

Cremated Remains Dumped in Arlington Landfill

More burial mix-ups unearthed at the troubled national cemetery

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Records at Arlington National Cemetery suggest that workers found an urn of cremated remains that had been dumped — presumably accidentally — in a dirt landfill, reburied those remains as an unknown soldier, and kept the whole thing quiet.

With the publication of this article, Salon has now disclosed four separate cases in which the cemetery discovered unmarked remains due to burial glitches, mostly poor record-keeping. In a [fifth case](#), the cemetery accidentally buried the remains of one service member on top of another in the same grave. Salon's reporting has led the Army to launch an investigation of record-keeping problems at the cemetery.

Gravestones simply marked "Unknown" are easy to find scattered throughout the sprawling acres of perfectly aligned headstones at Arlington. In addition to the famous Tomb of the Unknowns, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of unknown soldiers buried there, dating back to the Civil War.

These should be old graves. The cemetery interred the last soldier rendered anonymous by war back in 1984 because DNA has rapidly improved the process of identifying remains.

But a [Salon investigation](#) has turned up internal cemetery records that show that sloppy record-keeping, not the ravages of war, blurred the identities of some of those unknown soldiers at Arlington. In some cases cemetery officials lost track of the identity of remains during burial operations and simply erected an "Unknown" headstone above those graves when they could not straighten it out.

In the case of the urn apparently found in the dirt landfill, the internal cemetery burial records read: "Unknown cremains found in Project 90 March 1, 2002."

"Project 90" refers to the year, 1990, when construction was supposed to begin on 40 acres of then-vacant land on the eastern edge of the cemetery along Jefferson Davis Highway. Work finally began on that undeveloped land in the spring of 2005, and it is now cleared and ready for more graves. In March 2002, however, Arlington used Project 90 land only as a vast repository for excess dirt from graves — a landfill — according to interviews with former cemetery workers, satellite images, and pictures of that area from the cemetery's own [Web site](#). Today, the new dirt landfill is located just to the southwest of Project 90.

The documents in this case show that the day after discovering the urn in 2002, cemetery officials had it buried three feet down in grave 5253 of Section 69 of the cemetery. Officials then ordered an "Unknown" headstone, according to the documents. That headstone still stands there, near a stone wall, in an out-of-the-way section of the cemetery at the very

southern edge of the sprawling grounds.

A headstone stands at grave 5253. Cemetery records suggest workers found an unidentifiable urn in the cemetery's dirt landfill and buried it here.

Salon has also obtained burial records for another unknown grave, No. 4791 in Section 33 of the cemetery. Burial records show that on Nov. 25, 1981, the cemetery ordered an unknown marker after workers went to bury a service member in that plot and "that grave was dug for an interment and there was a body there."

The headstones labeled "Unknown" above the urn that was apparently fished from the landfill in 2002 and above the remains from 1981 are unremarkable. A passerby would probably assume the remains were rendered unidentifiable from some war long ago.

[Previous statements](#) from [top cemetery officials](#) on these issues have proved to be conflicting or incorrect. The cemetery spokeswoman, Kaitlin Horst, recently informed Salon that the cemetery would not answer any more questions about Salon's reporting. The reason? Army Secretary John McHugh recently [announced an investigation](#) into the issues already raised in this series of articles.

"It would be inappropriate to comment further due to the ongoing investigation by the Army inspector general's office," Horst told Salon. "Anyone with information pertinent to the investigation should contact the Army inspector general's office."

The Army, which oversees Arlington, responded likewise. "Anyone with information pertinent to the investigation should contact the Army inspector general's office," spokesman Gary Tallman said.

The remains found in the cemetery landfill are a disturbing new wrinkle in the story of botched paperwork that has resulted in an unknown number of burial mix-ups at Arlington. Sources familiar with Arlington's operations have long argued that some whole urns containing cremated remains likely go into the landfill, sometimes referred to as the "borrow pit," but could not provide hard evidence until now.



The burial records for grave 5253. In March 2002, the cemetery used Project 90 land only as a dirt landfill.

According to sources familiar with burials at Arlington, here is one potential scenario for how that might happen: The cemetery buries married couples together in one grave at Arlington, stacked one on top of the other. If the spouse who dies first is cremated, workers bury the urn three feet down. If the other spouse dies some years later and is buried in a coffin, the coffin goes in seven feet down in the same grave. The second burial obviously requires that workers first carefully remove the urn and then rebury it on top of the coffin. During the second burial, however, bungled paperwork or sloppiness might cause workers to unknowingly scoop up the urn with the dirt. The urn would then end up in the landfill.



The burial records for grave 4791. It says workers found a “body there” when digging in what was supposed to be an empty plot.

Salon [previously reported](#) on cases where the cemetery also found unknown, unmarked remains in what were supposed to be empty graves. In those previous cases, cemetery officials left the plots unmarked, with no headstone at all — not even one marked as unknown. Workers unexpectedly discovered caskets in graves that were supposed to be empty in May 2003 and then again in January 2009. (Cemetery officials now say they know the identity of the remains in those two graves by having studied burial paperwork from surrounding graves — though they have resisted doing any digging to be sure.)

A photo of Arlington’s dirt landfill recently. It’s located just southwest of where it was in 2002.

These kinds of mishaps are unlikely at other, similar-size cemeteries that years ago computerized operations and track grave locations via satellite. Arlington still conducts 30 burials a day with a flurry of paper that sometime goes missing, despite spending more than \$5 million over the past decade in [failed attempts](#) to computerize operations there.

In the meantime, no one knows how common these burial mishaps and urn troubles are. The total number of urns that have ended up in the dirt landfill at Arlington is unknown. The total number of burial screw-ups hidden beneath headstones labeled “Unknown” is also unclear. And the total number of unknown remains underneath patches of empty grass at Arlington, with no headstone at all, also remains a mystery.



The large, brownish plot north of the structures and against the highway in this Google Earth image shows Project 90 land 17 days after an urn was found there in 2002, apparently in the light brown landfill near the center of the plot.

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