

Behind the Names

Part 2

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 facilities are named.

Many VA facilities are named for great Americans. In this second installment of “*Behind the Names*,” we look at four Americans for whom national cemeteries are named.

Fort Gibson National Cemetery

In 1824, increasing tensions between the Cherokee and Osage Nations led the Army to construct “Cantonment Gibson,” a wooden stockade that ultimately gave rise to the community of Fort Gibson, the oldest in Oklahoma. For many Native Americans, Fort Gibson was the last stop on the “Trail of Tears,” the route used to force tribes from the east to western reservations.

George Gibson was born in Pennsylvania in 1775, coming from a family of soldiers. He joined the Army in 1808 and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel, serving through the War of 1812. President Monroe then appointed him Quartermaster General under Andrew Jackson.



George Gibson

Gibson was ordered to supply Gen. Jackson's 1817-1818 campaign against Seminole Indians in West Florida. Instead of depending on private contractors for provisions, Gibson successfully purchased and transported all needed supplies, a job that earned him Jackson's high praise and friendship, lasting far into Jackson's term as U.S. President.

In 1818, he was appointed to the new office of Commissary General of Subsistence, which he held for 43 years. He earned promotions to brigadier general and then to major general for meritorious conduct, particularly in performing his duties during the Mexican War.

Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery



President Thomas Jefferson

Jefferson Barracks, located north of St. Louis, was named to honor revered former president Thomas Jefferson, who died just six days before the fort's establishment in 1826. It was the nation's first "Infantry School of Practice" and a gathering point for troops and supplies from the Mexican War through World War II. It became a national cemetery in 1866.

Thomas Jefferson, born in 1743 in Virginia, was a fine writer, but no public speaker. Known as the "silent member" of Congress, he drafted the Declaration of Independence at age 33. As the nation became separated by political parties, Jefferson assumed

leadership of the Republicans. Sympathizing with the revolutionary cause of France, he opposed strong centralized government and supported states' rights.

Jefferson assumed the presidency in 1800. He cut taxes, reduced the size of the military, the budget and the national debt. He projected American power into the Mediterranean by sending a naval squadron to fight the Barbary pirates who had been harassing American interests. Jefferson seized the opportunity to double the size of America by negotiating the Louisiana Purchase with France in 1803, even though he knew he didn't have the constitutional powers to do so.

Leavenworth National Cemetery

Henry Leavenworth was born in Connecticut in 1783, the son of an officer who served under Washington in the Continental Army. Leavenworth fought in the War of 1812 and then served in the New York State Legislature. He rejoined the military in 1818 as a lieutenant colonel and was detailed to Minnesota to build a post, but was transferred to Nebraska soon after construction began.

In 1827, Leavenworth was directed to locate a site on the east side of the Missouri River for "Cantonment Leavenworth," a permanent training and outfitting establishment near present-day Kansas City.



Henry Leavenworth

However, Leavenworth judged that the west side offered a more advantageous location and began construction even before he got final confirmation for the location change.

Called Fort Leavenworth by 1832, it became the oldest continuously operating military establishment west of the Missouri River. The oldest city in Kansas is Leavenworth (est. 1854) and was the jumping-off point for two major migration trails west.

The fort's cemetery became a national cemetery in 1862. The oldest gravesites date to 1827, when disease killed many of the soldiers during the post's first year of operation.

In 1834, Leavenworth was given command of the entire southwest frontier. He led an expedition against the Pawnee and Comanche Indians with such tact and skill that no blood was shed and Leavenworth obtained a treaty that satisfied the desires of the government. Leavenworth died of a fever in 1834, never learning of his promotion to brigadier general for his success in concluding that treaty.

Fort Scott National Cemetery



Gen. Winfield Scott

Fort Scott, located on the eastern outskirts of the city of Fort Scott, Kansas, was established in 1842 to keep a three-way peace between Native American tribes who were forced off of their lands in the east, the area's local tribes and white settlers. It was named for Gen. Winfield Scott (b.1786), one of the top military heroes of his time.

Scott, a native of Virginia, was the son of a Revolutionary War veteran. He studied and practiced law and when the War of 1812 broke out, he recruited a regiment and was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel.

While fighting in Canada, Scott was captured and held for one year. After a prisoner exchange, he returned to fighting. His actions in battle left him severely wounded, but won him a promotion to major general.

After the war, Scott traveled in Europe, studying military tactics. He returned in 1832 and participated in a succession of conflicts, "calming" actions, and diplomatic efforts.

He relocated Indian tribes and suppressed rebellions of those who had been

moved. His reputation was used to intimidate secessionist South Carolinians. He restrained unauthorized bands of Americans hoping to stir up revolution in Canada, and he helped negotiate a dispute between gangs of American and Canadian lumberjacks before an outright war could begin.

In 1841, he was appointed General-in-Chief of the U.S. Army, and held that position until his retirement 20 years later. Scott was known as “Old Fuss and Feathers” because of his penchant for military procedures and finery.

As a member of the opposition Whig party, he often clashed with President Polk, who considered him a political threat. He ran for U.S. President in 1852, but was defeated by Franklin Pierce.

He spent the last years of his life writing his memoirs and traveling in Europe. He died in 1866 and was buried at the national cemetery at West Point.

By Robert Turtill, *Vanguard* staff

Note: This is the second in a series of features about the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named. In the coming weeks, Part 3 will feature two Medal of Honor recipients and the VA medical centers named for them.