

# Memorial Day

***Date Established as a Federal Holiday: May 13, 1938***

***Date Observed: Last Monday in May***

**M**emorial Day is a federal holiday created to remember those who have died in the military service of the nation. It was originally called Decoration Day, because the primary activity associated with the observance was, and is, decorating the graves of fallen soldiers. Decoration Day observances began during the Civil War. By 1890 every state in the North, as well as the District of Columbia, had passed legislation making Decoration Day or Memorial Day a legal holiday on May 30 or May 31. On May 13, 1938, Congress passed a law making Memorial Day, May 30, a legal public holiday. The Monday Holiday Law of June 28, 1968, took effect in 1971, changing the observance date of Memorial Day to the last Monday in May.

In 1996 Congress instituted the White House Commission on Remembrance to promote Memorial Day activities, encourage Americans to participate in a National Moment of Remembrance, and educate children about the meaning of Memorial Day. In addition, on December 28, 2000, Congress passed a law designating 3:00 P.M. (local time) on Memorial Day as the National Moment of Remembrance.

## History of Memorial Day

People around the world have decorated graves of fallen warriors and loved ones since ancient times. The American Memorial Day dates from the Civil War, which began in 1861 and ended in 1865. The war was fought between the Union of Northern states, which sought to abolish slavery throughout the United States, and the Confederacy of Southern states, which aimed to preserve states' rights to allow slavery. Many battles were

*Opposite page:  
A grave-decorating scene on the cover of sheet music for the 1868 song "O'er Graves of the Loved Ones Plant Beautiful Flowers" by John P. Ordway.*

fought in the Southern states, though one of the most decisive, the Battle of Gettysburg, took place in Pennsylvania. Of the more than 2.3 million Union soldiers, more than 360,000 were killed. About 1 million soldiers fought in the Confederacy, and between 133,000 and 165,000 died. It is the bloodiest war in the nation's history. (*For more on slavery and the Civil War, see **Emancipation Day**.*)

The sheer devastation of the war demanded recognition and response. According to most accounts, women began decorating graves during the war, and some decorated the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers. The *New York Tribune* hailed women in Columbus, Mississippi, for performing this "healing touch for the nation."

Historians are uncertain exactly where and when the first Civil War-era grave-decorating observance occurred. Several towns claim to be the site of the earliest Memorial Day observance: Boalsburg, Pennsylvania (which claimed its first observance took place in 1864), Vicksburg, Mississippi (claiming April 1865), Winchester, Virginia (claiming May 1865), Columbus, Mississippi, and Carbondale, Illinois (each claiming April 1866), and Waterloo, New York (claiming May 5, 1866). The Waterloo commemoration was formally recognized by Congress and President Lyndon Johnson in 1966 as the official birthplace of Memorial Day.

### **Confederate Memorial Days**

Some southern states observe their own memorial day holidays to honor fallen Confederate soldiers. Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi have legal state holidays designating the fourth, or last, Monday in April as Confederate Memorial Day. Their holidays commemorate Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's formal surrender to Union General William T. Sherman near Greensboro, North Carolina, on April 26, 1865. South Carolina's Memorial Day is May 10 to observe the death anniversary of Confederate General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. In Texas Confederate Heroes Day is January 19, the birthday of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. In Tennessee June 3, Jefferson Davis's birthday, is a special observance.

In September 1867 a poem published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “The Blue and the Gray” by Francis Miles Finch, drew a verbal portrait of decorated graves of both Union soldiers—who wore blue uniforms—and Confederate soldiers—who wore gray. The poem’s popularity helped spread the custom of grave decorating in the years after the war.

The first official observance of Memorial Day can be traced back to a General Order issued by Union General John A. Logan. On May 5, 1868, he sent this order to all posts of the Grand Army of the Republic:

The thirtieth day 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. In this observance no form of ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit.

It is the purpose of the commander-in-chief to inaugurate this observance with the hope that it will be kept up from year to year while a survivor of the war remains to honor the memory of his departed comrades. He earnestly desires the public press to call attention to this order and lend its friendly aid in bringing it to the notice of comrades in all parts of the country in time for simultaneous compliance therewith.

Department commanders will use every effort to make this order effective.

