Early Observances of Memorial Day

The [Civil War](http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/american-civil-war-history), which ended in the spring of 1865, claimed more lives than any conflict in U.S. history and required the establishment of the country’s first national cemeteries.

By the late 1860s, Americans in various towns and cities had begun holding springtime tributes to these countless fallen soldiers, decorating their graves with flowers and reciting prayers.

***Did you know?* Each year on Memorial Day a national moment of remembrance takes place at 3:00 p.m. local time.**

It is unclear where exactly this tradition originated; numerous different communities may have independently initiated the memorial gatherings. And some records show that one of the earliest Memorial Day commemoration [was organized](https://www.history.com/news/memorial-day-civil-war-slavery-charleston) by a group of freed slaves in Charleston, South Carolina less than a month after the [Confederacy](https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/confederate-states-of-america) surrendered in 1865. Nevertheless, in 1966 the federal government declared Waterloo, [New York](https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/new-york), the official [birthplace of Memorial Day](http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/memorial-day-history/pictures/memorial-day/birthplace-of-memorial-day).

Waterloo—which first celebrated the day on May 5, 1866—was chosen because it hosted an annual, community-wide event, during which businesses closed and residents decorated the graves of soldiers with flowers and flags.

Decoration Day

On May 5, 1868, General John A. Logan, leader of an organization for Northern Civil War veterans, called for a nationwide day of remembrance later that month. “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,” he proclaimed.

The date of [Decoration Day](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/civil-war-dead-honored-on-decoration-day), as he called it, was chosen because it wasn’t the anniversary of any particular battle.

On the first Decoration Day, General [James Garfield](http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/james-a-garfield) made a speech at [Arlington National Cemetery](http://www.history.com/news/arlington-national-cemetery-8-surprising-facts), and 5,000 participants decorated the graves of the 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried there.

Many Northern states held similar commemorative events and reprised the tradition in subsequent years; by 1890 each one had made Decoration Day an official state holiday. Southern states, on the other hand, continued to honor their dead on separate days until after [World War I](https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i).

Confederate Memorial Day is still celebrated in several states and will be on Sunday, April 26, 2020 in Florida; on Monday, April 27, 2020 in Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi and on May 11, 2020, in parts of South Carolina. The practice of commemorating the Confederacy became even more controversial after [massacre at Emanuel AME Church](https://www.history.com/news/charleston-church-shooting-memorial) in Charleston in 2015

History of Memorial Day

Memorial Day, as Decoration Day gradually came to be known, originally honored only those lost while fighting in the Civil War. But during World War I the United States found itself embroiled in another major conflict, and the holiday evolved to commemorate American military personnel who died in all wars, including [World War II](https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/world-war-ii-history), [The Vietnam War](https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history), [The Korean War](https://www.history.com/topics/korea/korean-war) and the wars in [Iraq and Afghanistan](https://www.history.com/topics/21st-century/war-on-terror-timeline).

For decades, Memorial Day continued to be observed on May 30, the date Logan had selected for the first Decoration Day. But in 1968 Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, which established Memorial Day as the last Monday in May in order to create a three-day weekend for federal employees; the change went into effect in 1971. The same law also declared Memorial Day a federal holiday.

Memorial Day Traditions

Cities and towns across the United States host Memorial Day parades each year, often incorporating military personnel and members of veterans’ organizations. Some of the largest parades take place in [Chicago](https://www.history.com/topics/chicago), [New York](https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/new-york) and [Washington, D.C.](https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/washington-dc)

Americans also observe Memorial Day by visiting cemeteries and memorials. Some people wear a red poppy in remembrance of those fallen in war—a tradition that [began with a World War I poem](https://www.history.com/news/world-war-i-poppy-remembrance-symbol-veterans-day). On a less somber note, many people take weekend trips or throw parties and barbecues on the holiday, perhaps because Memorial Day weekend—the long weekend comprising the Saturday and Sunday before Memorial Day and Memorial Day itself—unofficially marks the beginning of summer.

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**Answer the following questions**

1. In ¶ 2 What does the word, tribute mean?
2. When and where did the federal government declare the birthplace of Memorial Day?
3. When was the first decoration day celebrated and why was that date chosen?
4. What does the word remembrance in ¶ 6 mean?
5. What was the holiday renamed and when did it happen?
6. Who does Memorial Day celebrate or honor?
7. What war was the origin of this holiday? What happened to change this?
8. Why is Memorial Day celebrated the last Monday in May?
9. Name 2 traditions that take place on Memorial Day.
10. What is Memorial Day the unofficial start to?