

Donald Pfanz. *Where Valor Proudly Sleeps: A History of Fredericksburg National Cemetery, 1866–1933.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018. xvi + 253 pp. \$26.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-8093-3645-6.

Reviewed by Thomas J. Brown

Published on H-FedHist (January, 2019)

Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

Donald Pfanz's *Where Valor Proudly Sleeps* is the culmination of a life in Civil War history. Pfanz grew up in Gettysburg, where his father was a National Park Service historian, and after graduating from college he entered the same line of work. He spent four years at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County National Military Park (1981-85), three years each at Petersburg National Battlefield (1985-88) and Fort Sumter (1988-91), and twenty-two more years at Fredericksburg (1991-2013) before retiring with thirty-two years of federal service. His history of the Fredericksburg National Cemetery from its establishment in 1866 to its administrative transfer to the National Park Service in 1933 draws on extensive and expert research. The book is a rich mine of factual details, but the author resolutely tries to avoid mobilizing his facts in an interpretive argument. The disjuncture between this work and the outpouring of scholarship on Civil War cemeteries in the last fifteen years reveals a persistent rift in the historical profession.

Where Valor Proudly Sleeps is informative on many points. Pfanz begins his narrative with the battle of Fredericksburg, the first of six major engagements that eventually contributed Union corpses to the cemetery. His account of the initial gathering of remains in the aftermath of combat clarifies why Fredericksburg, with only 16.5 per-

cent of Civil War bodies identified (often partially or erroneously, Pfanz points out) lagged so far behind the cumulative 1870 national cemetery report of 54.5 percent of bodies identified (p. 44), which reflected the higher proportions elsewhere of deaths in hospital or camp. The chapters on wartime and postwar burials and reburials, the consolidation of remains at Fredericksburg National Cemetery, the initial installation of walls, gates, headstones, and refinements like a flagstaff, monuments, signage, and shrubbery compose a little more than half of the book. Chapters on the superintendent's lodge and cemetery employees take up about one-sixth. The level of detail on the lodge is especially lavish. Pfanz carefully traces changes in floor plans and the vicissitudes of heating, water, and sewage in the residence and associated outbuildings. Like other chapters, this section ends with a QR code that leads to a website with additional images and resources, in this instance including cross-sections of the plan for cisterns used at national cemeteries. About a third of the book consists of a chapter on "special populations," including African Americans and field-grade officers; a collection of twenty stories about the Fredericksburg dead, intended to recapture some of their individuality; and a history of Memorial Day observances at the cemetery.

The bibliography is one of the most striking elements of the book. Pfanz certainly does not mention every work he used to prepare *Where Valor Proudly Sleeps*. He does not even include his own *War So Terrible: A Popular History of the Battle of Fredericksburg* (2003). But the bibliography does signal priorities. Pfanz lists at least eight modern regimental histories, as well as many older publications. He does not note David Blight's *Race and Reunion* (2001), Jim Weeks's *Gettysburg* (2003), William Blair's *Cities of the Dead* (2004), Susan-Mary Grant's "Patriot Graves" (2004), John R. Neff's *Honoring the Civil War Dead* (2005), Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering* (2008), Barbara Gannon's *The Won Cause* (2011), or Micki McElya's *The Politics of Mourning* (2016), to name only eight indispensable recent studies of the establishment of national cemeteries and the observance of Memorial Day. Pfanz is doubtless familiar with this literature, but his book betrays little of its imprint. For all his attachment to Fredericksburg National Cemetery and all his expertise about the nuances of its development, he ultimately collapses the significance of the institution into the lives of people buried there. "How little we think of the grief produced by war's calamities!" he exclaims in the last paragraph, though his book certainly does not show that the United States has neglected its military dead (p. 181). He goes on to remind readers that they "owe a great debt to those who fought for our country and who continue to fight for it to this very day," a sentiment inflected at Fredericksburg by the shocking number of lives utterly wasted by the Union command and the undiscussed slippage of the institution from a final resting place for casualties in suppression of a proslavery rebellion to a celebration of volunteers for imperialist adventures in Cuba and the Philippines.

Where Valor Proudly Sleeps inevitably points toward a more complicated story even as it tries to focus on the building of the facility and the individuality of lives that shared a patriotic end. The cemetery population, reported as 15,128 in-

terments in October 1868, was about three times the city population during Reconstruction. The federal institution was a potentially influential part of the community, usefully situated within convenient excursion distance from Washington and Richmond. But War Department administrators antagonized wartime Unionists at an early stage, and superintendents eager to ingratiate themselves with white Fredericksburgers spurned the goodwill of the African Americans who proved the most loyal visitors to Union graves. This process was not immediate or inevitable. Grand Army of the Republic units remained ambivalent about blue-gray Memorial Day exercises with Confederate veterans at Fredericksburg through the 1880s. White sectional reconciliation at the national cemetery set the stage for the most memorable burial Pfanz records, the interment of black physician Urbane Bass after his heroic death in France in World War I, for which he had volunteered at the age of thirty-seven to attend to black soldiers in the segregated army. Bass's conspicuous presence at the cemetery, an example of what W. E. B. Du Bois called a wartime strategy to "close ranks" to advance integration, symbolically reinvigorated the Reconstruction promise of citizenship that paralleled the creation of national military cemeteries.

The place of Fredericksburg National Cemetery in community life and imagination, most prominently including but not limited to its role in race relations, may someday attract a historian interested in engaging the recent literature on cultures of death in the Civil War and subsequent American conflicts. That scholar will begin with the meticulous research of *Where Valor Proudly Sleeps*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-fedhist>

Citation: Thomas J. Brown. Review of Pfanz, Donald. *Where Valor Proudly Sleeps: A History of Fredericksburg National Cemetery, 1866–1933*. H-FedHist, H-Net Reviews. January, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53156>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.