

## **2024 Save the Graves Veterans Projects**

**In 2024 Save the Grave undertook a number of veterans projects. Most of the effort, an astounding 1,250 hours of volunteer time, was spent on veteran headstones. We also created a veterans memorial area in Placerville Union Cemetery.**

### **Veterans Headstone Projects**

The veterans headstone project was, by far, our most work-intensive effort in 2024, consuming an estimated 1,250 hours.

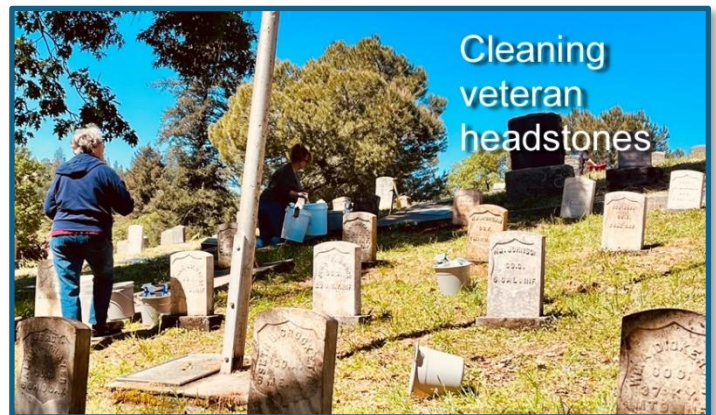
It had several goals:

1. Clean, straighten, or repair all existing veteran headstones as needed
2. Identify all the veterans in Placerville Union Cemetery
3. Create a list or map of veterans buried at Union Cemetery
4. Update veteran status on county interment database
5. Identify the veterans with no headstone
6. Apply for VA headstones
7. Install VA headstones

### **Clean and straighten veteran headstones**

Veterans were the emphasis in the headstone cleaning and straightening “parties” STG hosted in 2024. Those projects were partnerships with two large El Dorado Hills youth service groups and the Placerville LDS church. Their effort was impressive:

- 100 +/- headstones cleaned
- 20 headstones straightened
- 2 headstones repaired
- 30-40 flat brass veteran markers cleaned and oiled



*LDS VOLUNTEERS tackled the military headstones in the historic G.A.R. section of Union Cemetery during their annual Day of Giving.*



*BEFORE CLEANING*



*AFTER CLEANING*

## Attachment A – 2024-2025 Veteran Project Details

### 2025 Latrobe Fund Pre-Grant Questionnaire for Save the Graves

#### Identify all the veterans in Placerville Union Cemetery

We initially hoped to send an interment list to the VA and get a list of veterans in response. HA! How naïve. It quickly became obvious that we needed to confirm every burial in the cemetery. Complicating matters:

1. The headstones on the ground didn't match the interment list. There were many categories of disagreement:
  - a. Veteran status disagreement
  - b. Missing headstone
  - c. Headstone present but not included on interment database
  - d. Headstone in wrong place
    - i. Close, perhaps adjacent plot
    - ii. In another area of cemetery
    - iii. In another cemetery
  - e. Family headstone present but veteran not mentioned
  - f. Headstone present. Name close but not matching.
  - g. Headstone present but unreadable
  - h. etc.
2. There is no simple military service public lookup for veterans. Service records are considered private.
3. Individual genealogy sites such as Ancestry.com, Fold3 and Family Search are not reliable sources of veteran status. Reliable results require checking at least two sites.

#### Details

The first task was a crude reconciliation between a physical headstone inventory and the interment database. Michele created multiple oversized worksheets for each section, which we then took into the cemetery for a detailed, plot by plot, reconciliation survey. The results were disappointing. There were many mismatches and exceptions. We attempted to capture each one, in hopes of someday resolving each and updating the county's interment database, but with recent staff reductions that no longer seems like a possibility without a serious volunteer commitment to the requisite research and office time.

