

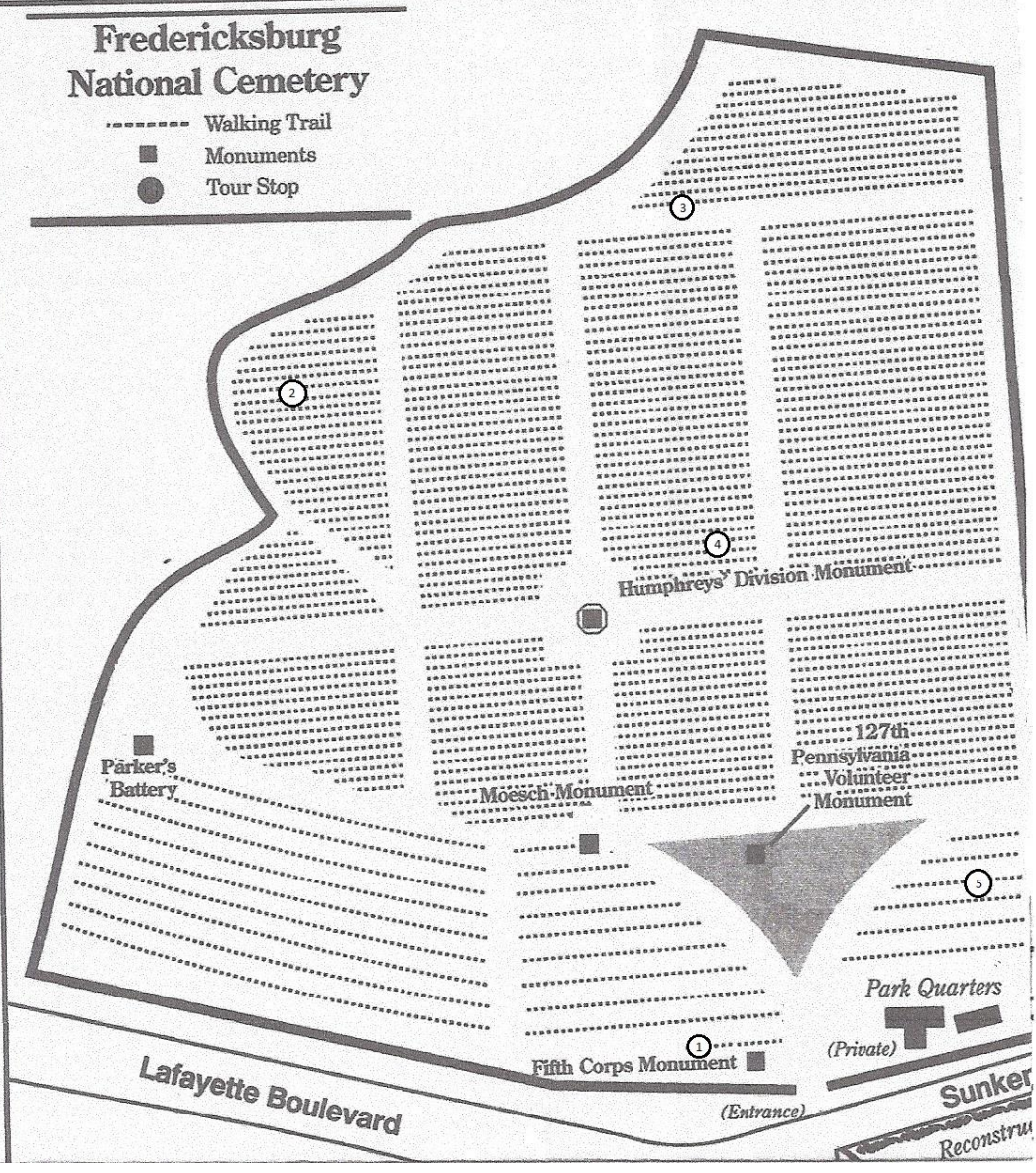
African American Burials Tour

We have five Civil War burials of African-American soldiers and a few from later wars. Unlike some other Civil War cemeteries, these burials are not separated from white burials. Instead, they are scattered around the cemetery.

Early in the Civil War, black men were unable to enlist as soldiers. That policy would change as more slaves fled to Union lines and the Union war aims shifted to support emancipation. From that point black soldiers played an increasingly important role in the Union war effort. By the end of the war there were 166 black regiments in United States service, comprising 300,000 men. These regiments were distinguished from ordinary Union unit by the title United States Colored Troops. In some cases, black troops had non-combat roles, like guarding railroads, but this would change in the final year of the war. In Virginia, black troops saw their first action against Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia near Piney Branch Church in the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House. They engaged in some of the heaviest fighting around both Petersburg and Richmond.

