

The Washington Post

Local

# Arlington Cemetery wants to change the rules on who can be buried there

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By [Michael E. Ruane](#)

September 25 at 10:13 AM

Arlington National Cemetery is proposing new rules that would eliminate burial and inurnment eligibility for service members who die on active duty but not in combat, ending a custom that goes back to the cemetery's founding in 1864.

It is one of a series of tough new proposals, requested by the government, that seek to address Arlington's fast-dwindling space, according to statements issued Wednesday by the cemetery and the Army.

If approved, the new rules would end, among other things, the non-combat, active-duty death eligibility that dates back to the [Civil War](#), when burial was reserved for those killed in action or who died on active duty, according to the cemetery's website.

Indeed, the cemetery's first official burial on May 13, 1864, came after the death of William Christman, 20, a Union soldier from Pennsylvania who had died of disease. In those days, disease killed many more people than did combat.

The proposal also would end burial eligibility for military retirees but still allow them to be inurned aboveground, according to a comparison of the new proposals and current rules on the cemetery's website.

The new rules also would exclude the current inurnment eligibility for members of the reserves, Army National Guard or Air National Guard who suffer non-combat deaths on active duty.

And they would not include blanket inurnment eligibility for many former members of the armed forces, which would seem to eliminate numerous veterans who served during the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

World War II-era veterans would still be eligible for inurnment.

The cemetery would not go into further detail, saying in its statement that "it would be inappropriate to discuss any specifics at this time."

The new proposals aim to keep the cemetery open for the next 150 years.

"Today nearly all the 22 million living armed forces members and veterans are eligible for about the 95,000 spaces," the cemetery said in a video that accompanied the announcement.

Karen Durham-Aguilera, the cemetery's executive director, said in the video: "Our reality is we are running out of space. Without any changes in eligibility we will be full for first burials by the year 2041."

"To be able to keep Arlington National Cemetery open and active well into the future ... we're going to have to make some tough decisions and restrict the eligibility," she said.

The always-sensitive eligibility rules have been changed 14 times in the last 150 years, according to a 2017 report by the cemetery.

The proposals, which are "potentially subject to change," came after substantial public input and 250,000 responses to national surveys, the cemetery said.

The new proposals will be published in the Federal Register for public comments, said Durham-Aguilera.

"Once we get through those comments and adjudicate those comments, then we will publish the final rule," she said. "At that time, the criteria will be effective."

They do not affect any current funeral arrangements and must now go through a roughly nine-month period of public notice and comment, the Army and the cemetery said.

In general, they limit burials to, among others, those killed in action, recipients of medals for heroism and gallantry, recipients of the Purple Heart medal, former POWs, and U.S. presidents and vice presidents.

They generally limit inurnments to, among others, the World War II-era veterans, military retirees, combat veterans with two years of active duty and non-combat veterans who served out of uniform in top government national security posts.

Last year the cemetery opened a new 27-acre section capable of holding about 27,000 remains in specially built close-packed, pre-dug graves and a new niche wall and columbaria.

The cemetery is also planning for an additional 37-acre addition called the "Southern Expansion," where the old Navy Annex building was before it was demolished in 2013.

But that project is not expected to be ready until about 2025.

The cemetery was established by the War Department on the Arlington plantation of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's deceased father-in-law. The site was vacated by Lee's family after he joined the rebel forces in the Civil War, and it was taken over by the Union army.


By the end of the Civil War, 5,000 people were buried there. Since then, more than 400,000 people have been laid to rest on the grounds.

President John F. Kennedy, his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and his brothers, U.S. senators Robert F.

Kennedy and Edward M. Kennedy, are buried there.

Also at rest there are Abraham Lincoln's son Robert and grandson, Abraham II, who was known as Jack and died at 16.

### Michael E. Ruane

Michael E. Ruane is a general assignment reporter who also covers Washington institutions and historical topics. He has been a general assignment reporter at the Philadelphia Bulletin, an urban affairs and state feature writer at the Philadelphia Inquirer, and a Pentagon correspondent at Knight Ridder newspapers. Follow 

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