MEMORIAL DAY
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All we have of freedom,
All we use or know,
This our fathers bought for us
Long, long ago.
-- Rudyard Kipling

The History of Memorial Day

Memorial Day (also known as Decoration Day) stands apart from most other U.S. holidays in two regards. First, Memorial Day stands alongside the Fourth of July, Flag Day, and Washington's birthday as one of the few purely American holidays on the calendar. Second, Memorial Day's origins are more ambiguous than those of its patriotic counterparts.

What is known is this: Memorial Day, then known as Decoration Day, officially began after the Civil War to honor soldiers killed during the war. The first national observance was not a government initiative, but rather the work of a veterans' organization, The Grand Army of the Republic. That organization's commander-in-chief, General John Logan, signed a proclamation on May 5, 1868, declaring May 30, 1868, a national day of remembrance to be held on May 30th, a date chosen because it was not the anniversary of any single battle. On that date, flowers were placed on the graves of both Union and Confederate dead in Arlington National Cemetery, soldiers' graves tended, and the casualties of America's bloodiest war remembered.

But Logan cannot be credited as the "founder" of Memorial Day. Historians

believe that Logan drew his inspiration from cities across the nation -- particularly in the south -- that had already established local days of remembrance. Decoration Day began in an effort to honor the Union's war dead in the same way that Confederate casualties were already being honored and perhaps to draw the nation together in its grief. (Prior to 1868, only residents of the town of Columbus, Mississippi, had chosen to honor fallen soldiers from both sides of the conflict.)

In the years that followed, Logan would prove successful in one of his aims. Northern states quickly embraced the concept of honoring their war dead, and by 1890, Decoration Day had officially been declared a holiday in all of the Union states.

War wounds ran deep, however. Confederate states balked at the idea of a "shared" day of remembrance and continued to observe their own Confederate Memorial Days. Meanwhile, Decoration Day came to be known as a tribute to Union war dead alone.

So what ultimately united the nation? The losses of a second war.

Following World War I, Decoration Day took on new meaning. The focus of the holiday expanded to include all U.S. citizens killed in war or military conflict. More than half a century after the holiday's inception, division had finally given way to reconciliation.

The aftermath of World War II brought yet more changes. As countless more families mourned loved ones killed in action, the name of "Decoration Day" faded from popularity. It was replaced by the more somber title of "Memorial Day, a term that it had been used since the latter decades of the nineteenth century, but not widely embraced. In 1967, "Decoration Day" was officially renamed "Memorial Day" by federal law. Just one year later, a less-popular chance would also follow.

The Uniform Holidays Bill of 1968 moved Memorial Day from its traditional date of May 30th to the current calendar position of the last Monday in May. This move came in an effort to create more three-day weekends, and the federal date was eventually adopted by all fifty states. Veterans' groups have argued, however, that the change cheapens Memorial Day. No longer is it just a day for Americans to honor the men and women who have laid down their lives in defense of liberty. In recent years, Memorial Day has evolved into a celebration of summer. It is widely regarded as the start of the summer vacation season and has become a time of picnics, weekend getaways, and fun with family and friends.

Still, even today many choose to remember the origins of the holiday and pay tribute to those for whom the holiday was created. On Memorial Day, flags are typically flown at half-staff from dawn until noon. A national moment of silence is observed at 3 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST). Volunteers place flowers and flags on the graves of servicemen and women. A national remembrance ceremony is held at the Tomb of the Unknown Solider in the Arlington National Cemetery. Many cities and towns across the nation also hold ceremonies to remember local war dead.