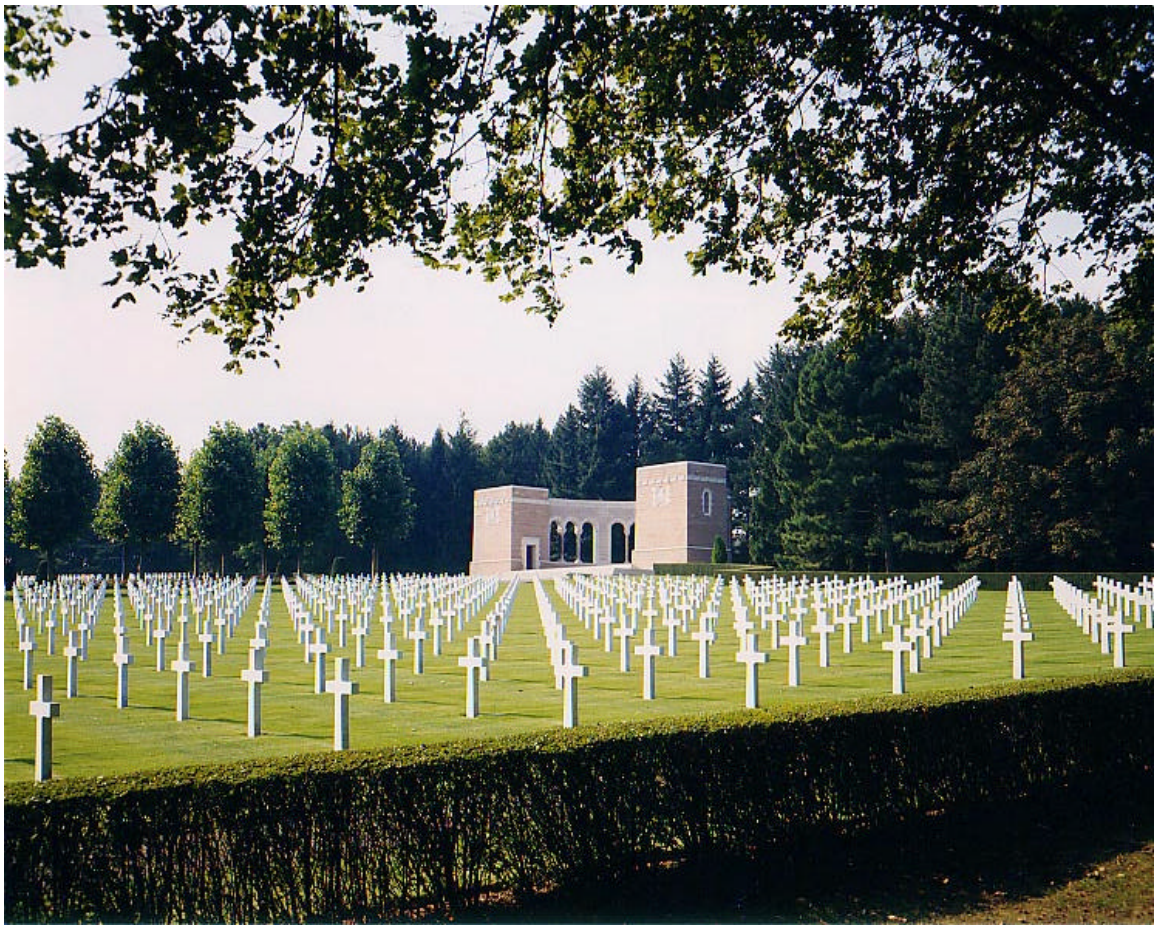
Oise-Aisne American Cemetery and Memorial



American Battle Monuments Commission

Chapel Interior

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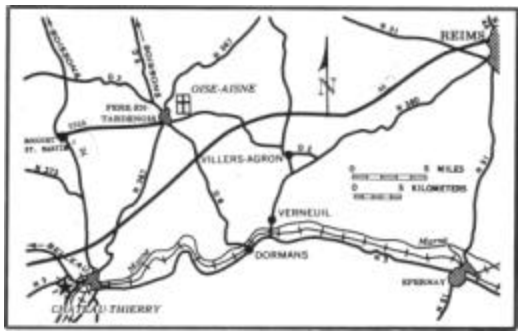


