



A Walk Down Rozier Street: Why Alton's Confederate monument is different

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ALTON - The words "Confederate monument" invoke a sort of knee-jerk reaction these days, regardless on which side of current events someone finds themselves.

It evokes enough such reactions that the United States Federal Government currently has a paid guard on duty down one of Alton's quietest streets. No matter how one views the current debate about the future of Confederate monuments, the monument in Alton is different. It is a massive obelisk atop a green hill down Rozier Street in Alton. It was erected by the same government currently guarding it; not funded by a Lost Cause.

The obelisk stands as a singular grave marker for 1,354 soldiers who died as prisoners of war away from their homeland either in the Alton Confederate Prison or the aptly-titled "Smallpox Island." Many of these soldiers were buried in mass graves or

unmarked graves. Because of this, the land in which they were ultimately laid to rest was left as a verdant mound capped by a large marker, which bears all of their names, homes and military units.

According to the information provided on a panel at the monument, many Union and Confederate soldiers perished from smallpox on several islands in the Mississippi River. Most of their bodies were never returned to the mainland. Those men were among the first 1,640 prisoners arriving in Alton from the Confederate surrender of Fort Donelson, a Confederate stronghold on the Cumberland River west of Clarksville, Tennessee.

Between that surrender in February 1862 and the end of the war, nearly 11,760 Confederate prisoners entered the prison in Alton. Nearly 1,300 died there and were buried on the prison grounds.

Prisoners buried at the prison were given both coffins and markers, and records were kept of their deaths by W.H. Hart, who buried most of the prisoners. However, after the United States assumed control of the cemetery in 1867, Henry Nichols, a United States Army quartermaster clerk spoke with Hart and utilized the record book, but declared it was "utterly impossible to identify the graves of those buried there" in 1899.

The Commission for Making Graves of the Confederate Dead tried again to document these burials in 1907, according to the informative panel, but they too were met without success.

Realizing the graves could never properly be marked, the commission, after being petitioned by the Daughters of Confederate Veterans commissioned the Van Amringe Granite Company to erect the currently-existing obelisk, which is 57-feet tall. It was completed in 1909. Only the names of soldiers who died there were made as inscriptions on bronze plaques at its base. Civilian deaths were not recorded on the obelisk.

While many monuments currently being simultaneously protested and defended in city streets across the nation decorate notable Confederate figures, the one in Alton stands toward the sky to honor more than 1,300 men who died as prisoners of war far from their homes from prison conditions and smallpox. Each name on the bronze plaque represents another unmarked grave beneath an otherwise quiet Alton street.

The Federal Government has contracted a company to place a guard on duty at that site 24/7 until further notice, but the obelisk on Rozier Street is different than the non-sentient carved slabs of marble and stone causing chaos elsewhere. It does not stand as a valiant reminder of one of the most brutal conflicts in American history. It stands as a quiet titan to remind everyone who walks up its hill of the disorder, malaise, death and general hell of war itself.



ERECTED
BY THE
UNITED STATES
TO MARK THE BURIAL PLACE
OF
1054 CONFEDERATE
SOLDIERS WHO DIED HERE
AND AT THE
SMALLPOX HOSPITAL
ON THE ADJACENT ISLAND
WHILE PRISONERS OF WAR
AND WHOSE GRAVES
CANNOT NOW BE IDENTIFIED