

TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution, located in the Burial Ground of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House, honors an unidentified soldier whose remains were unearthed and reburied at this site in 1826. It honors as well the many other patriots who died helping secure Independence for the United States of America, and especially those who now rest in unmarked graves. It reminds us of the gratitude we owe all those who have served to enable the United States to remain a free and independent nation.

The Unknown Soldier is regularly honored with services conducted by the National Society of the Children of the American Revolution, Daughters of the American Revolution, Sons of the American Revolution, Society of the Cincinnati, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and others.

We remain ever grateful to those who first secured our Independence and to those who have maintained it.

CREATION OF THE MEMORIAL AND ITS DEDICATION IN 1929

The Memorial was created through the leadership of the National Society Children of the American Revolution. It was dedicated on Lexington-Concord Day, April 19, 1929, with services in the Meeting House and at the gravesite. The service in the Meeting House was led by Mrs. Josiah H. Van Orsdel, president of the National Society of the Children of the American Revolution, and included two addresses — “Story of the Discovery of the Grave”, by John B. Gordon, member of Alexandria’s Second Presbyterian Church and American Legion Post 24, and “157,000 American Unknown War Dead Here and Abroad”, by James W. Good, U.S. Secretary of War. William Tyler Page, clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives and author of “The American’s Creed”, read “Epitaph of the Unknown Soldier”, which he had prepared for inscribing on the tabletop memorial (the words are presented below). Music was provided by the U.S. Army Band, which also joined with the church’s 1849 Erben organ to lead the singing of the Star Spangled Banner. The program concluded with a procession to the gravesite, which was accompanied by the solemn tolling of the church bell. Washington’s local radio station WRC carried a live broadcast of the program to a national radio audience.

EPITAPH TO THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER THAT APPEARS ON THE MEMORIAL

“Here lies a soldier of the Revolution whose identity is known but to God.
His was an idealism that recognized a Supreme Being, that planted religious liberty
on our shores, that overthrew despotism, that established a people’s government,
that wrote a Constitution setting metes and bounds of delegated authority,
that fixed a standard of value upon men above gold and lifted
high the torch of civil liberty along the pathway of mankind.
In ourselves this soul exists as part of ours, his memory’s mansion.”

THE OLD PRESBYTERIAN MEETING HOUSE, THE BURIAL GROUND, AND THE 1920S

The Old Presbyterian Meeting House was organized as a congregation in 1772 and today includes 1,000 members. Alexandria’s Presbyterians initiated public worship services in the town’s Assembly Hall during the 1760s. The original Meeting House, erected in 1775, was largely destroyed by fire in 1835, rebuilt in 1837, and continues in use today.

The churchyard burial ground is the final resting place for some 300 persons dating from the colonial and early national periods. After 1809, members of the congregation were buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery, located one mile west of here. Few of the gravesites in the churchyard burial ground remain marked.

Here lie the congregation's first pastor, the Rev. William Thom, its third pastor, the Rev. Dr. James Muir, and members of their families. Others buried here include John Carlyle (1720-1780) founding trustee and first over-seer of Alexandria; Dr. James Craik (1727-1814) surgeon general in the Continental Army and close friend of and physician to George Washington; William Hunter, Jr. (1731-1792) mayor of Alexandria and founder of the St. Andrew's Society; Lewis Nicola (1717-1807) Colonel in the Corps of Invalids of the Continental Army and member of the Society of Cincinnati; numerous veterans of the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War; and many founding members of Alexandria-Washington Masonic Lodge No. 22, which George Washington served as master.

In 1826, when construction to expand the sanctuary of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church was undertaken, the body of an unidentified man clothed in a Revolutionary War uniform was unearthed. The body was reinterred within the current burial ground. The memory that the remains of an unidentified soldier had been re-buried at this site was carried into the twentieth century by Mary Gregory Powell (1837-1928). She was an active member of the Meeting House congregation, as had been her family – her father, William Gregory (1789-1875), came to Alexandria from Scotland in 1807 and served many years as an elder and member of the church committee. Young Mary Gregory regularly placed flowers on the unmarked grave.

Several events during the 1920s influenced the creation of this Memorial. One was the memorialization of unknown soldiers who died in World War I. On Armistice Day 1920, the second anniversary of the signing of the treaty that ended World War I, memorials to unknown soldiers were dedicated in Great Britain and France. The United States dedicated its memorial to an unknown soldier of that war, the Tomb to the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery, on Armistice Day, November 11, 1921. The sarcophagus-style carved monument that now tops the memorial's burial vault, was added in 1932.

The 1920s also witnessed a surge of interest in preserving and honoring our colonial heritage. Among Alexandria's earliest preservation-restoration efforts was the Meeting House, initiated by Second Presbyterian Church in 1925. At the completion of that project in 1927, project-chair John B. Gordon contacted Mary Gregory Powell about the unknown soldier's grave and a decision was made to formally mark the gravesite. Leadership in that task was provided by the National Society of the Children of the American Revolution.

On February 22, 1928, a temporary marker was placed at the gravesite in conjunction with Alexandria's celebration of George Washington's birthday. Dedication services held that day followed traditions dating from the colonial period – participants first gathered at Gadsby's Tavern and then joined in a processional walk through the city's streets to the Meeting House, where a service was conducted and Mary Powell dedicated the first marker. The tabletop memorial that you see today was dedicated a year later, at ceremonies conducted on April 19, 1929.