General Logan reportedly got the idea from his wife. Earlier that spring she and a few friends had traveled to Virginia and visited Confederate battlefields and graveyards. Moved by Southern women’s practice of decorating their soldiers’ graves, Mrs. Logan urged her husband to formalize the custom in the North.

For years after the Civil War, particularly in the South, Americans observed Memorial Day much more widely than the Fourth of July. The ideas surrounding **Independence Day** aggravated too many open wounds, but both sides could share in mourning the Civil War dead. (*See the Appendix for two accounts of Memorial Day observances in Washington, D.C., in the late 19th century.*)

Although Memorial Day originally commemorated those who died in the Civil War, after World War I, the holiday honored Americans who died in all wars.

## **Red Poppies**

Red poppies grow wild in fields in France and Belgium where many battles of World War I were fought. After the war soldiers carried memories of the arresting sight of the beautiful flowers sharing the land with their fallen comrades. This vision is perhaps most poignantly rendered by Canadian Colonel John McCrae's poem "In Flanders Fields," written in 1915, three years before he was killed in the war.

### **In Flanders Fields**

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
    That mark our place; and in the sky  
    The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
    Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
    In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
    The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
    If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
    In Flanders fields.

Soon after World War I a few women—including Anna Guerin in France, and Moina Michael and Mary Hanecy in the United States—who were deeply affected by McCrae's poem, headed efforts to sell poppies to raise funds for families in war-torn regions. Today disabled and unemployed veterans make the millions of paper poppies sold by the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion Auxiliary each year around Memorial Day.

## Fallen Americans

Revolutionary War (1775-83): 4,435  
 War of 1812 (1812-15): 2,260  
 Indian Wars (about 1817-98): 1,000  
 Mexican War (1846-48): 13,283  
 Civil War (1861-65): at least 497,832 (Union: 364,511;  
 Confederate: 133,321-164,820)  
 Spanish-American War (1898-1902): 2,446  
 World War I (1917-18): 116,516 (422 were women<sup>\*\*\*</sup>)  
 World War II (1941-45): 405,399 (470 were women<sup>\*\*\*</sup>)  
 Korean War (1950-53): 54,246\* (16 were women<sup>\*\*\*</sup>)  
 Vietnam War (1964-75): 58,209\* (8 were women)  
 Persian Gulf War (1990-91): 382 (13 were women)  
 War in Afghanistan/Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-):  
 193\*\* (at least 6 were women)  
 War in Iraq/Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-): 1,712\*\* (at least 33  
 were women)

\* According to the Department of Defense, numbers continue to be added to these totals.

\*\* Department of Defense totals as of June 16, 2005

\*\*\*Figures from Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.; research is ongoing and statistics are incomplete.

## Observances

Americans observe Memorial Day in both public and private ways. Many decorate the graves of departed loved ones, whether they served in the armed forces or not. Towns and cities around the country also hold ceremonies for Memorial Day that often include prayers, speeches, and the singing of the national anthem and the playing of "Taps." (*For more on "Taps," see Veterans Day.*)

Washington, D.C., is the location of the most elaborate observances during the weekend of Memorial Day. On the evening before the holiday the National Symphony Orchestra pays musical tribute at the National Memorial Day Concert on the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol Building.

## The Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers



*On Memorial Day, 1993, President Bill Clinton participated in the wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.*

Three unknown soldiers rest in the Tomb at Arlington National Cemetery. The first unidentified soldier to be buried at Arlington died in World War I. His remains were interred on November 11, 1921. On Memorial Day, 1958, remains of an unknown soldier who fought in World War II and another who fought in Korea were also buried there. The remains of a Vietnam War soldier were buried at the Tomb in 1984. DNA testing later identified the Vietnam War veteran, and his family was able to claim his remains.

The Tomb is inscribed: "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God." Specially selected sentinels from the Army's Third Infantry maintain constant guard at the Tomb.

