

GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL CEMETERY  
1300 Sneath Lane  
San Bruno  
San Mateo County  
California

HALS CA-8  
*HALS CA-8*

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

ADDENDUM TO:  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL CEMETERY

(Golden Gate National Cemetery at San Bruno, San Bruno National Cemetery)

HALS NO. CA-8

- Location: 1300 Sneath Lane, San Bruno, San Mateo County, California  
37.633274, -122.43449 (Flagpole, Garmin GPS unit, accuracy 10', WGS84)
- Significance: When the Golden Gate National Cemetery was established in 1938, it was the first national cemetery on the Pacific Coast developed on a site with no prior cemeterial use. Its symmetric circulation design emanating from the flagpole is typical of new national cemeteries designed and built by the Army between 1936 and 1941; its flagpole mound is unusual. The cemetery has changed little since 1962, except for the removal of one interior drive in 1966, and the realignment of the entrance drive and planting of interior trees in ca. 1973.
- Description: The Golden Gate National Cemetery is a 161.55-acre military cemetery on an L-shaped parcel at the northern edge of the City of San Bruno. The parcel is bounded by residential South San Francisco to the north, El Camino Real to the east, Sneath Lane to the south, and Junipero Serra Freeway to the west.<sup>1</sup>

At the corner of the L-shape is a large, lawn-covered mound, which conceals a reservoir and is topped by a grand granite plaza centered on the flagpole. The cemetery legs roll gently up to the mound base from the northeast and down to the mound base from the northwest. On clear days, the flagpole mound yields views of the entire cemetery and its surroundings, including the San Bruno Mountains, San Francisco Bay, San Francisco International Airport (1927), Sweeney Ridge,<sup>2</sup> San Andreas Rift Zone, and Milagra Ridge. Historically, the mound also had a view of the horse barns and racetrack at Tanforan Park (1899-1964), also known as Tanforan Assembly Center (1942),<sup>3</sup> on the opposite side of El Camino Real. Summer fog, ocean winds, and winter rains can make for bracing conditions atop the flagpole mound.<sup>4</sup>

The circulation design is formal and, for the most part, symmetric about three axes originating from the flagpole. The design lost some of its balance when a road on one side of the widest axial drive was removed in 1966 to make room

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<sup>1</sup> Father Junípero Serra was the first leader of the missionary order that established twenty-one missions on the coast of the Spanish colony of Alta California starting in 1769. El Camino Real (the Royal Road) connected the missions.

<sup>2</sup> A Spanish expedition discovered San Francisco Bay from the top of Sweeney Ridge in 1769.

<sup>3</sup> Bay Area Japanese-Americans were ordered to assemble at Tanforan in 1942, before being interned further inland.

<sup>4</sup> Winters are wet with minimums averaging 44°F (6.4°C), and summers are dry with maximums averaging 71°F (22°C). Annual precipitation averages 20" (51 cm). (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAAA) and Desert Research Institute (DRI), Western Regional Climate Center (WRCC), "Period of Record General Climate Summary, San Francisco International Airport, California (047769): 1948-2012," <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/cgi-bin/cliMAIN.pl?ca7769>.)

for more graves. The turn-off to the entrance drive was moved eastward on Sneath Lane when Serra Freeway was widened in ca. 1973.

The most-memorable features of the cemetery are the flagpole mound, the views, the weather, the circulation design, and the uniformity and enormity of the headstone collection. The headstones are all of the post-World War I style, except for a handful of the Civil/Spanish-American War type. More than 0.8 miles (1.3 km) of headstones can be viewed marching in unison toward the San Francisco Bay on the northeast leg.

Less memorable are the buildings, entrance gate, bridge, boundary demarcation, monument, and trees, all of which are dwarfed by the flagpole mound. The buildings are all one-story concrete and stucco with mission tile roofs. The chapel-restroom and office-lodge buildings (1941) frame the entrance; the utility buildings (1957) are in a discrete walled cluster to the side rear. The entrance gate consists of the coat of arms of the United States in stone, flanked by stone pedestrian arches and spear-tipped metal fence. The bridge is a vehicular overpass of concrete with stone facade. The boundary is demarcated by chain-link fence, except for masonry and metal fence from the entrance to about halfway on Serra Freeway and Sneath Lane. The fence was moved as close to the boundary as possible in 1966 to make room for more graves. The Gettysburg Address Monument is the cemetery's only monument; it was installed in 2011 near the office.<sup>5</sup>

The trees are an informally placed mix of broadleaf evergreen, coniferous, and deciduous trees, except for three drives that are each lined on their outer side with trees of a single species: *Prunus serrulata* 'Shirofugen' (Flowering Cherry)<sup>6</sup> on the entrance drive, wind-nipped *Cordyline australis* (Dracaena Palm) on the mound's top-most drive, and *Washingtonia filifera* (California Fan Palm) on the northwest leg's loop drive. According to aerial photographs, the existing interior trees were planted in ca. 1973; trees were present along the boundary before the development of the cemetery.