Fredericksburg National Cemetery

- Walking Trail
- Monuments
- Tour Stop



Parker's Battery

Moesch Monument

Humphreys' Division Monument

127th Pennsylvania Volunteer Monument

Fifth Corps Monument

(Private)

Park Quarters

Lafayette Boulevard

(Entrance)

Sunker Reconstruction

Stop 1: Urbane Bass
Grave #10, Officers Row

Urbane Bass, buried at the end of what is named Officers Row, was the first African-American commissioned officer buried in the National Cemetery. A graduate of the Leonard Medical School of Shaw University in Raleigh, NC, Bass moved to Fredericksburg in 1909 and served as its first black physician until the outbreak of World War I. Despite the continued segregation of the army, Urbane offered his services for the Army Medical Corps in an April 1917 letter to the secretary of war. He served in France as a lieutenant in the 372 US 93 Division. He would earn the Distinguished Service Cross for the October 1918 action which cost him his life. Attending to the wounded under severe shell fire, he was struck by a shell which severed both of his legs. Despite the aid of his hospital attendants, Urbane died a few minutes later.

Only 36 when he died, Bass left behind a wife and four children. Maude, who is buried beside her husband, stayed in Fredericksburg until 1922, then moved to Raleigh, NC where she taught music to the blind for thirty years at the North Carolina State School for the Blind. Thirty-two when Urbane died, she never remarried and lived to the age of 100, dying in October 1986.

Stop #2 Cluster of Graves

In this section of the cemetery lie six of our African-American burials representing the Civil War, Spanish-American War and World War I.

Both of our Civil War soldiers buried here have connections to the Fredericksburg area. Private Thomas Hill (Grave #4677c) enlisted in the 50 USCT on January 10, 1865 as a substitute for James Emory of Walnut Grove, Illinois. Born in Tennessee and twenty years old at enlistment, Thomas listed his occupation as a farmer. He served with this unit from January 1865 to January 1866 and was discharged in Jackson, Mississippi. He died here in Fredericksburg on October 22, 1930.

The other Civil War burial has a special connection to our park. Private Charles Sprow (also listed as Sprow) (Grave #6688) served with the 1 USCT Cavalry from December 12, 1863 until February 4, 1866. Prior to the war, Charles was owned by James Horace Lacy; he was a slave at Chatham which is now our park headquarters. Sprow must have claimed his freedom for his pension file contains a note that he was free as of April 19, 1861 and he enlisted at Fort Monroe, VA which saw a large number of refugee arrivals. In his mid-twenties by the time he was discharged, Sprow later married and lived until the age of 86 when he died on February 13, 1926.

Stop 3: William Branch
Grave #6152

While many former slaves enlisted to fight for the Union against their former owners, the North also had a large freed population that joined the cause. Some regiments were composed of largely free, northern black men. Private William Branch was most likely a free-man before the Civil War. Possibly born in Washington D.C. in the early 1840s, the twenty-three year old

enlisted in company E, of the 31st USCT on April 8, 1864 at Jamaica, Long Island, New York. He was present with his unit from April 1864 to January 1865 when he was detached as an Army teamster. He died a few months later on May 11, 1865 from Typhoid Fever in a 25th Army Corps hospital.

Stop 4: Moses Humphreys

Grave #3306

The burial of Moses Humphreys is interesting. We believe he died in May of 1864, but most of his information is unknown or inaccurate. His tombstone and records tell us that Moses was a private in company I of the 135th USCT, however he most likely did not serve with this regiment as it only existed between March 28, 1865 and October 23, 1865, and operated in North Carolina.

What we know for certain about Humphreys is that he was an African-American serving in the Union army during the Civil War and his burial here in the cemetery reflects that. In death his resting place and tombstone are the same as the white soldiers who lie around him, a representation of the equality African-Americans hoped to achieve.

Stop 5: Peter Wilson

Grave #814

Thirty-four year old Peter Wilson enlisted as a private in company C, 36th USCT Infantry on July 13, 1863 at Pylmuth, NC. Probably born near Windsor, NC, before he enlisted he was a slave owned by Dr. Turner Wilson, most likely engaged in farming since he listed "Farmer" as his pre-enlistment occupation. Less than a year after his enlistment he was killed in action by Confederate guerillas at Pierson's farm near Richmond on June 16, 1864.

In addition to these soldiers buried in the National Cemetery, the African-American community would also be instrumental in commemoration in the years immediately after the Civil War.

On May 5, 1868 General John A Logan, commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, issued General Orders No. 11 declaring that May 30, 1868 was designated for the decoration of the graves of those who had died in defense of their country. Decoration Day was born. This announcement had little effect on local white resident; Fredericksburg citizens continued to decorate Confederate graves but not the Union ones. African-Americans heeded the call, however, and began coming in 1868 from Washington and Richmond to honor those soldiers who had died for their freedom. Gradually, local citizens became involved and the first multi-racial ceremony was held by Fredericksburg citizens in 1871, but African-Americans remained heavily involved until the 1880s.

Change came in 1884 when the GAR returned to Fredericksburg and held a ceremony of reconciliation with Confederate veterans. They agreed to honor the Union dead jointly and the GAR agreed to exclude African-Americans from attending the ceremony. Exclusion gradually dulled the enthusiasm of the black community and after twenty more years they turned their focus to Shiloh Cemetery to honor their own war dead.

