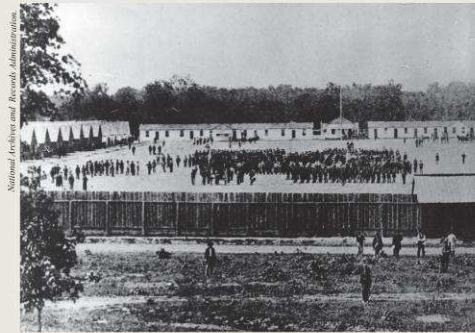# CONFEDERATES AT CAMP BUTLER

Camp Butler Prison Camp

On February 26, 1862, Fort Donelson, a Confederate stronghold on the Cumberland River near Nashville, Tennessee, surrendered. Faced with 15,000 prisoners, the army converted several training camps, including Camp Butler, into military prisons.

Over 1,000 more prisoners arrived in April, after the capture of Island No.10 near Memphis, Tennessee. The first group of prisoners was exchanged in September but more prisoners arrived in late 1863—over 1,600 Confederate soldiers captured in Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas.

Conditions varied with the camp commanders. Barracks often filled, forcing prisoners to live in tents. Illness often reached almost epidemic proportions and pneumonia was a constant problem. When the last Confederate prisoners were removed on May 19, 1863, over 800 of their comrades were left behind in the prison cemetery, claimed by poor facilities, poor sanitation, and disease.

The Confederate section in 1939.

Camp Butler, ca. 1862.

The Confederate Burials

The prisoners who died at Camp Butler were interred in an old cornfield northeast of camp, near the graves of Union soldiers. The prisoners were buried in individual coffins and placed in graves marked with headboards or stakes, as were Union soldiers.

Camp Butler became a national cemetery in 1862. All of the Confederate prisoners buried at Camp Butler are in their original graves. An 1868 inspection report explained their irregular pattern: "The burials were made from the hospitals at Camp Butler as the deaths occurred, and do not seem to have been made according to any regular plan or order; but the graves were dug as most convenient."

In 1908, the Commission for Marking Graves of the Confederate Dead erected the simple headstones that still mark the graves of the Confederate prisoners-of-war.
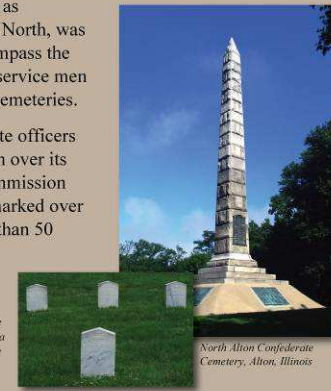
A Spirit of Reconciliation

On May 30, 1868, the Union veterans' organization decorated Union and Confederate graves at Arlington National Cemetery. In the decades that followed, the nation reached out to Confederate veterans. President William McKinley proclaimed in December 1898:

And while when these graves were made we differed widely about the future of this Government these differences were long ago settled . . . and the time has now come . . . when in the spirit of fraternity we should share with you in the care of the graves of the Confederate soldiers.

Three years later, the War Department created the Confederate section at Arlington. In 1906, Congress created the Commission for Marking Graves of Confederate Dead. The Commission's initial charge, to identify and mark the graves of Confederates who died as prisoners-of-war in the North, was later expanded to encompass the graves of Confederate service men interred in all Federal cemeteries.

Four former Confederate officers headed the Commission over its lifetime. When the Commission ended in 1916, it had marked over 25,500 graves at more than 50 cemeteries.

Where individual graves could be identified, they were marked with headstones. When they could not be identified, the Commission erected a monument bearing the names of the deceased.

Camp Butler National Cemetery, Springfield, Illinois.

North Alton Confederate Cemetery, Alton, Illinois

Department of Veterans Affairs
National Cemetery Administration

Figure 2. Draft Panel: Confederates at Camp Butler.