LOCATION

The Oise-Aisne American Cemetery and Memorial is located 1.5 miles (2.5 kilometers) east of Fere-en –Tardenois, along Highway D-2 near the hamlet of Seringes-et-Nesles. It is approximately 70 miles (113 kilometers) northeast of Paris and can be reached by train from the Gare de I'Est in Paris via Chateau-Thierry and Fere-en-Tardenois in about two hours. Taxi service to the cemetery is available from each of these stations.

To travel by automobile to the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery from Paris, one should proceed east on the Metz/Nancy toll route A-4 and leave at the Chateau-Thierry exit (49.5 miles/80 kilometers). Turn left onto Highway D-1, continue to Fere-en-Tardenois (12 miles/20 kilometers), and turn right onto Highway D-2 to the cemetery (1.5 miles/2.5 kilometers). Directional road signs to the cemetery may be found on the main highways in Chateau-Thierry, Soissons, Reims and Epernay. Road distances to Fere-en-Tardenois from nearby cities are: Soissons, 16 miles/26 kilometers; Reims, 28.5 miles/46 kilometers; Laon, 33 miles/53 kilometers, and Senlis, 44.5 miles/72 kilometers.

Adequate hotel accommodations and good restaurants are available in Chateau-Thierry (7 hotels and 9 restaurants), fere-en-Tardenois (2 hotels and 3 restaurants). Excellent hotels and fine restaurants are also available in Reims, Soissons and Epernay.

Cemetery Entrance

HOURS

The cemetery is open daily to the public from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm except December 25 and January 1. It is open on host country holidays. When the cemetery is open to the public, a staff member is on duty in the Visitors' Building to answer questions and escort relatives to grave and memorial sites.

HISTORY

Germany's strategic plan for 1918 entailed the destruction of the British Army in the spring followed by massive attacks against the French. During March and April, the Germans launched offensives against the British in Picardy and Flanders. The situation for the British was critical until several French divisions were dispatched to their aid. Although destruction of British forces was averted, heavy casualties were inflicted upon them and they lost considerable ground.

While these attacks were taking place, other German forces were preparing for a major offensive along the Aisne River. Unaware of this and anticipating that the assaults against the British Army in Picardy and Flanders would resume at any time, the French High Command shifted some of its forces from the Aisne River to reinforce the British sector.

On the morning of 27 May 1918, the Germans attacked in strength between Berry-au-Bac and Anizy-le-Chateau, surprising the French completely. By noon, on captured brigades, German forces had crossed the Aisne River and by that evening were south of the Vesle River. Having met little resistance in their rapid advance toward the Marne River, the Germans decided to exploit their success by driving toward Paris.

Meanwhile from every quarter, Allied reserves were rushed to the Aise-Marne from and the French government prepared to flee Paris for Bordeaux in the south. On 31 May, flur days after the attack began, the U.S. 3rd Division reached Chateau-Thierry where it fought stubbornly and successfully to prevent the Germans from crossing the Marne. The next day, the U.S. 2nd Division arrived and, northwest of Chateau-Thierry, deployed across the main route to Paris where it was able to halt the German offensive in that direction. With the aid of American divisions, the Allies were able to stop the Germans but not before a great salient had been driven into Allied lines roughly defined by the cities of Reims, Chateau-Thierry and Soissons. Despite the penetration of German forces west and southwest of Reims, the city itself and its vital rail facilities remained in Allied hands. This left the 40 German divisions in the silent dependent upon one railroad link through Soissons for resupply. To widen the salient and secure the railroad line between Compiegne and Soissons, two German armies attacked westward from the salient on 9 June. They encountered such intense resistance, however, that their attack quickly ground to a halt.