*FIELD SURVEY WORKSHEET - One of dozens of worksheets created to identify veterans with unmarked graves*

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Veterans ID Research Plot Status Codes	
Code	Plot Status
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Plot reviewed.
V	Worksheet indicates veteran
1	Name on worksheet. No marker on map.
2	Name not on worksheet. Name is on map. Record name on worksheet.
3	Name on worksheet. Name is on map but not in right spot.
4	Worksheet matches Map (Yay)
5	More research needed.
6	

**Terminology**  
**Marker** – Headstone  
**Section** – An area of the cemetery. There are many “lots” in a section.  
**Lot** – Eight adjacent plots in two rows of 4 is a lot. Within each section, lots are identified by a sequential number.  
**Plot** – Burial plot...i.e., grave. Plots are identified by a letter, a thru h.

*STATUS CODES - Trying to categorize the ways that the database didn't match what was on the ground proved nearly impossible. This “first pass” at status codes wasn't up to the task.*

Michele then reconciled the handwritten field notes on the worksheets and printed a new, updated batch of worksheets. We returned to the cemetery for another plot-by-plot survey to confirm which known burials had no headstone.

The resulting superset of cemetery “residents” became the starting point for the veterans research.

By this time we understood confirming veteran status would require thousands of lookups. What had started out as a simple database extract and update was going to require time consuming research on most of the 6,000-plus

interments at Placerville Union cemetery.

To shrink the size of the list, Michele excluded

- Children who died before military service age
- Women who died before WWI

That got the list down to roughly 5,000 names. We printed oversized worksheets that contained one line per name and included data that might assist a search, such as: birth date, death date, spouse, etc.

We then recruited the LDS Family Search volunteers in Placerville to look up all 5,000 names on the list and attempt to identify the veterans. They generously agreed.

We prepared training material and conducted two training sessions at the church. Left to their own devices, the curious amateur genealogists who volunteer for such projects might spend hours on a single name, and despite our instructions, some did, at first. We ultimately asked them to spend no more than 10 minutes on each lookup.

As the weeks wore on, progress slowed. It ultimately took four months to complete the lookups.

### **Create a list of all veterans in Placerville Union Cemetery and update county database**

Michele compiled the LDS research results into a single list of veterans buried in Union Cemetery. That list is available on our website, and also by scanning a Q/R code on the interpretive sign in Union Cemetery's new veterans memorial area, described below. A volunteer used the list to update the county's cemetery database.

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### **Identify unmarked veteran graves**

We took the list into the field for one more survey to confirm which veterans had unmarked graves. Michele created a separate list of veterans with unmarked graves.

Assuming 10 minutes for each of the 5,000 names, the Family Search volunteers spent an estimated 833 hours to complete the task. Field surveys, spreadsheet prep and updates, and reconciliation easily consumed another 100 hours. (Headstone cleaning and straightening consumed the balance of the estimated 1,250 hours.)

### **Request VA Headstones**

The next step required more research on the short list of veterans with unmarked graves. At this point we'd identified all the veterans in Union Cemetery, and the 40-45 with no headstone, but didn't have the requisite service records to request a VA headstone. Only direct descendants are allowed to request service records from the VA.

Over the next month our best research volunteers tried, ultimately in vain, to find service records or family members of these "lost veterans" who might have access to the service records required by the VA or be willing to request them.

In mid-November we requested an extension on the veterans TOT grant we'd received to undertake this and other veterans projects at Placerville Union Cemetery. Our request was denied, but we remained committed.

In early January we found a genealogist with a long resume in the death industry that was familiar with the VA headstone process. She agreed to attempt another deep-dive on our lost veterans and follow through with a VA headstone request for any she felt might qualify. We agreed to pay her \$150 per veteran.

Like her predecessors, she was unable to locate service termination records (typically a DD214). She found some potential descendants, but they did not respond to her requests for assistance. But she WAS able to locate ample and irrefutable evidence of veteran service on four of the first five she took on.

Importantly, she also established a relationship with the VA. Surprisingly, despite lacking the ABSOLUTELY REQUIRED (according to the VA website) discharge records, her four requests were successful. Four VA headstones are currently sitting at Union Cemetery, awaiting installation. We've given her the green light to proceed researching another ten.

