

Memorial Day, formerly known as Decoration Day, developed in the late 1800s. Waterloo, New York, was officially declared to be the birthplace of the holiday, though similar celebrations were held in many cities in the years following the Civil War.

Waterloo held on May 5, 1866, one of the first organized events honoring Civil War soldiers who died in the war. The event took place at the urging of Waterloo resident Henry C. Welles. Flags were lowered to half-mast, and the people of the town gathered for ceremonies. They decorated the graves of fallen Civil War soldiers with flags and flowers, marching to music between the three cemeteries in the city. Two years later, on May 5, 1868, the leader of the Northern Civil War Veterans, General John A. Logan, called for a national day of remembrance on May 30.

Initially, Decoration Day was set aside to honor those who had died in the Civil War. However, after World War I, fallen soldiers from other wars began to be recognized. The day, widely celebrated on May 30 throughout the country, became known as Memorial Day. As the United States was involved in more wars, the holiday became a day to recognize men and women who died in defense of their country in all wars.

In 1968 Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act to establish three-day weekends for federal employees. For this reason, Memorial Day has been celebrated on the last Monday in May since being declared a national holiday in 1971.

Today, many groups still visit cemeteries to place American flags or flowers on soldiers' graves.