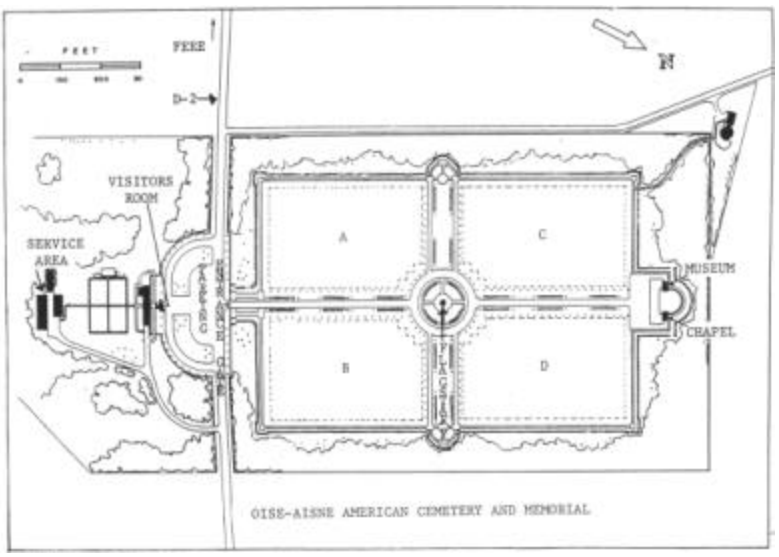
Without delay, the Germans began preparing for a major offensive against Reims and the high ground to its south to provide them with the additional railroad link they so sorely needed for their forces in the salient. Luckily, Allied intelligence agents learned not only the line of the new German attack, but the exact day and hour it was scheduled to take place.

By mid-July, twelve of the twenty-six American divisions in France, under the command of General John J. Pershing, were ready for combat. (These statistics did not reveal the strength of American forces completely as American divisions were larger and had twice the fire power of French, British and German divisions.) Capitalizing on availability of fresh. American troops, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the Allied Commander-in-Chief, included in his counterattack plans an assault against the western face of the Aisne-Marne salient by two American divisions.

On 15 July 1918, the day of the German offensive, Allied forces reduced the manning of their front line units to weak detachments and gave them orders to retire under heavy bombardment. This tactic proved quite successful as much of the German preparatory fire was wasted on newly abandoned positions. Capitalizing futher on their knowledge of the exact hour of the German attack, the Allies began bombarding likely German assembly areas shortly before their preparatory fire was expected to commence. The German assault forces suffered heavy casualties and were thrown into a state of complete confusion, causing them, on 17 July, to terminate their offensive without attaining any of their objectives.

The following day, on 18 July, the Allies launched a counterattack against the western face of the Aisne-Marne salient. Although the German resisted stubbornly, they soon realized their position was untenable and began withdrawing. Reduction of the salient was complete on 4 August, when Allied troops reached the south bank of the Vesle River. The counterattack was terminated officially on 6 August 1918. Not only had a serious threat to Paris been removed, but important railways were freed once again for Allied use. Marshal Henri Petain, Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies, who drew up the plans for meeting the German offensive, said that the counterattack could not have succeeded without use of American troops.

Quickly, Allied offensive operations were initiated elsewhere to maintain pressure on the Germans, who were now on the defensive, to make it difficult for them to regroup and reorganize. On 8 August, the British began their highly successful Somme Offensive. Ten days later, French forces with the support of American troops, began the very successful Oise-Aisne campaign in the Aisne-Marne region near Noyon, during which the German forces on the Vesle and the Aisne Rivers were outflanked, forcing them to withdraw. Many U.S. servicemen whose remains are interred in the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery lost their lives in the Oise-Aisne campaign. During the period 28 August to 1 September, the U.S. 32nd Division captured the town of Juvigny penetrating German positions to a depth of 2.5 miles (4 kilometers). The progress of the Allied offensive and the threat of being cut off caused the Germans to withdraw from the Vesle to the Aisne River during the night of 3-4 September. The U.S. 28th and 77th Divisions pressed the Allied attack against the new German line. On 8 September, the U.S. 28th Division was given a well-deserved rest. Following heavy fighting at the Ourcq and Vesle Rivers, the 77th Division was withdrawn from the lines on 16 September and also given a rest. During the latter part of September 1918, the 370th Infantry Regiment of the U.S. 93rd Division and the French 59th Division advanced steadily north of the Vauxaillon. The 370th Infantry Regiment remained in the lines until the middle of October when it was given a rest. It reentered battle on 5 November and continued in the pursuit of the German Army until the signing of the Armistice six days later.



