



News Release

**US Army Corps
of Engineers** ®
Norfolk District

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Remembering a President's passing – a piece of history

Norfolk engineers built JFK's permanent gravesite

As we recognize the 43rd anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy next week and his subsequent interment in Arlington National Cemetery, it's likely little known that an organization based in Hampton Roads played a significant role in this piece of American history.

Forty-three years ago next week, November 22, 1963, as our nation and the world reeled in shock from the assassination of America's youngest president, an appropriate gravesite needed to be found and constructed... and quickly. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was given the last-minute critical task of locating the gravesite in Arlington National Cemetery, working with the Kennedy family to design it and then to construct it, all in only one day.

The "Eternal Flame". According to William Manchester, Kennedy family friend and author of *Death of a President*, Jacqueline Kennedy said that when she accompanied her husband's body to the Capitol Rotunda to lie in state, the idea of an Eternal Flame "just came into my head." On an earlier trip the Kennedy's made to Paris, Mrs. Kennedy had seen such a flame at their memorial to the French Unknown Soldier at the *Arc de Triomphe*.

The gravesite that the Army Corps was charged with building, to include the Eternal Flame that would now mark it, had to be installed and functioning by the next day—the day the nation buried its youngest president. The Corps' mission was accomplished...but there was much more to follow *with a Hampton Roads connection*.

Not his final resting place...now the rest of the story

That initial resting place lasted for more than a year. In that time, thousands of people visited the gravesite. Because of these large crowds, cemetery officials and Kennedy family members decided that a more suitable site should be constructed. Just five days after her husband's assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy asked renowned Washington, D.C. architect, John Carl Warnecke to design the project. The task of actually planning and overseeing the project's design and construction fell to the **Army Corps of Engineers Norfolk District**. This included the placement and final permanent installation of the Eternal Flame; crafting the intricate stonework that comprised the plaza and the circulation walkways surrounding the gravesite and leading to the flame; providing access for handicapped visitors; designing and installing an intricate lightning rod system to deflect lightning and to protect a stately tree that resides in front of the gravesite; and planting vegetation, mature shrubs and large, 20 – 25 foot trees that still frame the site.

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JFK's Permanent Gravesite

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Construction of President Kennedy's permanent resting place began in the fall of 1965 with the work completed in 1967. Despite all of the bridges, dams and other major civil works and military construction projects that the Norfolk District has completed in the Hampton Roads and Commonwealth of Virginia during the district's 127-year history, the Kennedy gravesite is by far the most visible, seen and visited by millions from throughout the world.

The site itself

The final resting place of President Kennedy, assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on Nov. 22, 1963, lies in a small grass plot on a wooded hillside rolling down from the Curtis-Lee Mansion. A circular gray granite walkway terminates in an elliptical overlook from which white marble stairs rise to the rectilinear grave terrace. The slate marker which identifies the grave bears the inscription: *John Fitzgerald Kennedy 1917-1963*, and is surmounted by a small cross. It is flanked by smaller tablets marking the graves of President Kennedy's deceased children. The Eternal Flame emerges from a low three-pronged bronze font to the rear of the slate markers for the President's grave and those of his children. The site itself lies on an axis with and overlooking the Memorial Bridge and in line with the Lincoln Memorial on the opposite side of the Potomac.

One month after the site was completed and the president's body was moved to its final resting place, a 1967 critique of the new site in the *Washington Post* described it as: "Large enough to accommodate the crowds, yet almost intimate in scale, its design is worthy of the magnificent view it affords. It may well be the most cherished monument of modern American history."

And, it came to fruition through the efforts of an organization which calls Norfolk its home.

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Possible sidebar or teaser

Did You Know?

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers designed and built President Kennedy's original "Eternal Flame" at Arlington National Cemetery -- and with only one day to complete the mission. Read the fascinating firsthand account at: www.hq.usace.army.mil/history/Vignettes/Vignette_60.htm