Before the ceremonies, members of the Old Guard of the Third U.S. Infantry—the Army's official ceremonial unit—take part in a tradition known as "Flags-in." They place more than 280,000 American flags at

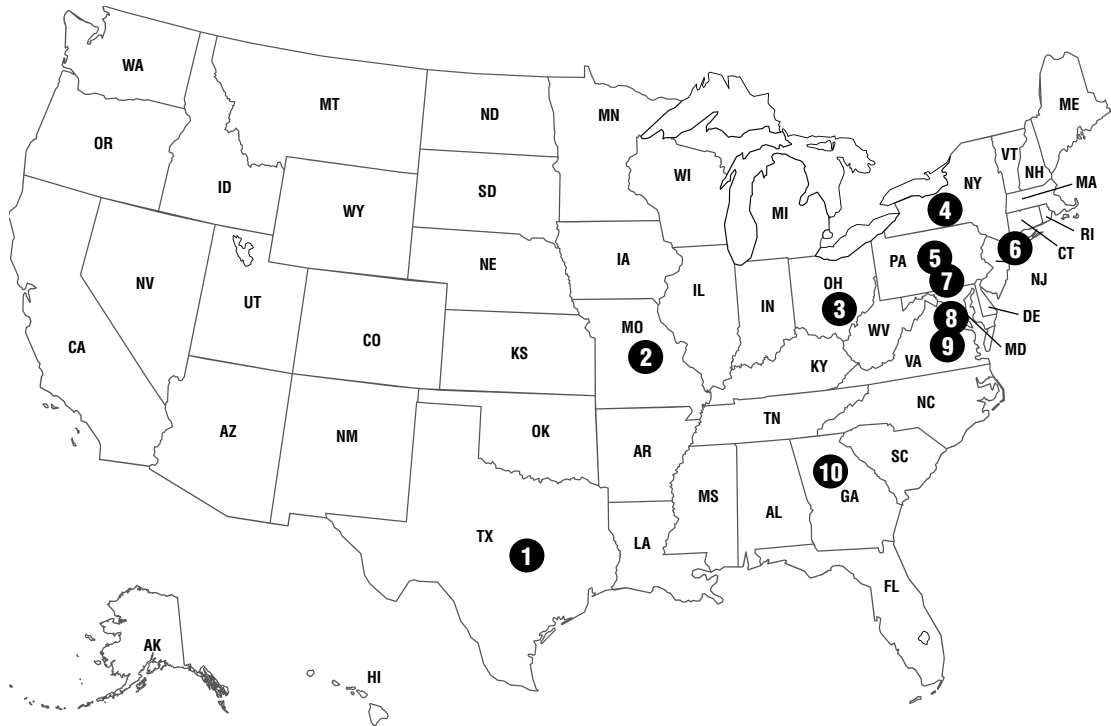
each grave site at Arlington National Cemetery and at the U.S. Soldier's and Airmen's Home National Cemetery. Old Guard soldiers stand guard over both cemeteries the entire weekend.

Memorial Day begins with the National Memorial Day Parade. Active military, veterans, bands, and others march down Independence Avenue. During the afternoon numerous wreath-layings and memorial services are held at monuments honoring the armed forces: the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery, the U.S. Navy Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Women in Military for America Memorial, and at Logan Circle Park, named after John A. Logan, the Union Army General who ordered the first official observance of Memorial Day (see above). In addition, the U.S. Army Band performs a concert for the ceremony at Arlington, and the U.S. Navy Band plays at the Navy Memorial.

The National Moment of Remembrance from 3:00 P.M. to 3:01 P.M. honors the fallen as buglers play "Taps" at various monuments and government buildings.

### ***A Sampling of Observances***

- 1. Austin, Texas:** America's Triathlon and Memorial Day Remembrance Celebration combines triathletic events with special observance ceremony and concert. Contact America's Triathlon, [info@americatriathlon.com](mailto:info@americatriathlon.com), <http://www.americatriathlon.com>
- 2. Columbia, Missouri:** Salute to Veterans Memorial Day Weekend Celebration includes an air show, visiting veterans, a parade, and special ceremonies with speakers, wreath laying, 21-gun salute, and "Taps." Contact Salute to Veterans Corporation, 573-443-2651, [airshow@salute.org](mailto:airshow@salute.org), <http://www.salute.org>
- 3. Nelsonville, Ohio:** Ohio Valley Honoring All Veterans Memorial Day Powwow since 1980. Other offerings include crafts and food. Contact Hocking College, 3301 Hocking Pkwy., Nelsonville, OH 45764-9704, 740-753-3591
- 4. Waterloo, New York:** In 1966 Congress and President Lyndon B. Johnson officially recognized this village as the "Birthplace of Memorial Day." Since 1866 Waterloo has commemorated Memorial Day. Events



feature marches to cemetery memorial services with wreath layings, speakers, gun salutes, and “Taps.” Other activities include a parade, fireworks, musical entertainment, living history demonstrations, and more. Contact Village Office, 41 W. Main St., Waterloo, NY 13165, 315-539-9131, <http://www.waterloony.com/>

