

Old military remains to get fitting reburial

By Aaron Mackey By Aaron Mackey

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For dozens of soldiers who guarded Tucson during its frontier era, eternal rest has been anything but peaceful.

Originally buried in a military cemetery Downtown, soldiers from the Civil War and ensuing conflicts with nearby Apache tribes were later exhumed and taken to the relocated Fort Lowell, which had moved from the city's center to the banks of the Rillito River.

But the exhumation work, done by a doctor during the summer of 1884, was far from thorough. Remnants of the soldiers — along with a few full skeletons — left behind recently were discovered during archaeological work under way on the site of a future court complex.

Those remains that made it to the fort's new location were taken to San Francisco after the fort closed in 1892, all but ensuring that remains left Downtown would never be reconnected to the soldiers buried in California.

Local historians, archaeologists and veterans officials say that while they can't reunite the remains, they want to ensure the forgotten fragments of soldiers receive the honor they deserve, along with some permanent peace.

To do so, the remains would be moved to the Southern Arizona Veterans' Memorial Cemetery in Sierra Vista in what officials hope will be the last disturbance of the long-dead soldiers.

The roughly 60 soldiers would have their own portion of the cemetery with period gravestones, and officials plan to erect some small monument that describes what the soldiers have gone through.

"It's obviously a really difficult situation and one we'd prefer we'd not be in," said Roger Anyon, Pima County cultural resources program manager. "But it's the most appropriate way to honor them."

Downtown site opened in 1862

The cemetery was first used in 1862 soon after military officials had established Camp Lowell, which was later moved and renamed Fort Lowell, in the heart of Tucson. Located near present-day North Stone Avenue and Alameda Street, the cemetery bordered civilian burial grounds that began at roughly the same time.

At first the post was occupied mostly by volunteer infantry and cavalry soldiers from California, who in 1862 would become some of the first casualties to be buried in the cemetery after a now-famous skirmish with Confederate troops at Picacho Peak.

The garrison grew to include members of the 8th, 21st, 23rd and 32nd Infantry as well as the 1st and 5th Cavalry.

In an effort to separate military dead from civilian burials, Army officials built an adobe wall around their cemetery in 1868 that eventually held roughly 100 soldiers, ranging from captains to privates, said Scott O'Mack, a principal investigator with Statistical Research Inc., which is conducting field work on the site.

But the wall didn't last long. Within a decade of its construction, Tucsonans had torn down nearly all of it, using the precious adobe to build other structures in the city, said Albert Franks, a volunteer with the Arizona Historical Society who has done extensive research on the military cemetery.

After the walls came down, the cemetery quickly fell into disrepair. People rode wagons through it, possibly damaging grave markers and dropping trash. It's also likely there were grave robbers, Franks said.

Exhumation work unclear

The site stopped being used after military officials moved the post away from the city's core in 1873, and in 1884 the army asked local Dr. W.J. White to move the buried out to their new location.

Little is known about how White exhumed the soldiers, but history shows the work was done quickly and without much attention to detail, Franks said.

Working in June 1884, White likely only unearthed soldiers who still had grave markers, moving them to the fort's location near present day North Craycroft and East Fort Lowell roads.

Because of the poor condition of the cemetery and the quick work done by White, it's easy to see how some soldiers' remains were left behind, Franks said.

Using a manifest that details where soldiers were buried, archaeologists working at the site have been able to identify 53 burials and expect to find a few more, O'Mack said.

The graves unearthed in the past year contained everything from a few small bone fragments to partial spines to three full skeletons.

As for the remains that made it to the fort's second location, they didn't stay there long. In 1892, after the Army closed the fort, they were exhumed once more and taken to San Francisco.

This time the exhumation work was done by a local rancher, said David T. Faust, Fort Lowell Museum curator.

Once in California, the soldiers who could be identified were given grave markers and thought to be permanently at peace.

While it would be nice to try to match the remains recently unearthed Downtown with those in San Francisco, it would be practically impossible, O'Mack said.

Instead, what will probably happen is that the soldiers will have two grave sites: one in San Francisco and one in Sierra Vista.

"Those names are going to appear in two places," he said.

Historical accuracy sought

A veterans official in Sierra Vista said he wants to ensure the soldiers are given a respectful resting place, complete with a historically accurate cemetery.

The veterans' cemetery would be similar in many ways to the cemetery found within nearby Fort Huachuca, with a stone and iron wall surrounding an acre of land, said Joe Larson, the cemetery's director.

Veterans Affairs has agreed to donate 1800s-style headstones, and the remains would be stored in small wooden boxes that feature the rank and unit insignia of the soldiers, if they are identified.

The boxes are being constructed by a volunteer who lives near Sierra Vista.

The city of Sierra Vista has donated \$30,000 to the project, which Larson estimates will cost \$100,000 and would be complete sometime after 2009.

People have been donating money by purchasing small pavers that will line the cemetery.

Money also must be found to set up some sort of exhibit explaining the journey of the soldiers and their remains.

The goal is to create a place where the soldiers can be honored in a way that salutes their service, Larson said.

"We want these soldiers to rest among their comrades and near an active Army post," he said.

Crews excavating for a future courts building Downtown have found the remains of almost 800 people — and the number is expected to grow as the project continues.

Through the first week of November, crews had found 728 burial pits and had identified 799 people from the site, near North Stone Avenue and Alameda Street, said Roger Anyon, Pima County cultural resources program manager. Some people shared the same graves, he explained.

The main portion of the graveyard, where Coconuts nightclub once stood, has been excavated.

The crews still have work to do under an alley that runs along the southern edge of the cemetery as well as a good portion underneath Council Street, which runs parallel to Alameda.

There could be several hundred other burials within those locations, Anyon said. The remains, which are predominantly from a civilian graveyard that opened in the early 1860s, are being exhumed to make way for a \$76 million joint Justice Court/Municipal Court complex.

The excavations likely will continue through spring of next year, Anyon said, with the remains being examined and documented after that.

The process could take a year or more, meaning the remains won't be ready to be reburied until April 2009.

Because no records exist detailing the civilian burials, it will be impossible to identify the civilian remains and try to reach descendants, Anyon said.

If remains are determined to be of local tribal descent, they will be turned over to the tribes. Otherwise, the remains will be buried at All Faiths Cemetery on the East Side.

- *Contact reporter Aaron Mackey at 573-4138 or at amackey@azstarnet.com.*