



## VA policy on unmarked veterans' graves frustrates headstone efforts

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CLEVELAND, Ohio - If Ira Cook had died today, chances are there'd be no problem getting a headstone for him from the Memorial Affairs Division of the **Department of Veterans Affairs**, which provides that service for all U.S. veterans.

But Cook, a black Union Army soldier who served during the Civil War in the regiment depicted in the movie "**Glory**," died in Cleveland in 1874 at age 42.

No headstone marks his grave at **Woodland Cemetery** in Cleveland. Just an empty patch of grass.

And unless Cook's next-of-kin can be found -  
- or a person authorized (in writing) by Cook  
or a family member to apply for a VA headstone -- he won't be getting that grave marker.

Until last year the VA provided headstones for unmarked veterans' graves based on documentation provided by historians, genealogists or anyone who could authenticate a veteran's identity and service.

A change to that policy, solely limiting headstone requests to a veteran's next-of-kin or authorized family representatives, has prompted a **campaign** ([www.marktheirgraves.org](http://www.marktheirgraves.org)) to have the restriction repealed.

The **Ohio Historical Society**, which has assisted groups and individuals in documenting veterans' service records and unmarked graves, dating back to the Revolutionary War, is part of that effort.

Earlier this year Burt Logan, executive director and CEO, wrote to the VA to object to the new policy.

"We cannot emphasize enough that the remaining unmarked graves of our military veterans, especially those who served in the Civil War, are predominantly those who were African-Americans, ethnic minorities



This grave of a black Civil War veteran at Woodland Cemetery is one of the fortunate ones to have a headstone. Many other veterans' graves at the cemetery are unmarked, and historians say that getting headstones for those graves has gotten harder due to a new Department of Veterans Affairs policy.

Lisa DeJong, The Plain Dealer

and the poor – hence the lack of headstones and recognition,” Logan wrote.

He noted that finding living descendants of these long-gone veterans to apply for a VA headstone “is most often nearly impossible.”

One reason, he added, is because, “Countless numbers of them (veterans) died in their teens or well before having the opportunity to begin a family of their own.”

Todd Kleismit, Historical Society director of community and government relations, also commented on the difficulty of finding the next-of-kin of Civil War vets.

“The reason they’re in an unmarked grave is because they didn’t die with a huge network of family and friends,” he said. “They passed away rather anonymously.”

A response from the VA to the Ohio Historical Society suggested “there are multiple internet resources available to locate living relatives of Civil War soldiers.”

That observation floored Bill Stark, a volunteer archivist with the **Cleveland Grays** and member of the Woodland Cemetery Foundation. Stark has documented and obtained 197 VA headstones for veterans’ graves in area cemeteries. Some were for unmarked graves, others were replacement markers.

“The problem is that those web sites are designed to go backward to find who the ancestors are, not forward to find out who the next of kin are,” said Stark, who is also graves registration officer for Garfield Camp 142 of the **Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War**.

Stark said he had six applications for headstones rejected by the VA in the past year due to the next-of-kin policy. (That policy does not apply to replacements for stones that are worn, illegible or damaged.)

Although there is no known number of unmarked veteran graves, Stark said they are commonly located in older cemeteries where vets who served in the Civil War and earlier are buried.

Marking those graves is important because these veterans “put themselves in harm’s way to serve, and this country owes them this last tribute,” Stark said.

He noted that 16 of the 63 names listed on a monument at Woodland Cemetery honoring the U.S. Colored Troops of the Civil War are buried in unmarked graves.

Michelle A. Day, president of the Woodland Cemetery Foundation, said the cemetery has unmarked graves of veterans from the War of 1812 through World War II.

Among the more than 2,100 veterans buried at the cemetery, “hundreds don’t have headstones,” according to Day.

She said finding a veteran's biographic and military service details for a marker can sometimes take years, and the VA's new policy will make that task even harder.

"It's baffling why they did it," Day said.

VA spokeswoman Jo Schuda said the policy was created to discourage someone from marking a veteran's grave "in a way that the descendants may not want" or even know about.

Day said that in her experience families appreciate a headstone for a previously unmarked grave. "I have never come across somebody who did *not* want one," she said.

Schuda noted that the VA is currently reviewing that policy due to concerns regarding the limitations on headstone applicants.

In May, **Ohio Congressman Steve Stivers**, a Columbus Republican, introduced an "Honor Those Who Served Act" that would ease those limitations.

Under Stivers' proposal, if a veteran's next-of-kin cannot be found, the headstone applications could be filed by a state veterans service agency, military researchers, local historians, genealogists or others who can prove a veteran's identity.

To Day, daughter of a Navy veteran, the value of marking these graves extends beyond overdue recognition.

The graves are visual reminders for future generations of our nation's past, she said.

"These veterans had a lot to do with our history, and how people learn about our history and the wars we fought in," she added. "You can't do that with an unmarked grave."

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