Location of Cemetery Features

ARCHITECTS

Architects for the cemetery's memorial features were Cram and Feguson of Boston, Massachusetts. The landscape architect was George Gibbs, Jr. The consulting architect for the American Battle Monuments Coooission was Paul P. Cret of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

SITE

The Oise-Aisne American Cemetery, 36.5 acres in extent, is the second large of eight permanent American World War I military cemeteries on foreign soil. Established initially on 2 August 1918 by the 42nd Division as a temporary battlefield cemetery, Congress authorized its retention as a permanent cemetery in 1921.

The majority of the 6,012 War Dead interred in the cemetery died fighting along the Ourcq River and in the area between the cemetery and the Oise River during the Aisne-Marne Offensive and the Oise-Aisne Offensive. An agreement with the French government grants use of the site as a military cemetery in perpetuity without charge or taxation.

In 1922, the ramains of American servicemen buried in the general area west of Tours-Romorantin-Paris-Le-Harve, whose next of kin requested permanent interment overseas, were disinterred and permanently interred at the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery. All interments were made by the American Graves Registration Service. The memorial, the chapel, the visitors' 'room, the office, the Superintendent's quarters, and the service facilities were designed and constructed by the American Battle Monuments Commission as part of its program commemorating the achievements of the American Expeditionary Forces in the Great War.

GENERAL LAYOUT

The Oise-Aisne American Cemetery is generally rectangular in shape. Its memorial chapel, museum and grave plots, which encompass three quarters of the cemetery, are located on the north side of Highway D-2; and the parking area, service facilities and the Superintendent's quarters with the visitors' room and office are located on the south side.

Entrance to the graves area is through two iron pedestrian gates on Highway D-2 which open onto the central mall leading to the memorial chapel and the museum at its northern end. A cross-axis mall intersects the central mall near the center of the graves area dividing it into four rectangular plots. At the intersection of the two malls is a circular island of grass and a flagstaff from which the American flag flies daily. A small cul-de-sac with a stone bench and a planter backed by evergreen shrubbery lies at each end of the cross-axis mall. Bordering the malls are Oriental plane trees and beds of polyantha roses surrounded by dwarf boxwood hedges.

A path edged by privet hedge lies just inside the perimeter fence, which encloses the graves area.

THE MEMORIAL

The Romanesque memorial consists of a semi-circular peristyle with a chapel on the right (east) end and a one-room museum on the left. Its columns of granite and multi-hued French and Italian marble encircle a raised stone terrace, in the center of which is a large rectangular altar of polished golden Rocheret Jaune marble. Entrance to the chapel and museum is from the terrace. The walls and piers of the peristyle are of pink Gres des Vosges sandstone with copings, bands, and openings of buff-grey Rippes Jaune sandstone.

