

Memorial Day

by
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Memorial Day is a federal holiday which occurs every year on the final Monday of May. It is a day of remembering the men and women who died while serving in the United States Armed Forces. Formerly known as Decoration Day, it originated after the American Civil War to commemorate the Union and Confederate soldiers who died in the Civil War. By the 20th century, Memorial Day had been extended to honor all Americans who have died while in the military service. It typically marks the start of the summer vacation season, while Labor Day marks its end.

Many people visit cemeteries and memorials, particularly to honor those who have died in military service. Many volunteers place an American flag on each grave in national cemeteries.

Annual Decoration Days for particular cemeteries are held on a Sunday in late spring or early summer in some rural areas of the American South, notably in the mountains. In cases involving a family graveyard where remote ancestors as well as those who were deceased more recently are buried, this may take on the character of an extended family reunion to which some people travel hundreds of miles. People gather on the designated day and put flowers on graves and renew contacts with kinfolk and others.



There often is a religious service and a "dinner on the ground," the traditional term for a potluck meal in which people used to spread the dishes out on sheets or tablecloths on the grass. It is believed that this practice began before the American Civil War and thus may reflect the real origin of the "memorial day" idea.

The practice of decorating soldiers' graves with flowers is an ancient custom. Soldiers' graves were decorated in the U.S. before and during the American Civil War. A claim was made in 1906 that the first Civil War soldier's grave ever decorated was in Warrenton, Virginia, on June 3, 1861, implying the first Memorial Day occurred there. Though not for Union soldiers, there is authentic documentation that women in Savannah, Georgia, decorated Confederate soldiers' graves in 1862. In 1863, the cemetery dedication at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was a ceremony of commemoration at the graves of dead soldiers. Local historians in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, claim that ladies there decorated soldiers' graves on July 4, 1864. As a result, Boalsburg promotes itself as the birthplace of Memorial Day.

Following Lincoln's assassination in April 1865, there were a variety of events of commemoration. The sheer number of soldiers of both sides who died in the Civil War, more than 600,000, meant that burial and memorialization took on new cultural significance. Under the leadership of women during the war, an increasingly formal practice of decorating graves had taken shape. In 1865, the federal government began creating national military cemeteries for the Union war dead.

The first widely publicized observance of a Memorial Day-type observance after the Civil War was in Charleston, South Carolina, on May 1, 1865. During the war, Union soldiers who were prisoners of war had been held at the Charleston Race Course; at least 257 Union prisoners died there and were hastily buried in unmarked graves. Together with teachers and missionaries, black residents of Charleston organized a May Day ceremony in 1865, which was covered by the New York Tribune and other national papers. The freedmen cleaned up and landscaped the burial ground, building an enclosure and an arch labeled, "Martyrs of the Race Course." Nearly ten thousand people, mostly freedmen, gathered on May 1 to commemorate the war dead. Involved were about 3,000 school children newly enrolled in freedmen's schools, mutual aid societies, Union troops, black ministers, and white northern missionaries. Most brought flowers to lay on the burial field. Today, the site is used as Hampton Park. Years later, the celebration would come to be called the "First Decoration Day" in the North.

On Memorial Day, the flag is raised briskly to the top of the staff and then solemnly lowered to the half-staff position, where it remains only until noon. It is then raised to full-staff for the remainder of the day. The half-staff position remembers the more than one million men and women who gave their lives in service of their country.

For many Americans, the central event is attending one of the thousands of parades held on Memorial Day in large and small cities all over the country. Most of these feature marching bands and an overall military theme with the National Guard and other servicemen participating along with veterans and military vehicles from various wars.

One of the longest-standing traditions is the running of the Indianapolis 500, an auto race which has been held in conjunction with Memorial Day since 1911. It runs on the Sunday preceding the Memorial Day holiday. The Coca-Cola 600 stock car race has been held later the same day since 1961. The Memorial Tournament golf event has been held on or close to the Memorial Day weekend since 1976.