



Bob Voliva and other volunteers have completed the restoration of the Grand Army of the Republic monument in the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery. (JOHN BURGESS/The Press Democrat)

Santa Rosa's Civil War monument rededicated

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The Grand Army of the Republic has its guns again.

The Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery is observing Veteran's Day in historic fashion today, dedicating the restoration of the city's long-neglected Civil War monument.

The site has been repaired in stages over the past decade, leading to the finishing touches two weeks ago with the installation of a pair of replica Civil War-era cannons that now guard the monument.

"To have this just sitting there as an eyesore just didn't make sense," said Bob Voliva, an amateur gun collector who championed replacing the cannonry. "It needed to be restored."

To celebrate, organizers have invited Abraham Lincoln, or someone who looks like him, to deliver the Gettysburg Address as well as Civil War enactors to fire off a volley of black-powder rifles. The event starts at 11 a.m. and is free to the public.

The ceremony is an echo of the one that greeted the monument's dedication in 1915. Then a full company of California National Guards troops fired salutes.

The monument was in honor of all veterans, but especially members of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of former Union soldiers who raised money for it.

Though far from the war's battlefields, Sonoma County was then home to many veterans from both sides of the conflict.

There are more than 160 Civil War vets buried in the cemetery, more than from any other war, Voliva said.

The glory of that first day didn't last long, though. In 1942, in the fervor to find scrap metal for World War II, locals stripped the cannonballs dotting the monument's wall and hauled off its mounted rapid-fire naval guns that dated to the Spanish-American War.

Denuded of all but a granite obelisk, the monument spent most of the rest of the century looking as unloved as the surrounding cemetery, which fell to vandalism, vegetation and earthquake damage.

In the 1990s, the Santa Rosa Rural Preservation Committee began using volunteer labor to restore the historic burial ground, including the war monument.

Progress was slow. In 1998, the group replaced 119 missing cannonballs from the monument's perimeter with concrete replicas. In 2008, they tracked down a 22-foot Douglas Fir flag pole for the site — harder than you think.

“Nobody makes wood flag poles the size of that anymore,” Voliva said.

And now, 68 years after its old guns were melted down, and 96 years from its creation, the monument is armed again.

Voliva said there was no way to replace the naval guns that were originally at the site. No one makes replicas of them, and any originals would be exorbitantly expensive.

Instead, they opted for a pair of muzzle-loading cannons modeled on weapons used in the Civil War. Both are cast iron and weigh more than 800 pounds.

Still they're actually more appropriate for a Civil War-based monument than the more modern rapid-fire guns that were installed in 96 years ago, Voliva said.