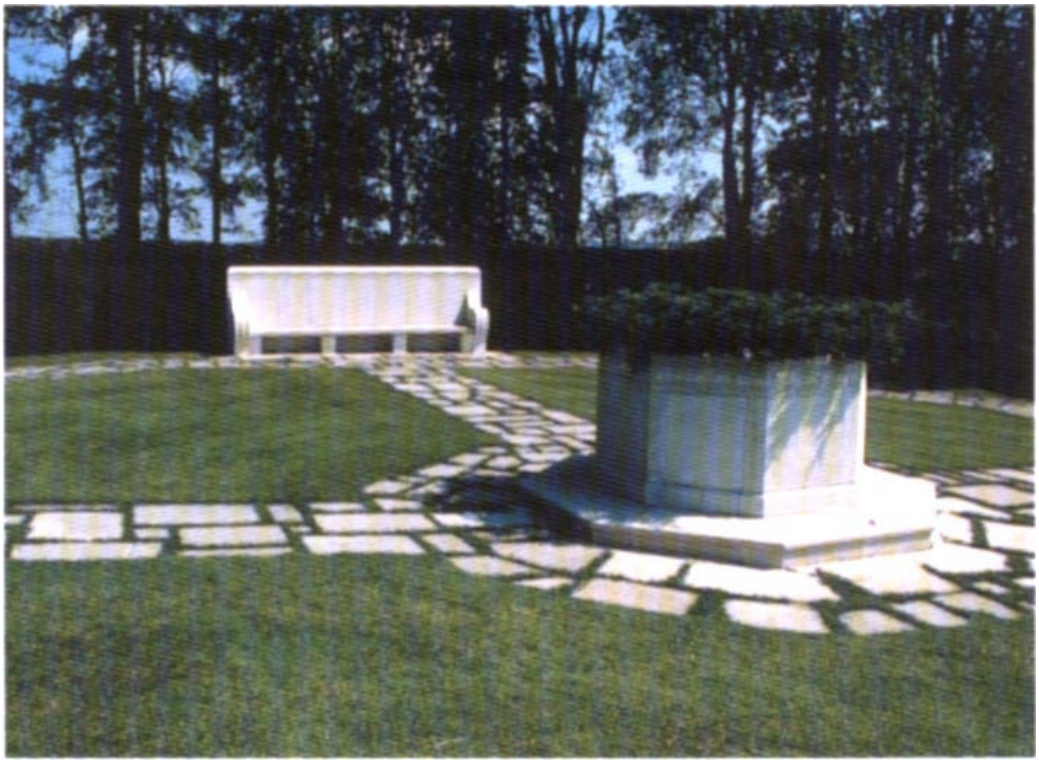
An eagle rising, a palm wreath encircling a cross and a pelican feeding its young, early Christian symbols of redemption and resurrection, are carved on the front face of the outdoors stone altar in bas-relief. Above the carving is inscribed in English and French:

IN SACRED SLEEP THEY REST

Engraved on the front and rear faces of the capitals of the ten double columns of the colonnade are the insignia of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 26th, 28th, 32nd, 42nd, 77th, and 93rd Divisions which fought in this sector. Caved on the sides of the capitals are embellishments such as a rifle and bayonet, gas mask, one-pounder cannon, airplane propeller, field glasses, Stokes mortar, airplane bomb, entrenching tools, automatic pistol, field telephone set, hand grenade, mess kit, machine gun on a tripod, cannon muzzle, mule's head, trench knife, canteen and cover, belt of machine gun ammunition, artillery sehll and harness.

The columns of the peristyle are separated at regular intervals by one of four piers. Above each of the two outer piers is carved a soldier of World War I; above each of the two inner piers is carved St. George slaying the dragon on the left and St. Michael, the Archangel, on the right. Over them in the frieze of the peristyle in Rippes Jaune stone is the commemorative inscription:

View Down Mall to Memorial



Cul-de-Sac at End of Cross-Axis Mall

The Memorial

Altar on Terrace of Peristyle

THESE ENDURED ALL AND GAVE ALL
THAT HONOR AND JUSTICE MIGHT PREVAIL AND
THAT THE WORLD MIGHT ENJOY FREEDON AND INHERIT PEACE

Engraved on the rear of the peristyle is the inscription:

AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION
CRAM AND FERGUSON ARCHITECTS

In the frieze of the exterior walls of the chapel and museum are carved twenty-three shields depicting the branch and service insignia of U.S. Forces which served in the Oise-Aisne region: Infantry, Field Artillery, Engineers, Signal Corps, Air Service, Coast Artillery Corps, quartermaster Corps, Ordnance Department, Medical Department, Chemical Warfare Service, Marine Corps, Tank Corps, Motor Transport Corps, Transportation Corps, Cavalry, Military Police, General Staff Corps, Adjutant General's Department, Inspector General's Department, Judge Advocate General's Department, Christian Chaplains, Jewish Chaplains and the American Field Service. Below the frieze on the front wall of both the chapel and museum is a stylized version of the Great Seal of the United States.

