

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

CAVE HILL NATIONAL CEMETERY, ROSTRUM

HALS No. KY-8-B

Location: 701 Baxter Avenue, Louisville, Jefferson County, Kentucky

The Cave Hill National Cemetery rostrum is located at latitude 38.248835, longitude -85.720442 (North American Datum of 1983). The coordinate represents the structure's southwest corner.

Present owner: National Cemetery Administration,
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Construction date: 1898

Builder / Contractor: unknown

Description: The Cave Hill rostrum is a 36' wide x 22' deep open-air podium surmounted by twelve Tuscan-order columns ranged in three rows of four. The podium is rectangular except for a curved central projection on its southeast, or front, side. A flight of six steps leads onto the podium on the southwest side. A handrail runs around the perimeter of the podium and down the steps.

The walls of the podium are built of quarry-faced ashlar blocks laid in irregular courses. A concrete coping forms the edge of the rostrum's concrete floor. The steps and the columns are also concrete, the latter being complete with bases, capitals, and abacuses. The handrails are made of iron pipe.

Beams formerly ran between the columns to support a pergola-like trellis roof. The roof was removed sometime after 1947.

Site context: The irregularly shaped 4-acre Cave Hill National Cemetery meanders across rolling hills in the northwestern corner of the private 300-acre Cave Hill Cemetery. The rostrum sits in the point of a roughly triangular section of the cemetery, downslope from rows of graves that run parallel to the front of the rostrum. The rostrum has a particularly picturesque setting, being sited only a couple dozen feet from a lily pond and being surrounded by trees and shrubs on the rear and one side. The rostrum faces southeast, and the cemetery flagstaff, located in an adjacent section of the grounds, is visible from it.

History: Cave Hill Cemetery, a large private garden-park cemetery in Louisville, opened to burials in 1848. In 1861, the cemetery company donated 0.65 acre in the northwest corner of the grounds to the federal government for a soldiers' lot. This was expanded by the purchase of another 0.96 acre in 1863, the same year the lot was officially established as a national cemetery under the care and management of the U.S. Army Quartermaster's Department. Additional donations and purchases brought the cemetery to just over 4 acres by 1912. Among these transactions was a donation from the cemetery company of 2,366 square feet (0.05 acre) in 1897 to provide a site for a permanent rostrum. This transfer came with the express condition that any land from the donation not directly occupied by the rostrum be reserved "for planting and ornamental purposes" only.

There had not previously been a rostrum in this cemetery. In 1873, the Quartermaster's Department built its first permanent speaker's stand at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. Six years later, the army began to systematically construct permanent platforms for use during Decoration Day ceremonies at other national cemeteries. Seven were built in 1879, including the ones in the national cemeteries at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; Antietam, Maryland; Chattanooga, Tennessee; and Vicksburg, Mississippi. Funding for this program was limited, and construction proceeded slowly. One rostrum was built in 1881, five in 1882, and one in 1883. No more were built until 1886, when the department adopted a simpler and more cost-effective design than it had used for the previous rostrums.

In January 1882, members of the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Association of Louisville petitioned Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs to have a rostrum built at Cave Hill "of character similar to those erected in other National Cemeteries. The large number of soldiers buried at Cave Hill and the fact that Decoration Day is always duly observed there, make it very appropriate that such a rostrum should be erected." The association's petition was forwarded through Lt. Col. James A. Ekin, the deputy quartermaster general responsible for the cemetery, who endorsed the idea. "I know of no National Cemetery in the Country," he wrote, "where there would be more propriety in erecting a Rostrum than at the beautiful and classic Cave Hill National Cemetery." He estimated the cost to build a rectangular rostrum similar to those already constructed elsewhere at a little more than the \$1,171 recently spent to build the rostrum at New Albany National Cemetery in Indiana, a mere 8 miles from Cave Hill. In reply, Maj. Benjamin C. Card in Washington asked Ekin where a rostrum would go in the cemetery — "Is there sufficient space?" he wrote.

