



Updated June 9, 2026

Defense Primer: Arlington National Cemetery

Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) is a military cemetery administered by the Office of Army Cemeteries. Located in Arlington County, Virginia, the cemetery was created in 1864 during the Civil War from 200 acres of plantation land that once belonged to George Washington Parke Custis, step-grandson of the first U.S. President. Custis bequeathed his estate to his daughter, who had married U.S. Army 1st Lieutenant Robert E. Lee in 1831. At the start of the Civil War in 1861, the Custis Lee family fled the property. The Union Army then occupied and fortified the estate to help defend the nation’s capital. In 1863, Freedman’s Village was established on the southern portion of the property to assist formerly enslaved individuals in their transition to freedom by providing shelter, medical care, education, and training. On June 15, 1864, the War Department officially designated the burial site as a military cemetery. The first military burial took place on May 13, 1864, for Private William Henry Christman, a Union soldier from

Pennsylvania. Since then, over 16,000 Civil War soldiers have been laid to rest at ANC. This includes 2,111 Union and Confederate soldiers who are buried underneath the Tomb of the Civil War Unknowns in Section 26. In total, ANC contains the remains of nearly 5,000 unknown servicemembers.

After years of legal wrangling with the Custis Lee family, the U.S. government officially purchased the property on March 3, 1883, for \$150,000 (over \$4 million today). According to ANC, there are now approximately 430,000 veterans and their eligible dependents buried there.

Current Eligibility

Eligibility criteria for burial at ANC is in accordance with the *Code of Federal Regulations*, Title 32, Part 553, Sections 12 and 13. See **Table 1**.

Table 1. Current Eligibility Requirements for Burial and Inurnment at Arlington National Cemetery

Servicemember with Honorable Discharge	Inurnment in Columbarium Court or Niche Wall	In-Ground Burial (Casket or Urn)
Dies on Title 10 federal active duty (other than for training)	Yes	Yes
Dies on active duty for training only under Title 10	Yes	No
Veteran—retired from active duty; reserve retirees receiving retirement pay	Yes	Yes
Veteran—at least one day active duty other than for training	Yes	No
Veteran—received Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross (Air Force or Navy), Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star, or Purple Heart	Yes	Yes
Any member of a Reserve component of the Armed Forces and any member of the Army National Guard or the Air National Guard whose death occurs under honorable conditions while on active duty for training or performing full-time service	Yes	No
Any former prisoner of war who, while a prisoner of war, served honorably in the active military, naval, or air service; whose last period of service terminated honorably; and who died on or after November 30, 1993	Yes	Yes

Source: Arlington National Cemetery, “Establishing Eligibility,” <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Funerals/Eligibility>; and in accordance with 32 C.F.R. Part 553, §§12 and 13. Table is as updated as of June 5, 2026.

Proposed Changes to Eligibility

Due to capacity concerns, in September 2020, the Army proposed changes to the eligibility for in-ground burial and above-ground inurnment at ANC. The proposed rule would limit eligibility to certain groups and was issued in response to requirements in Section 598 of P.L. 115-232, the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY2019. The Army indicated that the changes would allow ANC to continue to function as an active burial ground “well into the future,” defined as 150 years. Without new eligibility restrictions, ANC states that it will run out of

space for new burials by 2041—or by the mid-2060s with the eventual completion of the Southern Expansion project. According to the Army, as of June 2026, approximately 67,200 burial spaces remain available within the current cemetery,

The public comment period on the proposed rule closed November 16, 2020. After considering public comments, the Army planned to publish a final rule, which they estimated would occur in August 2025, although the rule has not been finalized as of June 5, 2026. According to ANC, “implementation of revised eligibility will not affect

previously scheduled services.” The proposed revisions are not to affect veterans’ burial benefits or veteran eligibility at Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration or state veterans’ cemeteries.

Proposed Eligibility for In-Ground Interment:

- Servicemembers killed in action, to include repatriated remains
- Current and future Medal of Honor recipients (ANC to reserve 1,000 gravesites)
- Recipients of the Distinguished Service Cross, Navy Cross, Air Force Cross, or Silver Star
- Recipients of the Purple Heart
- Those who died in combat-related service while conducting uniquely military activities
- Former prisoners of war
- Presidents and Vice Presidents of the United States
- Veterans with combat service who also served out of uniform as government officials and made significant contributions to the nation’s security at the highest levels of public service

Proposed Eligibility for Above-Ground Inurnment:

- World War II–era veterans, to include legislated active-duty designees
- Retirees from the Armed Forces who are eligible to receive retired pay but are not otherwise eligible for interment
- Veterans who have served a minimum of two years on active duty and who have served in combat
- Veterans without combat service who also served out of uniform as government officials and made significant contributions to the nation’s security at the highest levels of public service

Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

On November 11, 2021, ANC marked the centennial commemoration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which was dedicated on November 11, 1921, to mark the grave of an American unknown soldier from World War I. In August 1956, President Eisenhower signed into law P.L. 84-975, approving the selection and interment of unknown soldiers from both World War II and Korea, and in May 1984, President Reagan interred a Vietnam War unknown soldier. In 1998, DNA testing confirmed that the unknown soldier from the Vietnam War was Air Force 1st Lieutenant Michael Joseph Blassie, who was later reinterred at the National Cemetery in St. Louis, MO. On September 17, 1999, the Vietnam tomb was rededicated to honor all missing U.S. servicemembers from the Vietnam War.

Expansion Plans

ANC occupies 639 acres of land in Arlington County, Virginia. Since its inception, ANC has expanded to meet the demand for more burial space. The latest expansion is the Southern Expansion Program, which includes the Defense Access Roads (DAR) and Southern Expansion projects.

Southern Expansion

What would become known as the Southern Expansion program started in 1998 with the ANC Master Plan, which identified a former Navy annex site as suitable interment space. Through extensive public engagement and feedback over the next two decades, these efforts to expand ANC developed into two distinct but interconnected projects: the Federal Highway Administration DAR and Southern Expansion projects. The DAR project consists of roadway realignments to increase safety and capacity of roadways in the area and add “multimodal transportation capacity.” Section 2105 of the NDAA for FY2019 authorized \$60 million for ANC extension projects. The Southern Expansion project, which aims to add 80,000 additional interment and burial spaces, is split into several phases: Phase I creates retaining walls for the site of the new Operations Complex, Phase II constructs the Operations Complex, and Phase III expands burial grounds and columbaria. According to ANC, the DAR project and Phase I are anticipated to be completed in September 2026. Phase II is scheduled for completion in November 2026. The contract for the construction of Phase III was awarded in February 2026, and construction has since started.

Relevant Statutes and Regulations

32 C.F.R. §553.11. General rules governing eligibility for interment, inurnment, and memorialization at Arlington National Cemetery

85 *Federal Register* 57640 (Sept. 15, 2020). Proposed Rule on Army Cemeteries

38 U.S.C. §2410. Burial of cremated remains in Arlington National Cemetery

38 U.S.C. §2411. Prohibition against interment or memorialization in the National Cemetery Administration or Arlington National Cemetery of persons committing Federal or State capital crimes

Related CRS Reports

CRS Report R44426, *Military Funeral Honors for Veterans*

CRS Report R41386, *Veterans’ Benefits: Burial Benefits and National Cemeteries*

Selected Sources

ANC, “Proposed Revised Eligibility Criteria”

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Southern Expansion Project website and ANC Project News and Information.

U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, “Arlington National Cemetery Defense Access Roads (DAR) Project”

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