THE CHAPEL

The rectangular stone chapel on the West End of the peristyle is entered from the raised terrace through a massive brass-studded oak door of dark panels trimmed in lighter colored wood. Three stars within circles, separated by laurel leaves, are carved in the lintel above the door. At each end of the lintel is carved a fasces, symbol of authority of the magistrates of ancient Rome. Facing the entrance, inside the chapel, is a beautiful altar of black variegated Italian porter marble inset with two panel of Rocheret Jaune marble. A stylized oak tree, traditionally symbolizing strength, virtue and faith, is carved upon each of these panels. Between the oak trees in a circle is the carved figure of a pelican feeding her young, symbolic of Christ feeding the masses.

The tall Rocheret Jaune marble back of the altar is embellished with decorative sculpture and panels, and carries the following inscription on a gilded background directly above the altar:

WITH GOD IS THEIR REWARD

A gold cross between two candelabra sits upon the altar. At the altar base rests the Tablets of Moses.

The names of 241 American soldiers missing in the area whose remains were never recovered or, if recovered never identified, are inscribed upon the side walls. This inscription precedes the names on the south wall:

THE NAMES RECORDED ON THESE WALLS ARE
THOSE OF AMERICAN SOLDIERS
WHO FOUGHT IN THIS REGION AND
WHO SLEEP IN UNKNOWN GRAVES

Two windows provide light for the chapel's interior, one high above the altar and one in the north wall. Each is made up of circles of thin, translucent Algerian onyx. A circular bronze filigreed chandelier suspended from the vaulted stone ceiling also provides light.

Completing the furnishings of this simple chapel are four hand-carved walnut prayer benches facing the altar.

MUSEUM

On the East End of the peristyle is the museum room. It is similar in construction and size to the chapel. Carved in the wall facing the entrance is a crusader's sword upon a gilded backgoungd flanked by vertical laurel leaves also upon a gilded background. The colors of the United States and France are displayed from bronze standards on the walls on walls on both sides of the walnut bench.

Interior of Museum

On the left (north) wall, also engraved on a gilded background is the dedicatory relief inscription:

IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE OF HER SONS
WHO DIED IN THE WORLD WAR
THIS CHAPEL IS ERECTED BY
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The inscription appears in both English and French.

Opposite the inscription on the south wall is a carved battle map of the Oise-Aisne region. The map details the lines of advance and the areas where various American divisions fought during the Oise-Aisne Offensive and the Second battle of the Marne, which are described briefly in the history section of this booklet.

The chandelier, oak door, and onyx windows match those of the chapel.

Map of Aisne-Marne Region on Museum Wall

GRAVES AREA

The graves area contains four rectangular plots bordered by wide tree lined paths and beds of polyantha roses. Grave plots A and C lie to the left (west) of the central mall and plots B and D to the right. Interred within them are the remains of 6,012 military and support personnel. They represent all of the then Forty-eight States and the District of Columbia. Of these remains, 597 are Unknowns, i.e., those who could not be identified. Inscribed on the headstones of the Unknowns is:

HERE RESTS IN HONORED GLORY
AN AMERICAN SOLDIER
KNOWN BUT TO GOD

Stars of David mark the graves of those of the Jewish faith. Latin crosses mark the others. Each headstone was fabricated from white Carrara marble quarried in Italy. As one proceeds through the cemetery, their long rows rise gently from the main entrance of the graves area to the memorial on the north, presenting an ever-changing array of geometric patterns.

Enclosing the graves area are a privet hedge, a low peripheral stone wall covered intermittently with ivy, and a creen of oak, birch, pine, fir, cedar, poplar, ash and maple. Between the stone wall and the privet hedge are groups of lilac, hibiscus and hydrangea.

Names of the Missing on Museum Wall

VISITORS' ROOM

The visitors' room and the cemetery office are located in the Superintendent's quarters, an ivy-covered building enframed by stately maple trees and flowering shrubs, on the south side of Highway D-2 directly opposite the main entrance to the cemetery.

It is a comfortably furnished room, with toilet facilities, where visitors may obtain information, sign the register and pause to refresh themselves. During the day, a member of the cemetery staff is on duty in the building to answer questions and provide information on burials and memorialization in the Commission's cemeteries, accommodations in the vicinity, travel, local history and other things of interest.