### **Install headstones on unmarked veteran graves**

Last year we made arrangements for the installation of the VA headstones with a young man who'd helped setup shade structures during the last two STG October events. He had headstone installation and engraving experience and was starting a business as a



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memorialist last year. He agreed to install our VA headstones for \$250 each at the time, which was a bargain.

He is now working elsewhere. The offer expired. We now hope to self-install the VA markers. Our headstone repair specialist Bryan and his side-kick “Krow” have plenty of experience repairing and re-setting VA headstones that are already in the ground, and say they look forward to installing these 230-lb new ones. The pilot install is scheduled for Wednesday, March 26. Our plan for the balance of the VA headstone installations will depend on the results of the pilot.

If the volunteer installations prove infeasible, we will get bids from a local cemetery contractors and perhaps seek another veterans grant.



*Bryan and Krow straightening an old VA marker*

## Union Cemetery Veterans Memorial Project

The 2024 veterans projects included a veterans memorial area in Placerville Union Cemetery, located along the service road in the scenic northeast corner of the cemetery. It looks over the Grand Army of the Republic section of Union Cemetery, which includes a historic flagpole and many Civil War veterans burials. The memorial area includes a bench, an interpretive sign telling the fascinating history of the G.A.R., and an inscribed memorial rock, pictured on following pages.

Save the Graves purchased the bench and installed it with volunteers. The footing was also dug and poured by volunteers.

The memorial rock, or boulder, was donated by Kurt Raffetto, transported and installed by Brian and Lori Veerkamp, and inscribed by Emerson Green.

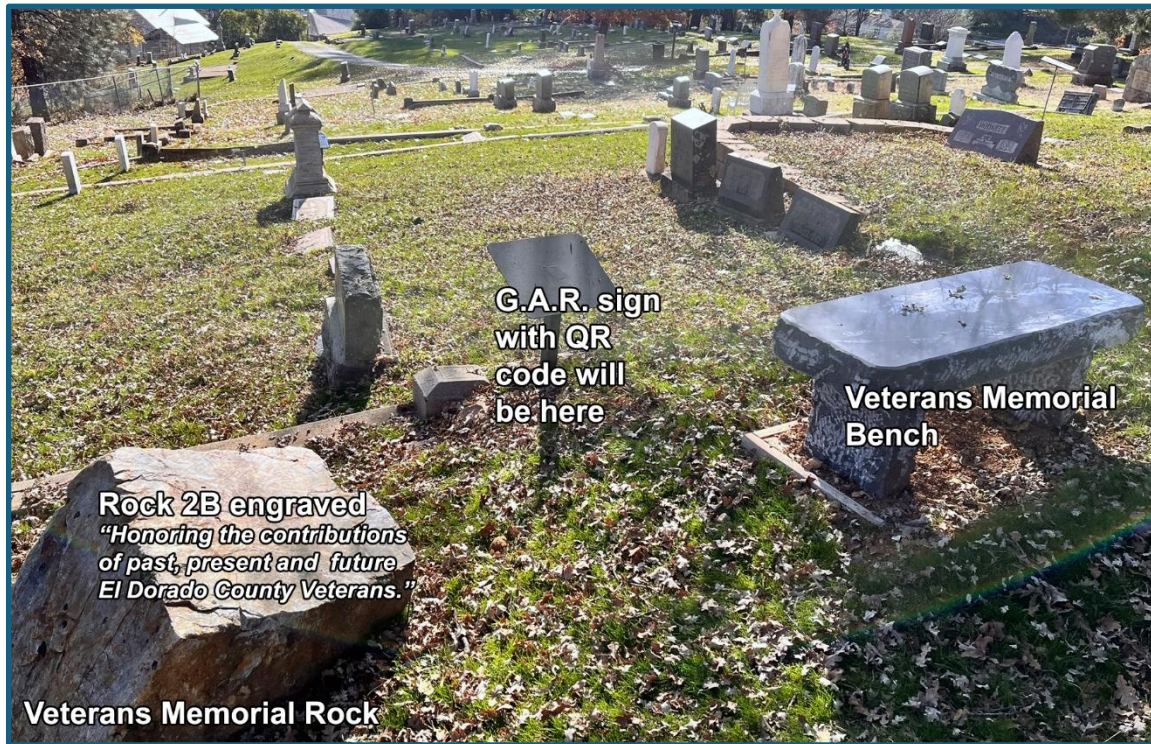


*VET BENCH - STG purchased and volunteers installed a hand-hewn granite bench above the historic GAR section of Union Cemetery. An interpretive sign explaining the Grand Army of the Republic and a memorial rock were placed adjacent to the bench.*



