

History and the Meaning of Memorial Day

Originally called Decoration Day, Memorial Day is a day of remembrance for those who have died in service of the United States of America. Over two dozen towns and cities lay claim to being the birthplace of Memorial Day. In May 1966, President Lyndon Johnson officially declared Waterloo N.Y. the birthplace of Memorial Day.

Memorial Day was borne out a desire to honor our Civil War dead. On May 5, 1868, General John Logan, National Commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, officially proclaimed in his General Order No. 11 that: *"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."*

Because the day was not the anniversary of any particular battle, the General called it Decoration Day. On the first Decoration Day, 5,000 participants decorated the graves of 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried at Arlington Cemetery while General James Garfield made a historic speech.

In 1873, New York was the first state to officially recognize the holiday. It was recognized by all northern states by 1890. The South refused to acknowledge the day and honored their dead on different days. This went on until after World War I when the holiday changed from honoring just those who died fighting in the Civil War to honoring Americans who died fighting in any war.

With the Congressional passage of the National Holiday Act of 1971 (P.L. 90 – 363), it is now observed on the last Monday in May by almost every state. This helped ensure a 3-day federal holiday weekend.

Several southern states have an additional separate day for honoring the Confederate war dead: January 19th in Texas; April 26th in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi; May 10th in South Carolina; and June 3rd in Louisiana and Tennessee.

History and the Meaning of Memorial Day: Red Poppies

The poppy, in Europe and the United States, quickly became a symbol of the fallen military after the publication of *In Flander's Field*. The opening line refers to the sight Lt. Col. John McCrae witnessed as he, a physician, walked among the crosses laid out to mark the site of so many who died for their countries. While the poppies grew among the graves, they are also a resilient flower. The poppy is able to lay dormant for many years in the soil only to reappear in great numbers, covering fields which had lay bare for

History and the Meaning of Memorial Day

many years previously. This also held significance for Lt. Col. McCrae as he wrote of the heroes who appeared in great numbers to come to the aid of others against oppression and tyranny during this Great War, and who would lie dormant until their call was heard again.

In Flander's Field

By Lt. Col. John McCrae, 1915

*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*

Inspired by the poem "*In Flanders Fields*," Moina Michael replied with her own poem:

We Shall Keep the Faith

By Moina Michael, 1915

*Oh! You who sleep in Flanders fields,
Sleep sweet – to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died*

*We cherish, too, the poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led;*

*It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a luster to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders field*

*And now the Torch and Poppy Red
We wear in honor of our dead
Fear not that ye have died for naught;
We'll teach the lesson that you wrought
In Flanders field*

She then conceived of an idea to wear red poppies on Memorial Day in honor of those who died serving the nation during war. She was the first to wear one, and sold poppies to her friends and co-workers with the money going to benefit servicemen in need.

Later a Madam Guerin from France was visiting the United States and learned of this new custom started by Ms. Michael. When she returned to France, she made artificial red poppies to raise money for war orphaned children and widowed women. This tradition spread to other countries.

History and the Meaning of Memorial Day

In 1921, the Franco-American Children's League sold poppies nationally to benefit war orphans of France and Belgium. The League disbanded a year later and Madam Guerin approached the VFW for help. Shortly before Memorial Day in 1922, the VFW became the first veterans' organization to sell poppies nationally. Two years later, their "Buddy" Poppy program was selling artificial poppies made by disabled veterans. In 1948, the U.S. Post Office honored Ms. Michael for her role in founding the National Poppy movement by issuing a red 3 cent postage stamp with her likeness on it.



National Moment of Remembrance

A resolution was passed in December 2000 creating the "National Moment of Remembrance", which asks that all Americans "...voluntarily and informally observe in their own way a moment of remembrance and respect, pausing from whatever they are doing for a moment of silence or listening to 'Taps'".

Objectives:

- To raise Americans' awareness of the honorable contributions made by those who died while defending our nation.
- To encourage all Americans to honor those who died as a result of service to this nation by pausing for one minute at 3:00 p.m. (local time) on Memorial Day.

Americans around the world should pause and remember these heroes in a symbolic act of unity.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration