

106 SUCCESS STORY

National Cemetery Expansion Avoids, Protects Significant Civil War Site

Port Hudson, Louisiana



“The Siege of Port Hudson was important in determining control of the Mississippi River during the Civil War. We applaud the Department of Veterans Affairs for identifying and avoiding damage to this site significant to national heritage. This is a vivid reminder of the importance of the National Historic Preservation Act in preserving our collective memory and expanding understanding of our country’s heritage.”

— JAMES LIGHTHIZER
President, Civil War Trust



THE STORY

After New Orleans fell in April 1862, Union forces controlled the Mississippi River below Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and above Vicksburg, Mississippi. Control of the river was an important military goal for both the Union and the Confederacy. The bluffs near the small town of Port Hudson were the first high ground upstream from Baton Rouge and overlooked a sharp bend in the river that presented an obstacle for Union warships. By 1863, Confederates had ringed the town with earthen defenses manned by a garrison of more than 6,800 men. To open the river, the Union concentrated their forces on taking the last two Confederate strongholds on the river: Vicksburg and Port Hudson.

On May 14, 1863, a Union fleet bombarded the Confederate defenses, opening the Battle of Port Hudson. A force of approximately 30,000 Union troops soon surrounded the Confederate position. The 48-day siege was the longest in U.S. military history and notable for deploying two regiments of the Louisiana Native Guards, composed of free and formerly enslaved African Americans. The Confederate garrison surrendered on July 9, 1863, after learning of the fall of Vicksburg.

Port Hudson National Cemetery was founded in 1867 when the Union dead were brought for re-interment from battlefield graves to the new national cemetery. The Port Hudson Battlefield was designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1974, and the Port Hudson National Cemetery was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1999 as part of the Civil War Era National Cemeteries listing.

THE PROJECT

In 2009, Port Hudson National Cemetery was comprised of approximately 20 acres containing more than 13,000 interments and nearing its capacity. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) decided to acquire lands adjacent to the existing cemetery for expansion to provide burial capacity for several more years. VA intended to search later for a larger property for additional space for a longer-term solution.

Photos: Above, Port Hudson National Cemetery (photo by Shine/FindaGrave); Right, central entrance road; plaque (photos courtesy Library of Congress)

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Photos: Right, cemetery entrance gate (photo courtesy Library of Congress); Left, cemetery administration building (photo courtesy VA)

THE 106 PROCESS

VA, the federal agency carrying out this project, was responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the fate of the property when adverse effects are likely to ensue.

In 2009, the Georgia-Pacific Corporation offered to donate a site adjacent to the existing cemetery, and VA initiated Section 106 consultation to consider the acquisition. Through archaeological testing and historical research, VA determined the proposed expansion site, located within the NHL's boundaries, included Battery XXVII, a Confederate redoubt built to protect an entrance near the south end of the Port Hudson fortifications. Since the battery contributed to the significance of the NHL, VA was obligated to comply with Section 110(f) of the NHPA, which requires that federal agencies shall, to the maximum extent possible, seek ways to avoid harm to NHLs.

Development of a contemporary national cemetery at this site would have required significant earth-moving and damaged the historic battery. Seeking ways to mitigate the effects, VA worked extensively to consider alternatives to avoid the historic property consistent with the higher standard for dealing with adverse effects to NHLs "to the maximum extent possible." The State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) encouraged VA to resolve both their short- and long-term capacity concerns by selecting a larger alternate property, thereby avoiding any adverse effects to the NHL. VA eventually identified and purchased a 103.8-acre parcel located approximately two miles from Port Hudson National Cemetery, outside of the NHL boundaries.

THE SUCCESS

The land acquisition and subsequent development of the alternate property as the Louisiana National Cemetery was accomplished under VA's National Cemetery Administration Minor Project construction program. As a result of consultation with the SHPO, National Park Service, and the ACHP through the Section 106 process, VA achieved a long-term solution for burials for veterans and their families, avoided damage to the NHL battlefield and the National Register-listed cemetery, and protected an important part of Port Hudson's Civil War history.

ADVISORY COUNCIL ON HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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Consulting Parties:

Department of Veterans Affairs
 ACHP
 National Park Service
 Louisiana State Historic
 Preservation Officer

For more about Section
 106 and the ACHP go
 to www.achp.gov



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