

History of Memorial Day

Following the Civil War, General John Logan with an organization of northern Civil War veterans called for a day of remembrance for those who died in the War. Logan proclaimed “The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land,” He chose the date of May 30 because it was not the anniversary of any major battle of the Civil War. The day was originally called Decoration Day. The words ‘defense of their country during the late rebellion’ didn’t sit well with the Southern states, of course and for many years a separate day was chosen to honor the Southern soldiers who died during the War. The first Decoration Day event was held at Arlington mansion, once the home of Robert E. Lee. Washington officials including Gen. and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant, presided over the ceremonies. After speeches, children from the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Orphan Home and members of the Grand Army of the Republic made their way through the cemetery, laying flowers on both Union and Confederate graves, reciting prayers and singing hymns. One of the first Southern observances occurred in Columbus, Miss., April 25, 1866, when a group of women visited a cemetery to decorate the graves of Confederate soldiers who had fallen in battle at Shiloh. Nearby were the graves of Union soldiers, neglected because they were the enemy. By 1890 most states had a day of remembrance for soldiers of the Civil War it was observed on 30 May in the North, other dates in the South. Many cities have laid claim to being the first community to celebrate Memorial Day. In 1966 President Johnson signed a bill declaring Waterloo NY the ‘birthplace’ of Memorial Day.

Following World War I, the day was changed to honor all soldiers who died in all US wars. In 1971, Memorial Day was declared a national holiday by an act of Congress and the last Monday of May was designated as the official Memorial Day. Interestingly, Many Southern states also have their own days for honoring the Confederate dead. Mississippi celebrates Confederate Memorial Day on the last Monday of April, Alabama on the fourth Monday of April, and Georgia on April 26. North and South Carolina observe it on May 10, Louisiana on June 3 and Tennessee calls that date Confederate Decoration Day. Texas celebrates Confederate Heroes Day January 19 and Virginia calls the last Monday in May Confederate Memorial Day.

An act of Congress in 2000 designated a National Moment of Remembrance encouraging Americans to pause at 3:00pm local time on Memorial Day for a minute of silence to remember and honor those who died in service to the nation. As Moment of Remembrance founder Carmella LaSpada stated: “It’s a way we can all help put the memorial back in Memorial Day.”