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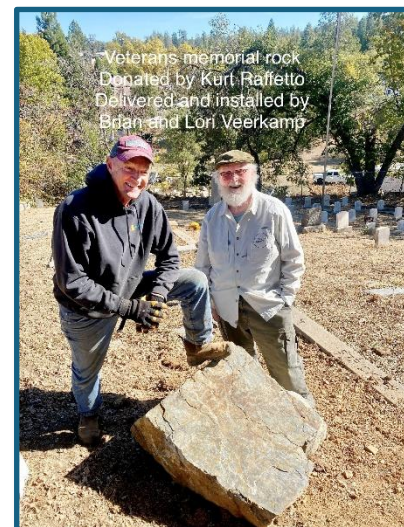
The G.A.R. interpretive sign was created by STG. It includes a Q/R code that links to a list of all veterans buried at Union Cemetery. The sign stand was built by students in the El Dorado High School metal shop.



*VETERANS MEMORIAL AREA at Placerville Union Cemetery. Located along the service road, above the historic G.A.R. section. Boulder was subsequently engraved; GAR sign was installed on the steel stand pictured above..*



*ROCK INSTALLERS - The Veerkamps delivered the veterans rock to Union Cemetery and nudged it into place. Brian is in the cab. Lori is standing,*



*BRIAN AND MIKE - Brian Veerkamp picked up the rock at the Raffetto Ranch, drove it down Main Street in the huge tractor pictured above, with Lori on the running board (Oh for a picture of that!) and delivered it to Union Cemetery.*



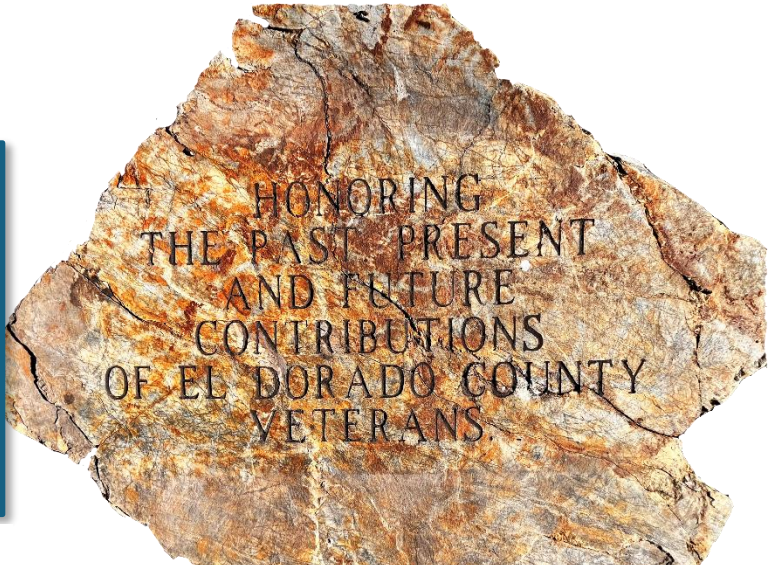
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## Veteran's Memorial Area Pictures



*BOULDER, BENCH, SIGN - Left to right. Historic G.A.R. section in background. Boulder inscription at right. Interpretive sign is below.*



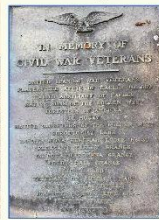
*Veterans Memorial rock inscription: "Honoring the past, present and future contributions of El Dorado County Veterans"*