5. **Boalsburg, Pennsylvania:** This village also asserts “Birthplace of Memorial Day” status, claiming annual observances since 1864. Events include a walk to the cemetery for special services, reenactments, a parade, and speeches. Contact Centre County Visitors Bureau, 814-231-1400, <http://www.boalsburgcentral.com> and also see Boal Mansion Museum, P.O. Box 116, Boalsburg, PA 16827-0116, 814-466-6210, [office@boalmuseum.com](mailto:office@boalmuseum.com), <http://www.boalmuseum.com/memorialday04.village.htm>
6. **New York, New York:** U.S. Navy and Marines participate in Fleet Week, which includes Memorial Day services and parades. For more information, see <http://www.fleetweek.navy.mil>

7. **Gettysburg, Pennsylvania:** A parade through town leads to the Gettysburg National Cemetery where a ceremony, including prayers, speeches, and wreath laying, concludes with children strewing flowers on the graves. Contact Gettysburg National Military Park, 97 Taneytown Rd., Gettysburg, PA 17235-2804, 717-334-1124, fax: 717-334-1891, <http://www.nps.gov/gett/>
8. **Washington, D.C.:** The Taste of DC food and music festival accompanies the national observances described above. For parade information, contact Music Celebrations International, [info@musiccelebrations.com](mailto:info@musiccelebrations.com), <http://www.musiccelebrations.com>  
For Taste of DC, contact 202-789-7002, <http://www.tasteofdc.org/>  
For information on other events, contact National Capitol Parks-East, 1900 Anacostia Dr., S.E., Washington, DC 20020-6722, 202-690-5185, fax: 202-690-0862, <http://www.nps.gov/nace/> or Washington, DC, Convention and Tourism Corporation, 901 7th St., N.W., 4th Fl., Washington, DC 20001-3719, 800-422-8644 or 202-789-7000; fax: 202-789-7037, <http://www.washington.org>
9. **Fredericksburg, Virginia:** Luminaria observance features the placement of 15,300 candles at gravesites honoring as many fallen soldiers. The nighttime commemoration also includes the playing of "Taps" and a walking tour at the site of one of the deadliest Civil War battles. Contact Fredericksburg National Cemetery, 120 Chatham Ln., Fredericksburg, VA 22405-2508, 540-373-6122, fax: 540-371-1907, <http://www.nps.gov/frsp/luminari.htm>
10. **Roswell, Georgia:** The Roswell Remembers Memorial Day observance includes special ceremonies and speakers, followed by community picnic and music. Contact the Roswell Memorial Day Committee, 617 Atlanta St., Roswell, GA 30075, 770-640-3253 or 800-776-7935, fax: 770-640-3252, [rcvb@mindspring.com](mailto:rcvb@mindspring.com), <http://www.roswellmemorialday.com>



## Memorials

African-American Civil War Memorial at <http://www.nps.gov/afam/index.htm>

Arlington National Cemetery at <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org>

Korean War Veterans Memorial at <http://www.nps.gov/kowa/index.htm>

National Park Service administers many more memorials commemorating Civil War and other war veterans. See <http://www.nps.gov> for more information.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial at <http://www.nps.gov/vive/index.htm>

Women in Military Service for America Memorial at <http://www.womensmemorial.org/> and <http://www.nps.gov/gwmp/wimsa.htm>

World War II Memorial at <http://wwiimemorial.com> and <http://www.nps.gov/nwwm/>

### **Other Web Sites**

American Legion Auxiliary provides information about its poppy program at <http://www.legion-aux.org/>

Library of Congress presents a timeline and photographs of the Civil War at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwphome.html>

Smithsonian Institution has an online exhibit on Civil War images and artifacts at <http://www.civilwar.si.edu/home.html>

Veterans of Foreign Wars gives information about the Buddy Poppy program at <http://www.vfw.org>

White House Commission on Remembrance, established by Congress in 1996, promotes Memorial Day observances and the National Moment of Remembrance at <http://www.remember.gov>

### **Sources for Further Reading**

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