In answer to this question, Ekin forwarded a plan devised by cemetery superintendent John T. Hopkins to place a rostrum at the north end of Section A, the oblong tract that formed the original portion of the soldiers' lot acquired in 1861. To build in this location would have required relocating eight graves as well as the cemetery's flagstaff and gun

monument; nevertheless, "The space is abundant," Ekin assured Card. "Please give us a Rostrum for Cave Hill." "I am inclined to think that a rostrum of the usual dimensions would be rather large for the purpose," Card replied, suggesting a smaller one of a different shape might suit, as was to be done in the cemetery at the Soldiers' Home Cemetery the District of Columbia. On the same day that Card wrote to Ekin – February 17, 1882 – Col. S. B. Holabird, assistant quartermaster general in charge of finance, informed the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Association that "there are no funds at present available for the construction of a rostrum at the Cave Hill National Cemetery, but it is the intention of the department to erect one as soon as funds can be spared for that purpose."

Colonel Ekin asked to be sent the plans and specifications for a modified rostrum. Civil Engineer James Gall Jr. inspected the cemetery in April 1882, and repeated the call for a rostrum. "I also recommend that a Rostrum be erected on the vacant ground near the flagstaff. I thought there was not room enough at this point, and it is the only available spot, but I now see that there is just room enough, and that a Rostrum built there would be quite an advantage to the place. The number of people that attend the Decoration ceremonies is quite large, and a handsome, permanent structure of the kind is needed for their accommodation."

No rostrum was built, however. R. M. Kelly, a leading member of the Louisville association, wrote in March 1884 to Postmaster General Walter Q. Gresham, who had practiced law in nearby New Albany, seeking to have the association's request passed directly to Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln. Kelly believed that Deputy Quartermaster General Lt. Col. R. N. Batchelder, who had taken charge of the office of national cemeteries on June 1, 1882, was blocking the project, probably because of lack of space, but, as Quartermaster General S. B. Holabird informed Lincoln, "The erection of a Rostrum at the Cave Hill Cemetery has been deferred for want of funds which could be applied to this purpose without diverting them from more urgent and necessary works of improvement. For the same reason it is still impracticable to comply with the within request." Furthermore, as Holabird wrote Ekin's successor, Col. Rufus Saxton, "When funds can be spared for the purpose, the department will be glad to provide a suitable rostrum for this cemetery, and relieve the memorial association from the expense of erecting temporary structures, but we have not the means to do it at present."

The quartermaster's department began constructing rostrums again in 1886, and built thirty-two at the rate of four to seven a year from 1886 through 1897. None of these were erected at Cave Hill, and it is clear that lack of space was the key reason. Only the donation of a special tract of land expressly for a rostrum site in 1897 led to the construction of a rostrum at Cave Hill. It was completed May 19, 1898, and dedicated at the Decoration Day ceremonies on May 30 that year. The contractor hired to build it is unknown.

The trellis beams that once shaded the rostrum were repaired using Works Progress Administration funding in 1936, and the floor was resurfaced with concrete in 1942. The roof structure was removed sometime after 1947.

Cave Hill National Cemetery was transferred from the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army Memorial Affairs Agency to the Veterans Administration (now the Department of Veterans Affairs) in 1973. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1998 as part of the Civil War Era National Cemeteries Multiple Property Submission. The much larger Cave Hill Cemetery that abuts the national cemetery has been listed in the register since 1979.

Sources:

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Sammartino, Therese T. National Register of Historic Places nomination for "Cave Hill National Cemetery." Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1998.

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Historian: Michael R. Harrison, 2012

Project Information: The documentation of lodges and rostrums in the national cemeteries was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), one of the Heritage Documentation Programs of the National Park Service, Richard O'Connor, Chief. The project was sponsored by the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) of

the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Sara Amy Leach, Senior Historian. Project planning was coordinated by Catherine Lavoie, Chief of HABS. Historical research was undertaken by HABS Historians Michael R. Harrison and Virginia B. Price. NCA Historian Jennifer M. Perunko provided research and editorial support. Field work for selected sites was carried out and measured drawings produced by HABS Architects Paul Davidson, Ryan Pierce, and Mark Schara.