

The origins of Memorial Day

By ThoughtCo.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.27.20

Word Count **483**

Level **580L**



A scout places a flag beside a gravestone at the Los Angeles National Cemetery on May 27, 2017, in Los Angeles, California, ahead of Memorial Day. Photo by: Frederic J. Brown/AFP/Getty Images

On Memorial Day, Americans honor soldiers who have died for their country. This holiday happens on the last Monday of each May.

Origins Of Memorial Day

Memorial Day began as Decoration Day in 1868. It was started by John A. Logan. He had been a Union soldier. Logan fought for the North during the Civil War. The Civil War was fought between the Union and the Confederacy.

Decoration Day was a time to decorate the graves of the war dead with flowers.

The first large Decoration Day event was held that year. It happened at Arlington National Cemetery. This is just outside Washington, D.C. The cemetery already held the remains of more than 20,000 Union dead. It also had several hundred dead from the Confederacy. The Union soldiers mainly came from the North. Most Confederate soldiers were from the South.

Ulysses S. Grant and his wife oversaw the Decoration Day ceremonies. Grant was a Union general in the war. He later became president.

After speeches, children and soldiers walked through the cemetery. They laid flowers on both Union and Confederate graves. They said prayers and sang hymns.

Was Decoration Day Really The First Memorial Day?

General Logan said his wife came up with the Decoration Day idea. However, events honoring those who died in the Civil War had happened before.

One of the first was in Columbus, Mississippi, on April 25, 1866. Back then a group of women visited a cemetery. They decorated the graves of Confederate soldiers who had died in battle. Nearby were the graves of Union soldiers. These had been avoided. This is because the Union was seen as the enemy. The women were disturbed at the sight of the bare graves. So, they put their flowers on those graves, too.

Today about 25 places claim they started the first Decoration Day. Many of them are in the South. Most of the war dead were buried there.

Official Birthplace Declared

President Lyndon Johnson declared Waterloo, New York, the "birthplace" of Memorial Day in 1966.

Some say a ceremony in Waterloo was first to honor local soldiers who had fought in the Civil War. It was held on May 5, 1866. Businesses closed. People flew flags at half-staff. This means the flag flies halfway up the flagpole. It is a sign of respect.

Confederate Memorial Day

Many Southern states also have their own days for honoring the Confederate dead. Mississippi celebrates Confederate Memorial Day. It is the last Monday of April. North and South Carolina observe it on May 10.

Learn The Stories Of Your Military Ancestors

Memorial Day began as a tribute to Civil War dead. Now it honors all who have died in American wars. More than 1.1 million soldiers have died fighting.

The holiday is an important reminder. We should learn about the soldiers who came before us. We should tell their stories.