

# ***Memorial Days***

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Memorial Day annually calls us to honor the nation's war dead, as well the servicemen, servicewomen, and families who've supported their efforts, and sacrifice.

Like all holidays and rituals, the observances of Memorial Day witness their own shifting and complicated histories. In 1971, Congress formally established the last Monday in May as a federal holiday. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, that same Monday is still officially recognized as Confederate Memorial Day.

What follows here is exploration of how these observances have evolved and varied over time, along with some of the contested 'origin stories' that different memorial groups have claimed, over the 150+ years since such memorial services and 'Decoration Days' emerged from the bloodshed of the Civil War. Some may be familiar, some more surprising. Also linked are some references for further reading, if you're interested in digging deeper into the history of ritual, of remembrance, of our nation at large.

Many accounts of a collectively celebrated Memorial Day turn to May 30, 1868. At the newly established Arlington Cemetery (on the grounds of the former Lee-Custis estate), James A. Garfield addressed the Grand Army of the Republic (a Union veterans' organization) echoing GAR commander-in-chief John Logan's call earlier that month to annually recognize that date "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."



*Decoration Day, May 30, 1884; Union Square, New York City  
(Grand Army of the Republic, joined by French troops and flags)*

In regional terms, the practice had been preceded – as early as 1866 -- by the Decoration Day rituals developed by local Ladies Memorial Associations in the South. These influential organizations variously planned and promoted group observances to honor dead Confederate soldiers (their first chosen date was April 26, marking the final Confederate surrender to Sherman; later variations and different states would variously commemorate the death of Stonewall Jackson and the birthday of Jefferson Davis) [for more: see Caroline Janney’s [\*Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause\*](#)].

Others would claim priority with their even smaller-scale, local, often family-based practices during the war itself: in Boalsburg, PA in 1864 to honor a son killed at Gettysburg; or April 13, 1862, when four women had strewn flowers on the graves of the many soldiers buried in Arlington Heights, Chicago.

Through the era of the Lost Cause, the most broadly promoted story, during the years of the Lost Cause, looks to Mrs. Charles Williams, whose graveside services for her husband in 1862 would find broader vent through her service as secretary for the Columbus (GA) Ladies Memorial Association, and their establishment of Memorial Day on April 26, 1866. Though Smithsonian author Ellen Litwicki notes the tale as “apocryphal,” Williams credited a friend for adopting the floral practice from the German custom of grave decoration on All Saints’ Day, and as the CMLA’s official history notes, used her position to publicize this story throughout the South [for more: see Ellen Litwicki’s ‘[American Public Holidays 1865-1920](#)’].

[tinyurl.com/AmericaPublicHolidays1865-1920](http://tinyurl.com/AmericaPublicHolidays1865-1920)



*Women decorate the grave of Stonewall Jackson, 1866. Lexington, VA*

Lastly, award-winning historian David Blight recently uncovered in the Harvard archives what he has identified as the first large-scale Memorial Day ceremony, on May 1, 1865, just days after the War’s end. This ritual of remembrance was also observed in the South, in Charleston, SC. After the arrival of Union troops, led by the 21<sup>st</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry, 10,000 people staged a parade at the Washington Race and Jockey Club (converted in the war’s final year into a POW camp and mass grave). A contemporary reporter for ‘The New York Tribune’ described the event as “a procession of friends and mourners as South Carolina and the United States never saw before.”

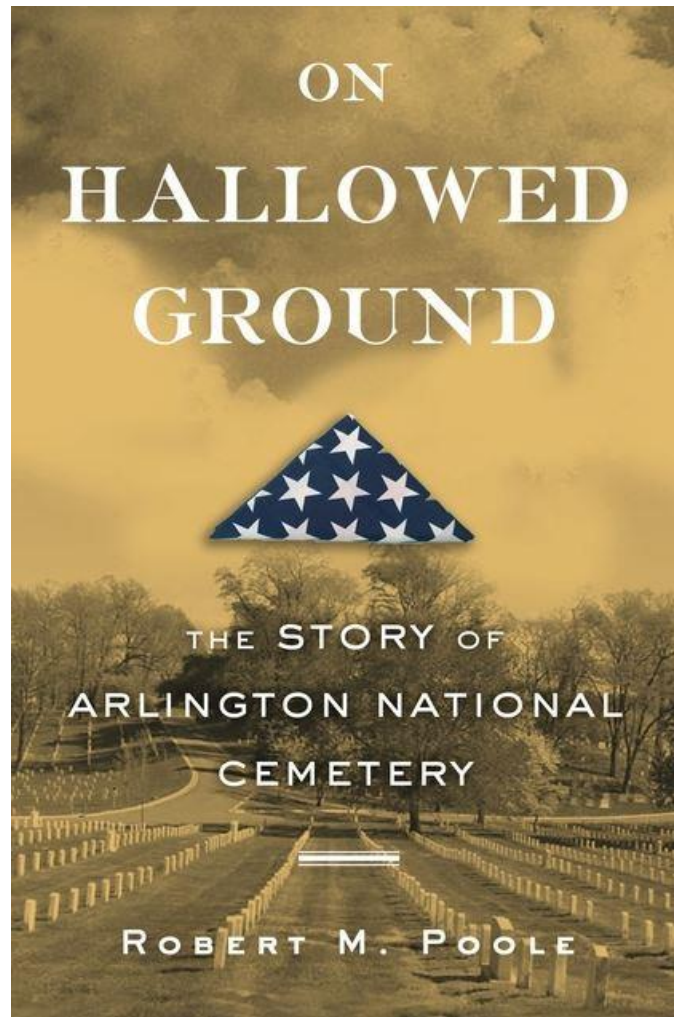


*May 1, 1865, Memorial Parade for Union Soldiers.  
Washington Race Course and Jockey Club/ POW Camp, Charleston, SC.  
Illustration Credit: Owen Freeman, for New York Times*

But little as this story is known, the memorial marchers here, according to Blight's records, were the city's newly freedpeople, "led by 3,000 black schoolchildren carrying armloads of roses and singing the Union marching song 'John Brown's Body.' Several hundred black women followed with baskets of flowers, wreaths and crosses ... After the dedication [of the cemetery for the imprisoned soldiers], the crowd dispersed into the infield and did what many of us do on Memorial Day: enjoyed picnics, listened to speeches and watched soldiers drill... The war was over, and Memorial Day had been founded by African-Americans in a ritual of remembrance and consecration" [for more, see David Blight's *New York Times* Op-Ed, '[Forgetting Why We Remember](#);' and his prize-winning book *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*].

[tinyurl.com/BlightFirstMemorialDay](http://tinyurl.com/BlightFirstMemorialDay)

However you observe Memorial Day, and whomever you honor, history witnesses how diverse our experiences and our traditions may be, even as we often come together on shared holidays and commemorations. We hope that an appreciation of history's turns, and its continuities, will duly enrich your sense of the people who have come before us, as well as the communities we collectively create, today.



*For more, see Robert Poole's [On Hallowed Ground: The Story of Arlington National Cemetery](#)*