

# Memorial Day

---

The Last Monday in  
May

## Remembering Those Who Made the Ultimate Sacrifice

*Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known only to God*  
Inscription on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

### Introduction

John Quincy Adams, our sixth President, once soberly stated, “Posterity, you will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make good use of it.”

Over 1.3 million Americans have died in our nation’s wars. They made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty, protecting us from internal and external invaders. They gave their lives that we might enjoy the highest level of liberty known by any people in history. How should we remember what they have done for us? Webster defines *memory* as,

*Memorial; monumental record, that which calls to remembrance.*

He defines *memorial* as,

*That which preserves the memory of something; any thing that serves to keep in memory.*

It is right that we who live set apart times to remember those who gave up life for us to live in relative order, prosperity and peace.

### Biblical References

In the Old Testament, God appointed memorials—feasts—which were primarily for the purpose of teaching a remembrance of what God had done for His people. God commands us to preserve many things in remembrance. Consider the following:

*Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.*  
(Hebrews 13:3)

*Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken to you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.* (Hebrews 13:7)

*For ye remember, brethren, our labour and toil: for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.* (I Thessalonians 2:9)

*Remember therefore from where you have fallen, repent and do the first works; or else I will come to you quickly, and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. (Revelation 2:5)*

When our nature is to forget, Memorial Day serves as an important holiday to cause us to reflect upon the goodness of God and those whom He has used to preserve liberty.

## History

Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, is a day of remembrance for those who have died in our nation's service. There are many stories of its beginnings, with over two dozen cities and towns claiming to be the birthplace of Memorial Day. There is also evidence that organized women's groups in the South were decorating graves before the end of the Civil War. A hymn published in 1867, "Kneel Where Our Loves are Sleeping" by Nella L. Sweet carries the dedication, "To The Ladies of the South who are Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead"<sup>1</sup>. While Waterloo, New York, was officially declared the birthplace of Memorial Day by President Lyndon Johnson in May 1966, it is difficult to prove conclusively the origins of the day. This holiday was likely celebrated in many locations before it became official.

Memorial Day was officially created on May 5, 1868, by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, in his General Order No. 11. It was first observed on May 30, 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. The South refused to acknowledge the day, honoring their dead on separate days until after World War I, when the holiday changed from honoring just those who died fighting in the Civil War to honoring Americans who died fighting in any war. It is now celebrated in almost every state on the last Monday in May (passed by Congress in 1968 to ensure this federal holiday includes a three-day weekend), though several southern states have an additional, separate day for honoring the Confederate war dead: January 19 in Texas; April 26 in Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Mississippi; May 10 in South Carolina; and June 3 (Jefferson Davis's birthday) in Louisiana and Tennessee. In Virginia, the last day in May is Confederate Memorial Day.

## John A. Logan

John Logan, after a successful career in politics that eventually made him a U.S. Congressman, volunteered to fight for the Union. He fought in eight major campaigns, rose from colonel to general, and commanded the entire Union force at the battle of Atlanta. He saved Raleigh, North Carolina, from being burned by angry Union troops. After the war, he returned to Congress and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1871 and 1874. John A. Logan College, in Murphysboro, Illinois, is named after him. Following is his General Order No. 11, given on May 5, 1868, mandating the creation of the first Memorial Day.

*I. The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated 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, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet church-yard in the land. In this observance no form of ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit.*

*We are organized, comrades, as our regulations tell us, for the purpose among other things, "of preserving and strengthening those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors, and marines who united to suppress the late rebellion." What can aid more to assure this result than cherishing tenderly the memory of our heroic dead, who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foes? Their soldier lives were the reveille of freedom to a race in chains, and their deaths the tattoo of rebellious tyranny in arms. We should*

*guard their graves with sacred vigilance. All that the consecrated wealth and taste of the nation can add to their adornment and security is but a fitting tribute to the memory of her slain defenders. Let no wanton foot tread rudely on such hallowed grounds. Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no vandalism of avarice or 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.*