### *The Grand Army of the Republic...*



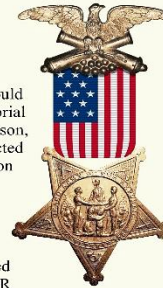
*Ceremony commemorating flagpole and plaque, likely late 1930s*

... emerged as the most influential among numerous veterans' organizations following the end of the Civil War. Founded on the principles of Fraternity, Charity and Loyalty, the GAR had many trappings of a fraternal order. It would become the most powerful single-issue political lobby of the late nineteenth century, advocating for a national Memorial Day holiday, veterans' benefits, and helping elect five presidents from its membership: Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Harrison, and McKinley. Members wore lapel pins featuring a bronze star badge hung from a small chiffon flag. The star depicted a soldier and sailor clasping hands in front of a liberty figure. The insignia can also be found on some GAR headstones.



Many historic cemeteries include a GAR area. Placerville's version lies before you on a peaceful east-facing hillside, marked by an aging flagpole and a brass plaque commemorating the fraternal, civic and business groups who sponsored it. The flagpole's hardware rusted away years ago, yet it remains as a symbol of the contributions of those buried beneath it who fought for their country. Its visible lean to the south is a small irony, since GAR membership excluded Confederate veterans.

The GAR was formed in April 1866 to "preserve and strengthen those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors and marines who united to suppress the late rebellion." The organization spread quickly in size and influence. In 1868, GAR Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan declared May 30 to be national Memorial Day, known for many years as Decoration Day, to honor fallen Union soldiers. Northern states quickly adopted the holiday.



In the south, influential organizations such as the Ladies Memorial Association and the United Daughters of the Confederacy used the holiday to preserve Confederate culture by erecting monuments and advocating the "Lost Cause" ideology, glorifying the Confederacy. By 1916, several southern states celebrated Confederate Memorial Day on June 3, the birthday of Confederate President Jefferson Davis or May 10, the date of his capture.

Confederate Memorial Day remains a holiday in Missouri, Louisiana, and Virginia. Georgia dropped the name, but still recognizes the day as a state holiday. Florida calls it Confederate Heroes Day, as does Texas, where state employees enjoy the day off with pay. Tennessee celebrates Confederate Decoration Day.

Interest in the GAR waned in the early 1870s. Many local posts were shuttered. In the 1880s, however, the GAR came roaring back. New leadership advocated Federal veteran pensions and veteran-friendly candidates. Black veterans joined in significant numbers and organized local posts. GAR membership ultimately peaked at 410,000 in 1890. The GAR formally dissolved when the last Union Civil War veteran died in 1956.

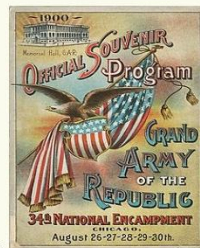


*Katy Brownell served in the Union Army*

Interestingly, three females became members of the GAR. Katy Brownell served in the Union Army with her husband Robert, a private in the 1st Rhode Island Infantry. They fought together at the First Battle of Bull Run. Sarah Emma Edmonds served for two years in the 2nd Michigan Infantry disguised as a man named Franklin Thompson. Dr. Mary Edwards Walker received the Congressional Medal of Honor for treating soldiers from both sides in her work as a Union Army surgeon until being captured by Confederate troops in 1864.



*United Daughters of the Confederacy*



"... guard their graves with sacred vigilance. Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic."

- GAR Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan

Save the Graves volunteers cleaned more than 150 veteran headstones and straightened more than 20 dozen which were leaning precariously. We are currently researching 40-plus veterans with no headstone, trying to find descendants so that we can order VA headstones for Union Cemetery's "lost veterans." For more information, or to get involved, go to [savethegraveseldorado.org](http://savethegraveseldorado.org).

To find your veteran in Union Cemetery, scan this QR code for a list of all Union Cemetery veterans and the location of their grave.



Funding for veteran's memorial bench, stone and sign provided by a 2023 El Dorado County Veterans TOT grant

*INTERPRETIVE SIGN placed in the new Veterans Memorial Area at Union Cemetery. Q/R code was added later, in the vacant area above the STG logo. A bench and a large memorial rock were also installed.*