

## History of Memorial Day

At the very end of the month of May we celebrate Memorial Day. If you are old enough to be on Medicare, you probably still call it “Decoration Day.” How did we go from Decoration Day to Memorial Day? Well, that takes us back to the period just after the end of the Civil War in April of 1865.

Just a few months later, in July of 1865 a druggist in Waterloo, New York began a campaign to “decorate” the graves of the civil war veterans. He caught the ear of a very influential local politician whose name was General George B. Murray. Shortly thereafter a committee was formed to make various decorations such as wreaths, crosses, and flower bouquets with the intention of doing something for each veteran’s grave in the local cemeteries. This was accomplished on May 5, 1866.

Down south, as the civil war was finally winding down, various Women’s groups who were providing support to the families of wounded or killed soldiers began to decorate the graves of fallen soldiers from both sides. So in reality, Decoration Day did not begin with an act of government, but the simple human need to honor our dead.

By 1868, Decoration Day was celebrated in virtually all parts of the country in what might today be called a “movement.” In that same year the movement came to the attention of General John A. Logan. General Logan was Commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a group of union veterans. In a few short years after the war there were over 400,000 veteran members of the GAR. On May 5, 1868 General Logan issued general Order No. 11 calling for the membership to set aside May 30<sup>th</sup> as a day for remembering the sacrifices made by their fallen brothers. Quoting General Logan, “the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing flowers, or otherwise *decorating* the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet church yard in the land.” With that declaration, “Decoration Day” began to be celebrated throughout the United States every May 30<sup>th</sup>.

The alternative name of “Memorial Day” was first used in 1882 to honor *all* US soldiers who died in service to our country. But Memorial Day really become commonly used until after WWI. It was about this time the red poppy came to be a symbol honoring our veterans on Memorial Day. As time went on and we lost men and women to other conflicts, Memorial Day began to replace Decoration Day as the more commonly used term. This was certainly the case following World War II.



Decoration Day became.....Memorial day



Flags at Military cemetery

Interestingly, Memorial Day was not declared the official name until a Federal law was passed in 1967. In the summer of 1968 Congress passed the Uniform Holidays bill which specified the traditional date of May 30<sup>th</sup> to be moved to the last Monday of the month of May. So now you know how we ended up getting a 3-day Memorial weekend holiday. The law took effect at the federal level in 1971, but it took several years for all 50 states to comply.

So Decoration Day evolved over the years to become known as Memorial Day, but despite the name change there are still many of our senior citizens who continue to refer to it as Decoration Day. In December of 2000 a resolution titled the “National Moment of Remembrance” resolution was passed. The Moment of Remembrance simply asks that each of us take a moment (3:00pm local time) to reflect and remember those that gave their lives so that so many more of us may live in freedom. Many patriotic events are held during the Memorial Day holiday including the President of the United States laying a wreath at the grave of the Unknown Soldier.

It is a sad but certain fact that the true meaning of Memorial Day has been diminished in that more people think of it as the “kickoff” to summer than the solemn day it started out to be 144 years ago. Ask any member of the VFW what they think about the change made by Congress. We strongly encourage all of our readers to be teachers to the young people in their lives. The next generation needs to know and respect the original meaning of Memorial Day.

Some might even argue that Abraham Lincoln himself set the table during his iconic Gettysburg Address when he ended his speech with these words, “that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that the government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

## Memorial Day trivia questions:

1. Why was May 30<sup>th</sup> picked to be the day for Decoration Day?
2. Where was the first official Declaration Day observed?
3. Where did the idea to use the red Poppy as a Declaration Day symbol come from?
4. What major sporting event is always held on the Sunday before Memorial Day?
5. What other traditional holidays were changed to make 3 day weekend holidays?