

This Day in History... May 30, 1868

The First Memorial Day

On May 30, 1868, the first Memorial Day, then called Decoration Day, was held in the United States. It's grown to become a federal holiday dedicated to remembering the sacrifices of our fallen soldiers.

While this event is often considered the major predecessor to Memorial Day, there were several other similar celebrations that came before it. The practice of decorating soldiers' graves has been done for centuries. With more than 600,000 casualties during the Civil War, honoring fallen soldiers took on a new significance in America.

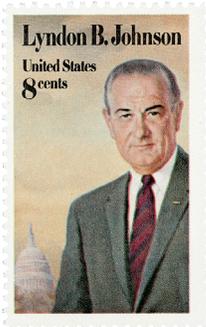


This stamp was issued to commemorate the last gathering of the Grand Army of the Republic.

According to one account, the first instance of a Civil War soldier's grave being decorated occurred in Warrenton, Virginia, on June 3, 1861. During the war there were other recorded instances of people decorating the graves of soldiers. Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, has declared itself the birthplace of Memorial Day for the decoration of soldiers' graves that took place on July 4, 1864.

There is another claim that the first observance could be traced back to African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, on May 1, 1865. There were also Memorial Day celebrations in the South since 1866. On April 25, 1866, the ladies of Columbus, Mississippi laid flowers on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers.

In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation naming Waterloo, New York, as the official birthplace of Memorial Day. Their first Memorial Day celebration was held on May 5, 1866, and quickly became an annual community-wide event in which business closed and people decorated the graves of soldiers.



This stamp was issued on Johnson's 65th birthday.

All of these smaller events around the country served as inspiration for the first wide-scale Memorial Day in 1868. On May 5 of that year, John A. Logan, commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic Civil War veterans' organization, issued a proclamation that May 30 would be Decoration Day, to honor those who died "in defense of their country during the late rebellion." He chose the day because it wasn't the anniversary of any battle and according to some sources, because that was the best day for flowers to be in bloom.

On May 30, 1868, there were memorial events in 183 cemeteries in 27 states. Among the events that day was one at Arlington National Cemetery. Civil War general and future president James A. Garfield delivered a lengthy speech before the group of 5,000 people laid flowers on more than 20,000 Union and Confederate graves.

Decoration Day proved to be a popular and meaningful event and it grew every year. Michigan was the first to declare it an official state holiday in 1871 (other northern states would do the same by 1890). In 1881, then-President James Garfield passed legislation granting government workers May 30 off work to decorate soldiers' graves.



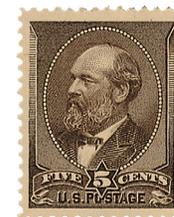
According to the Flag Code, on Memorial Day the flag is to be flown at half-mast until noon, and then at full-mast until sunset.



Stamp issued for the 125th anniversary of the 1866 Memorial Day celebration in Waterloo, New York.



Since 1948, Old Guard service members have placed flags at each headstone in Arlington for Memorial Day.



Stamp issued five months after Garfield's assassination.

In 1882, the event was first referred to as Memorial Day, though that name didn't become widespread until after World War II. Then in 1967 it was made the official name by a federal law. The following year, Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, which moved four holidays, including Memorial Day, from their usual dates to specific Mondays to allow for three-day weekends. This law went into effect in 1971, when Memorial Day was celebrated on the last Monday in May.

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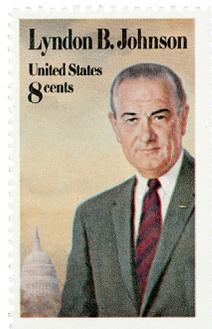
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