segregated even in death.

The central focal point of the cemetery is the large **Private Soldier Monument**, also known as "Old Simon." The monument is made of granite and stands over forty-four feet high. The soldiers' monument had been included in the cemetery's original design, but lack of money prevented the cemetery's overseers from obtaining the monument until 1879. "Old Simon" was designed by James G. Batterson of Connecticut and sculpted by James W. Poletto of Rhode Island, and was first exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. The monument was dedicated at Antietam National Cemetery in September of 1880.



The Private Soldier Monument, also known as "Old Simon" (Keith Snyder, National Park Service)

Encircling "Old Simon" are **iron tablets** each displaying a verse of Theodore O'Hara's poem,

“Bivouac of the Dead.” This elegiac poem commemorates those killed in military action, and is found inscribed in many veterans’ and national cemeteries, including on the original main gate to Arlington National Cemetery. Ironically, the poem was written by a Confederate veteran. Theodore O’Hara was born in Kentucky in 1820 and served in the Mexican War (1846-48). He wrote “Bivouac of the Dead” in the 1850s to honor his



One of the tablets with lines from “Bivouac of the Dead”  
(Dean Herrin)

fellow Kentuckians who died in the Battle of Buena Vista in 1847. O’Hara continually tinkered with his poem and different versions have appeared over the years. At the outbreak of the Civil War, O’Hara joined the Confederate side and served as a Colonel in an Alabama regiment. He died in 1867, the same year in which Antietam National Cemetery was dedicated. O’Hara was not cited as the author of “Bivouac of the Dead” at Arlington nor in any other national cemetery. While the United States

Quartermaster General, Montgomery C. Meigs, had O’Hara’s poem inscribed in several national cemeteries, historians have speculated that Meigs deliberately omitted O’Hara’s name because he had fought for the Confederacy. Meigs had lost his oldest son, a Union officer, in the Civil War, and remained bitter after the war towards those who had fought for the South.

Various **smaller monuments** stand throughout in the cemetery, including a monument to four unidentified Union soldiers whose remains were discovered on the battlefield grounds in 1988, and the grave and monument for Maryland Congressman Goodloe Byron, a U.S. Army veteran.

One last site is worth a short walk. As you exit the cemetery, turn left towards Sharpsburg and walk to the end of the cemetery **stone wall**. A beautiful small American flag was chiseled and painted on the wall presumably by Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) stonemasons when the wall was repaired in the 1930s.

Sources:

“Antietam National Cemetery – Not for Themselves but for Their Country,” brochure written by Keith Snyder for Antietam National Battlefield and published by the Western Maryland Interpretive Association.

Susan Trail, “Commemoration and Conflict: The Establishment of Antietam National Cemetery” *Catoctin History Magazine*.

“Antietam National Cemetery,” Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) MD-936, National Park Service, Washington, DC (available online at [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs\\_haer/](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/)).

For information on Theodore O’Hara and the poem “Bivouac of the Dead,” see <http://www.cem.va.gov/bivouac.htm>, and Amy Ballard, “The Smithsonian & Arlington Cemetery,” *Smithsonian Preservation Quarterly* (Summer / Fall 1995), located online at <http://www.si.edu/oahp/spq/spq95sf5.htm>.