*If other eyes grow dull, other hands slack, and other hearts cold in the solemn trust, ours shall keep it well as long as the light and warmth of life remain to us.*

*Let us, then, at the time appointed gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with the choicest flowers of spring-time; let us raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor; let us in this solemn presence renew our pledges to aid and assist those whom they have left among us a sacred charge upon a nation's gratitude, the soldier's and sailor's widow and orphan.*

*II. It is the purpose of the Commander-in-Chief to inaugurate this observance with the hope that it will be kept up from year to year, while a survivor of the war remains to honor the memory of his departed comrades. He earnestly desires the public press to lend its friendly aid in bringing to the notice of comrades in all parts of the country in time for simultaneous compliance therewith.*

*III. Department commanders will use efforts to make this order effective.*

By order of  
JOHN A. LOGAN,  
Commander-in-Chief<sup>1</sup>

## **A National Act of Enthusiasm and Faith**

The following is an excerpt from a speech by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., a Supreme Court Justice. The address was delivered for Memorial Day, May 30, 1884, at Keene, New Hampshire, before John Sedgwick Post No. 4, Grand Army of the Republic, and entitled, "In Our Youth our Hearts Were Touched With Fire".

For stripped of the temporary associations which gives rise to it, it is now the moment when by common consent we pause to become conscious of our national life and to rejoice in it, to recall what our country has done for each of us, and to ask ourselves what we can do for the country in return. So to the indifferent inquirer who asks why Memorial Day is still kept up we may answer, it celebrates and solemnly reaffirms from year to year a national act of enthusiasm and faith. It embodies in the most impressive form our belief that to act with enthusiasm and faith is the condition of acting greatly. To fight a war, you must believe something and want something with all your might. So must you do to carry anything else to an end worth reaching. More than that, you must be willing to commit yourself to a course, perhaps a long and hard one, without being able to foresee exactly where you will come out. All that is required of you is that you should go somewhither as hard as ever you can. The rest belongs to fate. One may fall at the beginning of the charge or at the top of the earthworks; but in no other way can he reach the rewards of victory. . . It is not of the dead alone that we think on this day. There are those still living whose sex forbade them to offer their lives, but who gave instead their happiness. Which of us has not been lifted above himself by the sight of one of those lively, lonely women, around whom the wand of sorrow has traced its excluding circle-set apart, even when surrounded by living friends who would fain bring back joy to their lives?<sup>2</sup>

## What fight do you fight?

One lesson that we can learn from Memorial Day is that, yes, all of us are called to fight for a cause. God does not call each of us to the same cause, but to varying ones. One may be called to Christian education—fighting for the hearts and minds of youth; another may fight for the lives of the unborn; still others may be called to political office and fight to instill God’s word in government. Each must believe something and want something with all his might. Each must, “commit to a course, perhaps a long and hard one, without being able to foresee exactly where you will come out.” Each must “remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses” (Nehemiah 4:14).

## Celebrate Memorial Day with Your Family!

- Teach others its true meaning.
- Pray for families that have lost loved ones in their nation’s service.
- Visit memorials or attend a Memorial Day service.
- Fly the US flag at half-staff until noon.
- As a family, write a letter to your local newspaper editor, encouraging others to honor the memory of local fallen soldiers by visiting and decorating their graves.
- Visit cemeteries and place flags or flowers on the graves of our fallen heroes.
- Participate in a “National Moment of Remembrance” at 3 p.m. (“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*”)

## Endnotes

1. Duke University’s Historic American Sheet Music, 1850–1920
2. Merchant, David. “Headquarters Grand Army of The Republic.” *Memorial Day*. Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, 04 April 2009. Web. 13 Jun 2011. <<http://www.usmemorialday.org/order11.html>>.
3. Holmes, Oliver Wendell. *The essential Holmes: selections from the letters, speeches, judicial opinions, and other writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 81–85. Print.