

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

SAN FRANCISCO NATIONAL CEMETERY (National Cemetery at the Presidio of San Francisco, Presidio National Cemetery)

HALS NO. CA-1

- Location:** 1 Lincoln Boulevard, San Francisco, San Francisco County, California
Presidio of San Francisco National Historic Landmark District
37.799991, -122.46371 (Center of Officers' Circle, Garmin GPS unit, accuracy 9', WGS84)
- Significance:** When the San Francisco National Cemetery was established in 1884, it was the first national cemetery on the Pacific Coast, and it remained the only national cemetery on that Coast for forty years. Since at least 1866, the cemetery site served as the Post Cemetery for the Presidio of San Francisco, a strategic military post established by Spain in 1776. The National Cemetery is located adjacent to, and has the same orientation as, the historic Main Post, and it fronts Lincoln Boulevard, one of the main historic roads through the Presidio. The National Cemetery nearly tripled in size during its first fifty years. The landscape has changed little since 1934, except for the loss of tree canopy, and is a major designed landscape component within the larger Presidio landscape. The northeast half of the National Cemetery is of predicted archeological interest for the period 1866-1889.
- Description:** The San Francisco National Cemetery is a 28.34 acre military cemetery on a hillside overlooking the San Francisco Bay near the Golden Gate Strait. The cemetery is west of the Main Post at the Presidio of San Francisco, and has the same northeast to southwest orientation as the Main Post.
- The circulation design is formal. Four long drives divide the cemetery into uneven thirds. Two shorter drives connect the long drives at their ends. The long drives are interrupted by one large circle – containing a burial area known as Officers' Circle – and two teardrop planting areas.
- The formality of the circulation pattern is countered by the informality of the topography, which slopes upward from north to south. The lawn is so steep in spots that it is easy to slip and fall on wet grass. The topography hides the cemetery from full view, making it appear smaller than it actually is.
- The most memorable features of the cemetery are the mature trees within and bordering the cemetery, the views, the weather, the topography, the collection of headstones, and the overall feeling of an intimate and serene space. Handsome, mature *Cupressus macrocarpa* (Monterey Cypress) trees stand over the graves in the northeast half of the cemetery. A mature *Eucalyptus globulus* (Blue Gum) forest borders the cemetery on all sides except the front. On clear days, there are

views of the Golden Gate Bridge, Marin Headlands, Angel Island, Alcatraz Island, and East Bay Hills. Summer fog, ocean winds, and winter rains can make for bracing conditions.¹ The headstones are an eclectic mix of military and private headstones, especially in and near Officers' Circle. The topography and enclosing Eucalyptus forest combine to create the feeling of intimacy and serenity. The serenity is enforced by the prohibition of picnicking, jogging, bicycling, and dog walking within the cemetery.

Less memorable features are the buildings and structures, boundary demarcation, individual monuments, and smaller vegetation, all of which are dwarfed by the topography and large trees. The five buildings (1884-1934)² are all small, one-story, and Mission Revival-style in an L-shaped cluster at the front of the cemetery. An entrance (1931), framed by symmetric columns of ashlar limestone masonry and iron-fencing side arcs,³ greets the visitor at the corner of Lincoln Boulevard and Sheridan Avenue. A concrete rostrum (1915) with side arcs is near the entrance. The front boundary is marked by an ornate cast-iron fence and gate (ca. 1886, moved 1929); the rear and side boundaries are marked by a stone and/or concrete wall (ca. 1886-ca. 1934).

The landscape possesses integrity. Since 1934, the most significant change has been the loss of aged Cypress trees during windstorms. The damage done by their falls has been repaired, but the trees have not been replaced in kind. Historically, the flagpole was in the center of Officers' Circle, but it is now in front of the rostrum. A recent (May 2012) improvement is the routing of Doyle Drive (U.S. Highway 101) through a new tunnel near the cemetery, which has noticeably reduced traffic noise in the cemetery.

History: The Presidio of San Francisco was established by Spain in 1776. Control shifted to Mexico in 1822 (after the end of the Mexican War of Independence), and to the United States in 1846 (after the start of the American-Mexican War). According to Thompson, early cemeteries at the Presidio were poorly documented, and 1866 is the date of the earliest known record of a cemetery at the current location.

National cemeteries were first established by Congress and President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 (during the Civil War) for the burial of soldiers who died during active service. The national cemeteries were administered by the Army. After

¹ Winters are wet with minimums averaging 44°F (6°C), and summers are dry with maximums averaging 62°F (17°C). Annual precipitation averages 24" (601 cm). (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Desert Research Institute (DRI), Western Regional Climate Center (WRCC), "Period of Record General Climate Summary, San Francisco Academy of Science, California (047765): 1951-1957," <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/cgi-bin/cliMAIN.pl?ca7765>.)

² The five buildings are a lodge (1884 two-story brick building, lowered and re-styled in 1929), office (1921 mortuary chapel converted ca. 1948), rest room (1929), service maintenance garage (1929), and garage (1934).

³ According to Thompson, T.B. Goodwin did the stonework and the Anchor Post Fence Company did the ironwork.

eligibility was expanded in 1873 to include honorably discharged veterans, the Army began converting cemeteries at military posts to national cemeteries.

In 1884, the post cemetery at the Presidio was made a fourth-class⁴ national cemetery, and re-named the San Francisco National Cemetery (SFNC). Historically in California, SFNC has been commonly known as the National Cemetery at the Presidio of San Francisco, or the Presidio National Cemetery. SFNC was the first and only national cemetery on the Pacific Coast until a neglected cemetery in Alaska became the Sitka National Cemetery in 1924.

The establishment of SFNC led to the funding of road and landscape improvements in the cemetery and throughout the Presidio, including the partial implementation of the Presidio's noted afforestation plan, with the justification that SFNC needed suitable access routes and environs. To make room for more Civil War veterans, SFNC was expanded to the west from its original 9.5 acres to 15.5 acres in 1896.

According to Holt, the Spanish-American War (1898) and Philippine Insurrection (1900-01) may have been the first time in history that a country disinterred its dead soldiers from foreign soil to reinter them in their home country. The Pacific dead were received at the Presidio. SFNC was upgraded to first class in 1904.

Between 1919 and 1932, the cemetery expanded to the southwest, to its current total of 28.34 acres. In 1938, because SFNC was almost full, 161.55 acres were purchased in San Bruno for the creation of an adjunct cemetery named the Golden Gate National Cemetery (GGNC). It was anticipated that the new cemetery would take sixty years to fill, but World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War filled it in thirty years.

In 1955, veterans blocked proposals by San Francisco officials to move SFNC to GGNC. When attempts to expand GGNC were blocked by San Bruno officials, the Army proposed expanding SFNC in 1961, but that was blocked by San Francisco officials. Frustrated by similar skirmishes throughout the country, the Army decided that the expansion of national cemeteries was a civilian issue, not a military one, and froze the national cemetery system at its 1962 size.

In 1973, the administration of most national cemeteries, including SFNC, was transferred from the Army to the Veterans Administration (VA). The VA established five national cemeteries totaling almost 4000 acres in the 1970s, and continues to establish new national cemeteries. The Presidio was transferred from the Army to the National Park Service in 1994. The San Francisco National Cemetery remains constant as the Presidio is adaptively reused.

⁴ Size and activity determine the national cemetery class, with first class being the largest and most active.

Sources:

Historic maps

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Historic aerial photographs

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Historian:

Cate Bainton
HALS Northern California Chapter
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⁵ The VA and Holt do not agree on the date of establishment for some national cemeteries. This report and the accompanying measured drawing use the VA's dates, rather than Holt's dates.