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Six Union soldiers return to Mass. after 145 years

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BOURNE, Mass. — A fife and drum band led a hearse carrying the remains of six Union soldiers to the Massachusetts National Cemetery, where they were buried Saturday, 145 years after they died in the Civil War.

"For them, it has been a long journey home," cemetery director Paul McFarland said at a ceremony that drew 200 people despite steady rain.

"The journey started here in Massachusetts. To borrow a phrase often used among our Vietnam veterans, 'Welcome home.' "

The soldiers, killed in a skirmish days before the first battle of Manassas — a Confederate victory in July 1861 that surprised President Abraham Lincoln — were discovered in unmarked graves in the early 1990s when relic hunters came across bones on a site slated for the construction of a fast-food restaurant in Centreville, Va.

War records and other clues, including uniform types, revealed them as members of the 1st Massachusetts Infantry Regiment.

The remains later were turned over to the Smithsonian Institution, where they stayed for about a decade.

The soldiers have been tentatively identified, but no descendants have been identified yet. That means no DNA matches — and an "unknown" designation.

McFarland said the remains were tentatively identified as William A. Smart of Cambridge, Albert F. Wentworth of Chelsea, Thomas Roome of Boston, George Bacon of Chelsea, Gordon Forrest of Malden and James Silvey of Boston.

The six wooden caskets — each 3 feet long and covered by an American flag — were buried in the cemetery, where 40,000 other veterans and their spouses, including Iraq war veterans, are interred.

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