

The Origins of Memorial Day Celebrations

On the last Monday of May each year, members of countless local organizations assemble to march from the Cranford Community Center through town ending at Memorial Park. Along the way, neighbors are greeted and candies tossed to assembled parade watchers. The parade is led by a Grand Marshall, usually a local or area resident active in or retired from a branch of the military. At Memorial Park, surrounded by monuments recognizing those Cranford residents who died or were wounded in the service of their country, the meaning of Memorial Day is recognized, as Boy Scouts read the roster of Cranford's war dead.

How long Cranford has celebrated this tradition is not recorded, but given that "modern" suburban Cranford was developed immediately after the Civil War, and many of the town's luminaries were, themselves, Civil War veterans, it's likely to have been for well over 100 years.

We do have in Images of America: Cranford, Vol. II (page 26), a photo of the Grant School May 30, 1890 Decoration Day Flag Raising Program. The earliest citation of a municipally sponsored event is found through the Burditt Newspaper Index and was reported in the June 1, 1922 *Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*. It reported that, after a parade, a ceremony was held at Cranford's Memorial Park, and then a second held at Fairview Cemetery. The reference to a bronze plaque honoring Cranford's war dead at Memorial Park suggests that this was probably not the first such event. The earliest photograph of Cranford's Memorial Day celebrations is found in Images of America: Cranford. It captures Cranford's 1924 Memorial Day parade.

But exactly how did this day of observance begin? Like so much in life, there is a simple answer, and a somewhat more complex one.

The simple answer is that Memorial Day (initially called Decoration Day) was proclaimed May 5, 1868 by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic (a veteran's organization of Northern Civil War veterans). His General Order 11 declared May 30 to be the official day of celebration, during which the graves Union and Confederate dead interred at Arlington cemetery and elsewhere should be decorated with flowers. "We should guard their graves", he continued, "with sacred vigilance. ... Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic." Similar events were reported to have been held at 183 cemeteries in 27 states in 1868, and at 336 cemeteries in 1869. The Arlington National Cemetery observance continues to this day, during which 1,200 soldiers of the US. 3rd Infantry place American flags on 260,000 gravestones on the Thursday before Memorial Day.

If that's the simple answer, why is there a more complex one? Well, although Waterloo, New York was officially recognized as the birthplace of Memorial Day by President Johnson in 1966, there were a number of similar celebrations begun in Confederate states prior to General Logan's 1868 general order and proclamation. The first decoration of the graves of Civil War dead appears to have originated in Warrenton Virginia June 3, 1861. The women of Savannah, Georgia decorated their soldiers' graves with flowers in 1862. And the women of Columbus, Mississippi laid flowers

at the graves of both Confederate *and* Union dead on April 25, 1866, a year after the Civil War's end.

The North, and northern sympathizers in the South, are not without their claims to having originated Memorial Day. Local historians in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania claim their women originated the practice when they decorated soldier's graves on July 4, 1864. On May 1, 1865, 10,000 Freedmen, teachers, students and missionaries came together to clean up and decorate the unmarked graves of 257 Union prisoners buried at the Charleston, South Carolina Race Course POW camp.

Because Decoration Day was proclaimed by a Northern veteran's group (and recognized by all Northern States by 1890), and because the practice was seen as appropriated from a Southern practice of decorating the graves of their war dead, the day was not recognized in the South until the next century. Instead, many Southern States recognized their own Confederate Decoration days, held on a date *other than* May 30. It took World War I and the extension of the meaning of "Memorial Day" (a term of use originating in 1882 but not officially recognized until 1967) to include the American dead from any war to bring North and South together in a common celebration.

Well that seems to clear up a lot about the origins of Memorial Day, but don't we celebrate it on the last Monday in May, not May 30th? You are correct, and that change was made on June 28, 1968, the date Congress passed the Uniform Monday holiday Act in order to create four three-day weekends to observe national holidays. Even this was not without controversy, as a number of veterans groups, as well as Medal of Honor Winner Senator Daniel Inouye (who in 1999 introduced Senate Bill 189 to restore May 30th for observance of Memorial Day), felt the 3-day weekend practice buried the original meaning of Memorial Day in a blizzard of department store white sales.

Concerned that the meaning of Memorial was being lost to many Americans, a National Moment of Remembrance was passed December, 2000 asking all Americans to pause at 3 PM local time on Memorial Day "to voluntarily and informally observe in their own way a moment of remembrance and respect, pausing from whatever they are doing for a moment of silence or listening to 'Taps'". At sunrise on Memorial Day, the American flag is briskly raised to the top of the staff and then slowly lowered to the half-staff position to recognize those who gave their lives in American wars. At noon, the flag is raised to full staff to resolve that the living will keep their sacrifice in mind and continue the fight for liberty and justice for all.

In spite of its convoluted history and moving date, Memorial Day continues to be widely observed as the Day on which Americans acknowledge their debt to the over 1 million of their brethren who gave up their lives in military service so that our freedom may be preserved. Truly, freedom is never free; rather it is purchased at a significant price.

Sources:

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