History: The site of the future cemetery was controlled or owned by the Ohlone Native Americans until 1776, by Mission San Francisco de Asís (Mission Dolores) until 1835 as part of the mission ranchlands, by Mexican José Sánchez and his Mexican-American descendants until ca. 1877 as part of the Rancho Buri-Buri land grant, and by American R.G. Sneath until 1938 as part of his Jersey Farm dairy. In late 1938, the federal government purchased a portion of the Jersey Farm in unincorporated San Mateo County for the creation of an adjunct cemetery to the nearly-full San Francisco National Cemetery (SFNC) at the

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<sup>5</sup> Robert George designed the granite monument for the cast-iron tablet from the National Cemetery Administration. Contractors were V. Fontana of Colma (stone work) and F. Ferrando of South San Francisco (concrete work).

<sup>6</sup> Donated in 1994 by Hagiwara-Nagata on the centennial anniversary of Golden Gate Park's Japanese Tea Garden.

Presidio of San Francisco.

The new cemetery was named Golden Gate National Cemetery (GGNC). Since SFNC is beside the Golden Gate Strait, but GGNC is not, the two cemetery names have always confused local residents. Historically in California, GGNC is more commonly known as Golden Gate National Cemetery at San Bruno, or San Bruno National Cemetery.

Construction was overseen by the Office of the Quartermaster at Fort Mason in San Francisco. Between 1939 and 1941, 63 acres were developed, including the entrance and flagpole mound. Contractors and suppliers included Monson Brothers of San Francisco (1939, lodge, chapel, and entrance gate), Madera Quarries Company of Madera (1940, granite and granite cutting for flagpole base), Barrett & Hilp of San Francisco (1940, flagpole, flagpole base, reservoir), Harvey E. Conner and R.J. Brant of Redwood City (1941, water mains), Western Well Drilling Company of San Jose (1941, two gravel-wall wells), Medley Electric Company of Burlingame (1941, floodlighting), and Carrico & Gautier (1942, sprinkler system). GGNC was incorporated into San Bruno in 1940. The first burial occurred in 1941 and the formal dedication on Memorial Day 1942. Development halted during World War II.

Between 1948 and 1962, the Army developed the remainder of the cemetery. Contractors included Robert A. Farish (ca. 1952, grading) and Arthur Brothers of San Mateo (1957, new utility building and maintenance yard on the site of an old barn). The area around a seasonal creek was the last to be developed because of drainage challenges.

In 1938, it had been predicted that GGNC would take more than sixty years to fill. World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War filled it in thirty years. GGNC closed to new, non-reserved interments in 1967. Attempts by the Army to expand GGNC in the 1950s were blocked by San Bruno officials, who feared the loss of tax revenue. After similar skirmishes elsewhere, the Army decided that the expansion of national cemeteries was a civilian issue, not a military one, and froze the national cemetery system at its 1962 acreage, although it did in 1967 (unsuccessfully) propose acquiring the Tanforan site to the east or the Anvansino-Mortenson Nursery to the south.

In 1973, the administration of most national cemeteries, including SFNC and GGNC, was transferred from the Army to the Veterans Administration (VA). The VA established five national cemeteries totaling almost 4000 acres in the 1970s, including a new 740-acre cemetery in California. The VA has continued to establish new national cemeteries, including three new national cemeteries in California totaling almost 1700 acres.

