

BALL'S BLUFF NATIONAL CEMETERY

Battle of Ball's Bluff

On October 20, 1861, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac, ordered Brig. Gen. Charles P. Stone to scout Confederate forces on the Virginia side of the Potomac River near Leesburg.

Early on the morning of October 21, Union forces crossed the river to attack what was reported to be an unguarded Confederate camp. Instead, they came upon Southern troops under the command of Confederate Col. Nathan "Shanks" Evans and fighting ensued.



Robert Knox Sneden's map of the Battle of Ball's Bluff, 1861. Union forces are shown in purple, Confederate in red. Virginia Historical Society.



Union soldiers recover comrades' bodies from the Potomac River, c. 1861. Library of Congress.

Senator Baker's Command

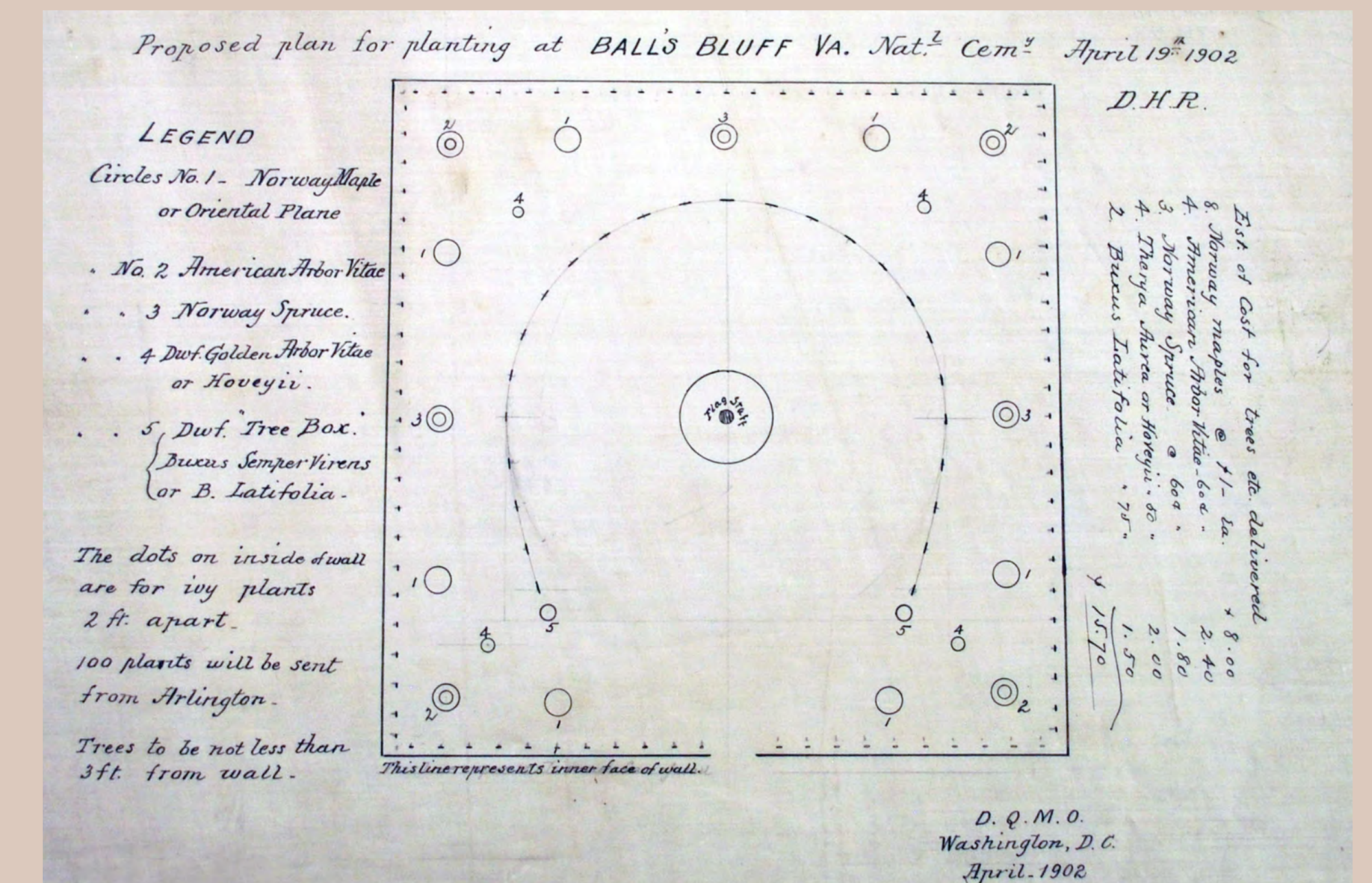
Stone ordered Col. Edward Baker, a U.S. senator, to Ball's Bluff to take charge of Union forces. Baker attempted to reinforce the troops but was delayed crossing the Potomac River. Only four small boats were available to transport soldiers. This extra time allowed Evans to call in additional Confederate forces from Leesburg. By late afternoon Baker was dead. Panicked Union soldiers retreated. Many drowned as they tried to swim across the river. The Union dead were buried on the battlefield in shallow, hastily dug graves.

Creating a National Cemetery

In April 1862, a surgeon with the Pennsylvania Volunteers was sent to Ball's Bluff to identify their dead. He reported graves in poor condition scattered on the bluff, and that it was impossible to "determine the State to which the bodies had belonged."

In 1865, Lt. Col. James M. Moore, U.S. Army, recommended the "remains be disinterred, and removed to a suitable site on the bluff; and their graves be marked Unknown United States Soldiers, killed October 21st, 1861."

By 1871, the remains of fifty-four soldiers had been interred in twenty-five graves arranged in a semi-circle around a central path. A red sandstone wall was built to enclose the cemetery. Attempts to have the remains moved to Arlington National Cemetery, the last in 1882, were ultimately rejected. Pvt. James Allen, Co. H, 15th Massachusetts Infantry, is the only known burial in the second-smallest national cemetery. The battlefield and cemetery were designated a National Historic Landmark in 1984.



Cemetery landscape plan, 1902. National Archives and Records Administration.