

# American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC): A Brief History with Resources

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## From the Beginning...

The American Military has been burying its dead for over two centuries. The Mexican War brought the first American cemetery established outside of the United States. The American Cemetery in Mexico City was consecrated in 1851 and includes the graves of over 800 men (750 unknown soldiers) who died during the war. It also includes a small number of soldiers and sailors who died in the Civil War and the Spanish American War. Congress closed the cemetery in 1924 and it was folded into the ABMC in 1947.

The first National Cemetery was dedicated June 15, 1864, on the grounds of Confederate General Robert e. Lee's estate in Arlington, Virginia. Here, as with other military burials, no definitive chain of command for records of the deceased or their burial were standardized and many burials on the grounds were lost or undocumented. This was a reoccurring problem during the Civil War. Many soldiers who were buried under the land where they fell in battle were hastily buried or unable to be identified. An estimated 40% of burials were 'unknown' soldiers.

The first concerted effort to keep track of the dead was during the Spanish American War under the watchful eye of Chaplain Charles Pierce. He established guidelines for recording the burials of American military personnel. Pierce was the first person to suggest the use of "dog tags" for identification purposes. [www.army.mil/article/128693/the\\_beginnings\\_of\\_the\\_quartermaster\\_graves\\_registration\\_service](http://www.army.mil/article/128693/the_beginnings_of_the_quartermaster_graves_registration_service)

## War Graves Registration, the Precursor to ABMC

When the United States declared war on April 6, 1917 troops began preparing to sail to France to aid our allies in defeating Germany. Once American troops arrived in Europe June 26, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson encouraged the army to create a detail responsible for tracking and burying the dead. The Burial



Department was established under the supervision of the Chief Quartermaster of the American Expeditionary Forces in General Order 27 by the Army Headquarters on August 29, 1917. This department was tasked with purchasing land to bury American war casualties and maintain and preserve these cemeteries, by managing shrubs, trees, flowers and all manner of landscaping. They would photograph graves, and handle memorials and ceremonies A commissioned officer would be in charge and handle reporting and correspondence with the Quartermaster regarding each cemetery. This officer would be responsible for keeping records and accurately registering and marking each grave. A series of forms were created

to track remains, burial locations and, eventually, repatriation for those bodies that returned to the United States. These forms would be sent to the Quartermaster, as well as the Adjutant General of the A.E.F. They would also notify relatives and keep a detailed map of all burials within the cemeteries.

Chaplains would be responsible for proper burial rights and for assuring graves are "properly marked." They would follow set protocols to assure graves were dug 6'6" long, 2' wide and 5' deep. They would

provide instructions for burial teams and encourage military units to use these cemeteries instead of private cemeteries to ease the tracking of remains.

General Order No. 30 on February 15, 1918 changed the name of the Burial Department to the Graves Registration Service. The commanding officer would be now known as the Chief of the Graves Registration Service and oversee all operations and personnel through a field force known as the Advance Group, G.R.S. and would be organized and attached to Headquarters, A.E.F. in France. They would include special troops on detached service. Their charge continued to be the maintenance and reporting for all American cemeteries as well as registering all A.E.F. casualties buried outside of these cemeteries, recording their burial locations. Reports would be submitted to Headquarters monthly. Chaplains would continue to oversee all correspondence regarding graves and burials. They would work with one Red Cross officer and necessary staff coordinating functions with the Red Cross Bureau of Information.

## The Creation of the American Battle Monuments Commission

The ABMC was established by Congress on March 4, 1923, to standardize the construction of cemeteries honoring the American Expeditionary Forces. After WWI there was a rush to memorialize the dead from numerous groups and wealthy families. Congress wanted to control the narrative of the war and reduce the haphazard construction of competing and disparate designs. Congress tasked the ABMC with designing and building monuments and then memorial chapels in each of the eight American cemeteries in Europe. In 1925 Congress appointed architect and former army officer, Paul Phillippe Cret, to design and create these memorials to our fallen soldiers. Paul Phillippe Cret, born in Lyon France in 1876, had studied architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Lyon and had won the Paris Prize. He came to the United States in 1903 and taught at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. While at Penn, he designed the memorial arch at Valley Forge National Park. He was in France when the war began, and joined the French Army and served for five years. Near the end of the war, Cret was hired by Edith Roosevelt to design the memorial to her son Lt. Quentin Roosevelt in Chambéry, France. Lt. Roosevelt was killed in action in July 1918 and was buried near his crash site. Roosevelt was eventually moved to the American Cemetery at Normandy after WWII to rest near his brother Theodore Jr. who was killed on Utah Beach.



Paul Phillippe Cret, with General John J. Pershing, were solely responsible for all aspects of the architectural designs for the American Cemeteries in France. They selected noted architects and approved all initial designs. Cret and Pershing elicited changes from the architects to maintain their vision, and their vision alone! Once the architectural changes were made, the plans would be shared with the ABMC board and the Committee on Fine Arts for “official approval.” Cret, himself, designed three of the monuments constructed at Chateau-Thierry, Bellicourt, the Naval Monument at Gibraltar, plus, the chapel at Flanders Field. His staff of engineers and stone masons included lauded architects like John Harbeson and award-winning sculptor Lee Lawrie. Both continued designing for the ABMC after Paul Cret’s death in 1945. The ABMC evolved over the years, under John Harbeson’s stewardship, expanding to include 29 additional cemeteries and monuments. Harbeson designed 19 of those monuments and cemeteries including the Omaha Beach Memorial in Normandy, France.



