

Behind the Names

Part 1

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of Americans who made significant contributions to their country. Who were they? In this feature series, we take a look at the historical figures for whom some of VA's national cemeteries are named.

Many VA facilities are named for great Americans. Their stories reach back to the earliest periods in U.S. history and up through today, as Congress has recently enacted legislation honoring six contemporary Americans by dedicating VA facilities in their name.

In this first installment of a feature series, *Vanguard* looks at the men who, between 1813 and 1842, built the forts on which VA national cemeteries were founded.

Fort Mitchell National Cemetery

Located just over the Georgia line in Seale, Ala., Fort Mitchell was designated a national cemetery in 1987, but its graves date back to World War I. The fort itself was built by the Georgia Militia in 1813, offering protection to European settlers heading west and serving as a staging area for military excursions into Creek Indian Territory.



Historic Fort Mitchell

It was named for Georgia Governor David Brydie Mitchell (b.1766), a Scottish immigrant who at age 17 came to Savannah to settle his late uncle's estate, then chose to remain in America, becoming a citizen in 1789.

He studied law and over the years held many political and military positions, culminating in the governorship of Georgia, until 1813. America was then at war with Great Britain and Mitchell set about strengthening Georgia's defenses, including the building of Fort Mitchell on land he donated.

He was elected governor again in 1815, and supported legislation to outlaw dueling, having once killed an opponent, himself. He served only two years before resigning in 1817, when President Monroe appointed him as agent for the Creek Nation.

Of the national cemeteries surveyed here, Fort Mitchell is the only one not built on land acquired by the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the bicentennial of which is celebrated this year. The six others, all built over a 40-year period following the

purchase, are Fort Smith, Fort Snelling, Fort Gibson, Jefferson Barracks, Fort Leavenworth and Fort Scott.

Fort Smith National Cemetery



*Fort Smith National Cemetery
in Arkansas*

At the edge of the Arkansas- Oklahoma border lies Fort Smith, Arkansas' second-largest city. Its beginnings lay in the founding of "Camp" Smith on Christmas Day, 1817.

The camp's original function was similar to Fort Mitchell's—to protect westward migration, in this case by keeping Europeans, particularly those selling liquor to Indians, off tribal lands until treaties were concluded.

It also served to keep peace between warring Osage and Cherokee tribes. The site was designated a national cemetery in 1867, but its earliest interments date back to 1819.

As was the Army's custom, Fort Smith was named to honor Brig. Gen. Thomas Adam Smith (b.1781), who commanded the western frontier forces that built and settled the post. Smith's military career led him to practically every corner of the young country. He participated in one of America's first clandestine military operations, the campaign to take eastern Florida away from European influence.

When diplomatic negotiations to secure Florida for America failed in 1811, the U.S. military planned an invasion by Georgia "Patriots" who would then offer the territory to the U.S. In March 1812, 180 Georgians invaded a small section of northeast Florida and offered to cede this land to America. The offer was immediately accepted.

Smith and his troops crossed into Florida and took command of the Georgians. Then began a campaign to wrest the remainder of the territory from Spain.

Smith's small force carried on for more than a year, battling Spanish reinforcements from Havana, British gunboats and Indians. By early 1814, the government secretly withdrew support for the Florida action and Smith was transferred to upstate New York to fight in the more urgent War of 1812.

Fort Snelling National Cemetery

At the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers in Minneapolis, Minn., lies Fort Snelling National Cemetery. It began as a stone fortress as early as 1805, but construction of a proper fort began in 1819.

Col. Henry Leavenworth began that construction, so the fort should have been named for him. But the harsh environment, which led to the deaths of almost one-third of his command within the first nine months, was too much for him.

He asked for and received a transfer. Subsequent efforts would one day find another fort and city named for him.

Col. Josiah Snelling completed construction of what was known as Fort St. Anthony in 1824. During an inspection of the fort, Gen. Winfield Scott, a friend of Snelling, was so impressed with its construction and the comforts it offered against the harsh Minnesota winters, he recommended the fort's name be changed to Fort Snelling.



Col. Josiah Snelling

Josiah Snelling was born in Boston in 1782. He joined the military to fight the great Indian warrior Tecumseh, and served with distinction through the War of 1812. He was considered a tough but fairminded commander. Some reports criticize him for alcohol-induced rages that turned his men against him. Whether they're true or not, he left the fort under a cloud of controversy in 1827 and died a year later.

By Robert Turtill, *Vanguard* staff

Note: This is the first in a series of features about the historical figures for whom some of VA's national cemeteries are named. In the coming weeks, Part 2 will feature Fort Gibson, Jefferson Barracks, Leavenworth and Fort Scott National Cemeteries.