

Arlington National Cemetery: A Monument to Heroes

by Michelle Clark, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Situated just west of Washington D.C., across the Potomac River, is one of the most famous cemeteries in our nation. Arlington National Cemetery is not just a final resting place for America's heroes and a peaceful refuge from the hustle of downtown D.C., but a memorial to many chapters of this country's history.

The area now occupied by Arlington National Cemetery was originally the home of George Washington Parke Custis. His father, John Parke Custis, was Martha Washington's son from a previous marriage and was adopted by George Washington. Custis hired the same architect who designed the U.S. Capitol to draw the plans for his estate home, which would be located high above the city of Washington D.C. When visitors would remark on his excellent views of the city, Custis was known to reply that the city "had an excellent view of him."

The first graves at Arlington were filled during the Civil War. Since that time, veterans from every American war and conflict have been buried here. In fact, there are more than 300,000 servicemen and their family members resting at Arlington National Cemetery.

Arlington is easily accessible by car with ample paid parking in a covered parking deck. The Metro station entrance is adjacent to the parking deck. The welcome center has a variety of exhibits and helpful information-picking up a map of the property is a must! You can also research the location of specific graves here. If you don't feel like walking the 600 acres that comprise Arlington National Cemetery you can purchase tickets for the Tourmobile in the visitor center.

Upon exiting the visitor center, the first site of interest is the grave of President William Howard Taft. Continue north on Custis Walk to the graves of President John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert F. Kennedy. This site was selected as the final place of rest for the fallen President due to his love of the remarkable views from that area. President Kennedy's widow and two infant children are also buried here. The graves are marked by the Eternal Flame and bordered with rocks from Cape Cod personally selected by the Kennedy family. Robert F. Kennedy's grave is simpler, marked with a small white headstone and cross similar to thousands of others in the cemetery.

Just above the Kennedy graves is Arlington House, George Washington Parke Custis' mansion. The house was passed on to Custis' daughter and

her famous husband, Confederate General Robert E. Lee. The Lees lived in the house for a period of time, and the house has been restored as a memorial to him. This is a great place to take in the panoramic views of the city. If you stand just west of the house you can get a glimpse of the top of the Pentagon as well. Located behind the house is a small museum and restrooms.

Probably one of the most popular attractions at Arlington National Cemetery is the Tomb of the Unknowns, located at the Memorial Amphitheater. There are three unknown servicemen interred here. The Changing of the Guard is a somber ceremony that occurs every 30 minutes during the summer months and every 60 minutes in October through March. The walk from the visitor center to the Tomb of the Unknowns is a brisk 20 minutes - uphill! Don't feel rushed to arrive for the ceremony on time, as you might overlook the beauty and serenity of the grounds. There is plenty of room for viewing the ceremony from the steps behind the Amphitheater. At the top of the steps is one of the more stunning views of Washington.

Between the Tomb of the Unknowns and the Amphitheater is the Memorial Display Room. Do take a few minutes to browse through the plaques, photographs and display cases that document the history of this tribute to the unknown servicemen, as well as the many soldiers lost during America's history. It's also a great place to escape the heat!

The Memorial Amphitheater is the site of national ceremonies that honor America's veterans. The Amphitheater will forever hold many chapters of U.S. history. During construction of the Amphitheater in 1915 many important artifacts were sealed in the cornerstone including a U.S. flag, copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, coins and postage stamps, a bible, a map of the city, and an autographed photo of President Woodrow Wilson.

Across from the Amphitheater on Memorial Drive are several points of interest. The grave of Audie Murphy, the most decorated combat soldier of World War II, is a simple white headstone marked with a small American flag. To the right of the Murphy grave are memorials to the crews of the Challenger and Columbia space shuttles. All seven of the crew killed on the Challenger mission and three of the astronauts killed in the Columbia mission are buried near these monuments. A memorial to the servicemen killed during the rescue attempt of American hostages held in Iran is located next to the shuttle monuments. Above these markers the mast of the USS Maine, sunk in Havana Harbor after an explosion in 1898, is visible. 229 sailors killed onboard the USS Maine are interred in a small plot next to the memorial, many of whom were never identified.

On average there are over 20 funerals taking place at the cemetery daily. During our visit we were able to witness a funeral procession that included a military band and escort troops, which preceded a horse-drawn caisson. Cemetery personnel instructed us that we are allowed to take photos at a respectful distance. As we continued our walk through the cemetery we saw Army soldiers preparing a gun salute for a funeral.

Besides the two presidents buried at Arlington, twelve former Supreme Court justices have been laid to rest here, including Earl Warren, Thurgood Marshall, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Other notable grave sites include Daniel James, the first African-American four-star general; Joe Louis, champion heavyweight boxer and World War II veteran; and Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the architect who designed Washington D.C.

If you're planning a visit to Washington D.C., a stop at Arlington National Cemetery can be a pleasant change of pace from the hustle and bustle going on in the city below. Here are a few tips to make your visit to Arlington more enjoyable:

- * You will be doing a lot of walking, so wear comfortable clothing and sturdy walking shoes. The only alternative to walking is buying a Tourmobile ticket. Handicapped visitors can get a special pass at the visitor center to drive inside the cemetery.

- * Visits to most of the monuments and sites will require three to four hours. During the summer the temperature can climb quickly, so I would suggest arriving early in the morning. The cemetery opens at 8:00 am, is open until 7:00 pm in the summer and 5:00 pm the rest of the year.

- * Stay hydrated by taking a water bottle. But please remember that this is a place of respect and not a picnic site.

- * Don't rush-take time to appreciate the beautiful landscaping and architecture.

- * Bring your camera-you'll be overwhelmed by the number of photo ops here!

About The Author: Michelle Clark is a self-professed thrill ride junkie and the mother of three teens who share in her obsession. Her goal is to experience as many theme parks as possible and stay in every Disney resort before she dies!

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