- Initial Burial Plats for WWI American Soldiers 1920 <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/12007376>
- *The Text Message* blog post on Burial Cards of WWI  
[https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2018/11/08/now-available-online-burial-cards-of-world-war-i-soldiers/?fbclid=IwAR2fwwrBFE3Pq3rwDsbmnlB2hlqONNWZE9tiMj0Nt-kuuwfU7iLmv\\_R-FWI](https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2018/11/08/now-available-online-burial-cards-of-world-war-i-soldiers/?fbclid=IwAR2fwwrBFE3Pq3rwDsbmnlB2hlqONNWZE9tiMj0Nt-kuuwfU7iLmv_R-FWI)
- *Unwritten Record* blog post on WWI Burial Plats <https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2018/11/06/newly-digitized-series-initial-burial-plats-for-world-war-i-american-soldiers/>
- Maps and Plans of Temporary American Expeditionary Force Cemeteries, 1920–1922  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/642000>
- Military Service Records [www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/about-service-records](http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/about-service-records)
- Compiled Data on Casualties of the American Expeditionary Forces by Division, 1917-1919  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/search-within/1726754>
- State Summaries of War Casualties for the United States Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard during World War II 1946 <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/305185>
- World War II Honor List of Dead and Missing Army and Army Air Force Personnel, June 1946  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/305276>
- Interment Control Forms 1928-1962 <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5833879>

#### Word War I Centennial Commission [www.worldwar1centennial.org](http://www.worldwar1centennial.org)

- Blog: Graves Registration Cards [www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/commemorate/families/documenting-doughboys/2223-graves-registration-card-registers-1917-22.html](http://www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/commemorate/families/documenting-doughboys/2223-graves-registration-card-registers-1917-22.html)
- Official U.S. Bulletin [www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/educate/other-resources-image/official-bulletin.html](http://www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/educate/other-resources-image/official-bulletin.html)

#### Library of Congress [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)

- John J. Pershing Papers: Diaries, Notebooks, and address books 1882-1925; Diaries; set 2; 1918, Sept. 1-30 <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss35949026>



#### HABS/HART Records: Historic American Buildings Survey

- Flanders Field American Cemetery [www.loc.gov/item/us0012](http://www.loc.gov/item/us0012)
- Flanders Field Superintendent's Quarters [www.loc.gov/item/us0011](http://www.loc.gov/item/us0011)
- Meuse Argonne American Cemetery [www.loc.gov/item/us0005/](http://www.loc.gov/item/us0005/)

#### Internet Archive [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

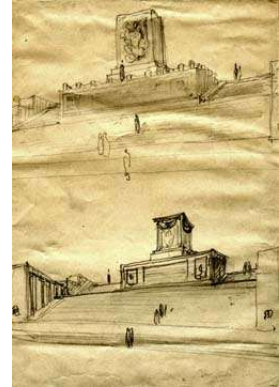
- American Battle Monuments Commission Cemetery Guides  
<https://archive.org/search?query=creator%3A%22American+Battle+Monuments+Commission%22>
- A Report to the Secretary of War on American Military Dead Overseas 1920  
<https://archive.org/details/reporttosecretar00unite/page/n3/mode/2up>
- Soldiers of the Great War Vol 1. <https://archive.org/details/soldiersofgreatw0001unse/mode/2up>
- Soldiers of the Great War Vol 2 <https://archive.org/details/soldiersofgreatw0002wmha>
- Soldiers of the Great War Vol 3 <https://archive.org/details/soldiersofgreatw0003wmha>

Hathi Trust [www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org)

- A guide to the American Battle Fields of Europe  
[https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b744250&seq=9](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b744250&seq=9)
- Graves Registration Service in WWII <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011424732>
- History of the American Graves Registration Service, Q.M.C. in Europe  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924007936333&seq=6>

Philadelphia Architects and Buildings [www.philadelphiabuildings.org](http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org)

- Paul Philippe Cret  
[https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar\\_display.cfm/22472](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/22472)
- Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial  
[https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj\\_display.cfm/125887](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj_display.cfm/125887)
- Chateau-Thierry Memorial  
[https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj\\_display.cfm/97701](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj_display.cfm/97701)



Miscellaneous Collections

- United States Army in the World War 1917-1919 General Orders, GHQ, AEF Vol 16.  
<https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll7/id/852>
- FamilySearch [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United States World War I Cemetery Records](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_World_War_I_Cemetery_Records)
- U.S. Army Historian *Beginnings of the Quartermaster Graves Registration Service*  
[www.army.mil/article/128693/the\\_beginnings\\_of\\_the\\_quartermaster\\_graves\\_registration\\_service](http://www.army.mil/article/128693/the_beginnings_of_the_quartermaster_graves_registration_service)

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