



Written in Stone: Accessible Online

David A. Norris looks at online sources for locating gravestone inscriptions for ancestors who served

WHEN WE LOOK FOR DEFINITE GENEALOGICAL FACTS THAT ARE “written in stone”, what better source can there be than the literal equivalent: information inscribed on gravestones? Ancestry.com’s recently updated collection “U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1970” contains file cards for government gravestones requested for deceased veterans. The collection is drawn from hundreds of reels of National Archives microfilm. Most cards date from 1925-1970 (the recent update added new 1963-1970 records), but they include headstones ordered for Revolutionary and War of 1812 soldiers long after their lifetimes. The cards are now scanned in color, too.



Before 1903, headstones provided for Civil War veterans (such as these in the cemetery at the National Soldiers Home in Washington, D.C.) stood 12 inches above the ground. The smaller blocks stood for unknown soldiers. (Library of Congress)

The National Cemetery system dates back to 1862, as deaths from battle and disease required the Union Army to establish vast burial grounds. Many cemeteries near battlefields, major hospitals, and prison camps became permanent national cemeteries. They remained in use after the war, taking soldiers who died after 1865 as well as receiving wartime casualties who were exhumed from temporary resting places. In 1873, Congress allowed the burial of honorably discharged veterans of any war in national cemeteries.

After 1879, government grave-stones were available for eligible veterans buried in private cemeteries. Provided by the Quartermaster Department of the U.S. Army, the markers by 1929 were available for “soldiers, sailors, marines and Army nurses ... whether they were regular or volunteer, and whether they died in the service or after muster out or honorable discharge.”

During and just after the Civil War, wooden headboards marked military graves. They deteriorated rapidly and in 1873 the government concluded permanent stone markers would be more practical. The first stone markers, called the “Civil War” type, were provided only for Union veterans. The upright stone markers were four inches thick; 10 inches across; and stood 12 inches above the ground.

Specifications for upright marble markers changed in 1903. Still four inches thick, they were to be 12 inches across and stand 39 inches above the ground.

In 1906, Congress allowed similar markers for Confederate soldiers who died in prison camps and were buried in national cemeteries, and in 1929 for those in private cemeteries.

At first, the provided markers were upright marble stones; later options expanded to upright granite stones, and flat markers of marble, granite, or bronze. Emblem options included Christian,