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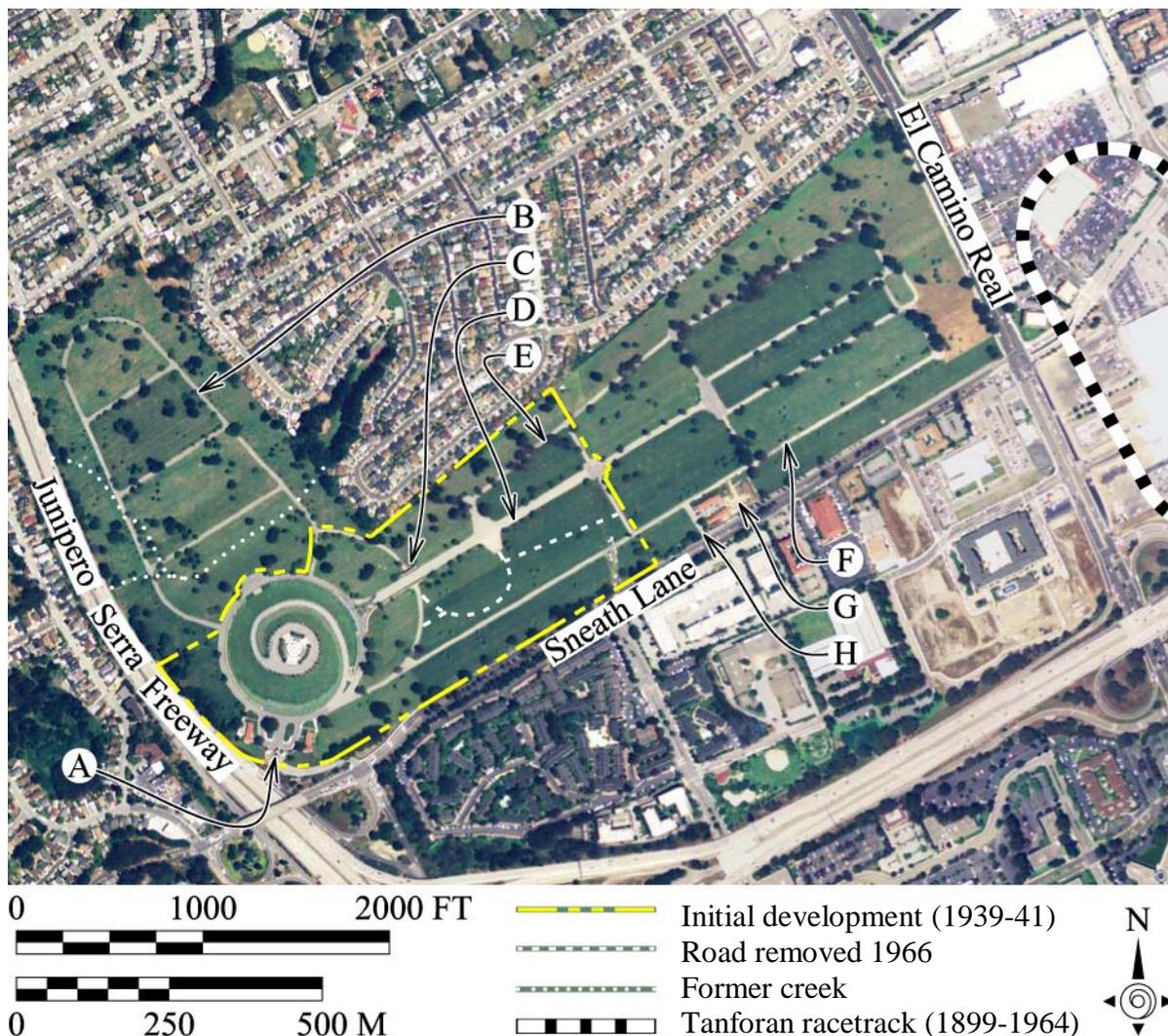
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Golden Gate National Cemetery  
 (Base Photograph by U.S.D.A. National Agriculture Imagery Program, 2005;  
 Delineation by Cate Bainton, 2012)

- A Entrance gate, with flagpole mound to north, office-lodge building to east, entrance drive to south, chapel-restroom building to west. The mound is encircled at its base by Circle Drive and climbed by spiraling Mound Drive.
- B North Loop Drive, with cross drives First Drive N, Second Drive N, and Third Drive N
- C Nimitz Drive overpass (Fork Drive underpass)
- D Nimitz Drive,<sup>7</sup> with cross drives First Drive E, Second Drive E, and Third Drive E, and subsidiary drives Mall Drive N and Mall Drive S
- E Plaza Drive North
- F South Drive
- G Maintenance yard (1957)
- H Alternate exit



<sup>7</sup> The grave of World War II Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz (1885-1966) is the first grave on Nimitz Drive.

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Photographs (Cate Bainton, 28 Apr 2012)

View looking northwest from flagpole of North Loop Drive.



View looking northeast from flagpole of Nimitz Drive, San Bruno, and San Francisco Bay.



View looking north from entrance of flagpole mound.



View looking west from South Drive of flagpole mound.



Detail view looking northwest from South Drive of Nimitz Drive overpass (Fork Drive underpass).



Detail view looking south from South Drive of boundary wall segment.

