

The First National Memorial Day—a Decidedly Union Affair

By David A. Swanson, PDC, Department of the Southwest, SUVCW



Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) Badge

Memorial Day is all about honoring those in the U. S. military who died protecting, defending and preserving—“the last best hope of earth”—the United States of America.

This history of our nation’s first Memorial Day commemoration at Arlington National Cemetery in 1868 will shed some light on that event which, over the years, has become distorted—intentionally or otherwise. Numerous histories contain sentiments such as the following: “After speeches, children from the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Orphan Home and members of the GAR made their way through the cemetery, strewing flowers on both Union and Confederate graves, reciting prayers and singing hymns.”¹

These renditions (and many more like them) present a false narrative of the facts. They also do not accurately reflect the rancor that was still felt by Union Veterans of the War of the Rebellion—not necessarily against the individual Confederate soldier—but against the foundational objects and actions of the Southern Confederacy.

The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was this nation’s largest Union Veterans organization and it played a central and commanding role in Memorial Day ceremonies for decades. The Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW) is its congressionally chartered successor organization.

The origin of our national Memorial Day and the 1868 ceremony

Rather than relying on interpretative histories of the event, let’s allow the participants to explain it through their speeches and writings. A few period newspaper articles will also help put things in perspective.

The seed of our national Memorial Day ceremonies began with famed General Order No. 11 issued by Grand Army of the Republic Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan on May 5, 1868. This order designated May 30, 1868, as the first national observance of Memorial Day with the hope that it would become an annual ceremony and it was issued to all GAR Departments throughout the country stating that “Department commanders will use efforts to make this order effective.” (See appendix for the complete order.) The first national Memorial Day was observed in 183 cemeteries in 27 states.²

The 1868 ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery was called to order by GAR Adjutant General N. P. Chipman who gave a short opening statement directed to “Comrades and Friends.” Immediately after the opening, General Order No. 11 was read. In part it stated: “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. . . . What can aid more to assure this result than by cherishing tenderly the memory of our heroic dead, who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foe? Their soldier lives were the reveille of freedom to a race in chains, and their death a tattoo of rebellious tyranny in arms. We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance.”

Next followed a prayer by Rev. Byron Sunderland, D. D. which included the following statements: “For we are come this day to the cities of the dead—we are come to the sepulchers of our heroes, slain and fallen in battle. . . . Because we have come to weep with those who survive, that the mission of our country could be accomplished only at so great a sacrifice. Because we have come, Oh Lord, likewise to mingle with our tears and sorrows a grateful sense of our deliverance and our triumph over appalling dangers, while we cover with garlands and fresh flowers the graves of our noble sons. Yet, Oh Lord, we well do know that these blooms of earth will fade; these blossoms will wither and perish where they fall. Well do we know that they will return to

mingle with the sacred mould of those who once stood up as a living rampart against the violence of treason—against the fury of rebellion.”

Following the prayer was the keynote speaker, Congressman (Civil War major general, GAR member and future president) James A. Garfield. Here is part of his speech: “And now consider this silent assembly of the dead. What does it represent? Nay, rather, what does it not represent? It is an epitome of the war. Here are sheaves reaped in the harvest of death, from every battlefield of Virginia. If each grave had a voice to tell us what its silent tenant last saw and heard on earth, we might stand, with uncovered heads, and hear the whole story of the war. We should hear that one perished when the first great drops of the crimson shower began to fall, when the darkness of that first disaster at Manassas fell like an eclipse on the Nation; that another died of disease while wearily waiting for winter to end; that this one fell on the field, in sight of the spires of Richmond, little dreaming that the flag must be carried through three more years of blood before it should be planted in that citadel of treason; and that one fell when the tide of war had swept us back till the roar of rebel guns shook the dome of yonder Capitol, and re-echoed in the chambers of the Executive Mansion. We should hear mingled voices from the Rappahannock, the Rapidan, the Chickahominy, and the James; solemn voices from the Wilderness, and triumphant shouts from the Shenandoah, from Petersburg, and the Five Forks, mingled with the wild acclaim of victory and the sweet chorus of returning peace. The voices of these dead will forever fill the land like holy benedictions.

“What other spot so fitting for their last resting place as this under the shadow of the Capitol saved by their valor? Here, where the grim edge of battle joined; here, where all the hope and fear and agony of their country centered; here let them rest, asleep on the Nation’s heart, entombed in the Nation’s love!

“And here are children, little children, to whom the war left no father but the Father above. By the most sacred right, theirs is the chief place to-day. They come with garlands to crown their victor fathers. I will delay the coronation no longer.”³



Memorial Day at Arlington National Cemetery, May 30, 1868. (Library of Congress)

Newspapers articles at the time

National Republican (Washington, District of Columbia) May 27, 1868

“DECORATION OF GRAVES OF UNION DEAD AT ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY—At a recent meeting of the Grand Army of the Republic, the following order of exercises for decorating the graves of our soldier dead on Saturday, at Arlington Heights, was adopted: Reading of General Orders No. 11, designating the 30th of May as a day to be observed throughout the United States in decorating the graves of Union dead. . .”

The Washington Evening Star, May 30, 1868

“Decoration of the Soldiers Graves at Arlington Honor to the Patriot Dead—The exercises were opened at one o'clock in front of the Arlington Mansion, by W. T. Collins, Esq., who read the general order designating the 30th of May as a day to be observed throughout the United States in decorating the graves of the Union dead.

“The procession was then formed as follows: Children of Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphan Asylum, in charge of the officers and managers of the Association, and Committee on Decorations followed by friends generally. The procession marched around the gardens south of the Mansion, the children strewing flowers upon the graves along the line of march as they passed and halted at the tomb of the unknown soldiers, who fell in Virginia during the early years of the war.”

National Republican (Washington, District of Columbia) June 1, 1868

“SOLDIERS GRAVES DECORATED—HONORS TO OUR NOBLE DEAD

“Yesterday, the ceremonies that took place at the Arlington National Cemetery on Arlington Heights (the occasion of decorating the graves of our departed soldiery there buried) were the most solemn, impressive, touching and yet interesting that we have ever seen. There assembled with thousands of others, on Saturday afternoon, many relatives of the departed heroes, who lost their lives in a war sprung then upon our then happy country by those whose motto and whose highest aim was rule or ruin.”

Other writings

In a 1999 book titled *Civil War Journal: The Legacies*, Thomas L. Sherlock (Arlington National Cemetery historian) writes about the 1868 event: “Decoration Day, currently observed as Memorial Day, was established by Gen. John A. Logan in General Order No. 11 and was originally devoted only to the Union dead—only their graves were allowed to be decorated. The graves of Confederates who had died in nearby hospitals were expressly left out of the honor and southern women who came to spread flowers on those graves were forbidden to enter Arlington cemetery.”⁴

This is amplified in a Wikipedia article which discussed the Confederate Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery: “The federal government did not permit the decoration of Confederate graves at the cemetery as Quartermaster General Meigs had charge of the Arlington cemetery (he did not retire until February 6, 1882). In 1868, when families asked to lay flowers on Confederate graves on Decoration Day (now known as Memorial Day), Meigs ordered that the families be barred from the cemetery. Union veterans' organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR; whose membership was open only to Union soldiers) also felt that rebel graves should not be decorated.”⁵ (Montgomery Meigs was the Union Quartermaster General and recommended that the property surrounding the house of Mary and Robert E. Lee at Arlington, Virginia be used as a military burial ground—Arlington National Cemetery was created in 1864.)

But it didn't stop in 1868 as James M. McPherson, professor of history at Princeton University, wrote in a 1996 article for the *New York Times*: “Controversies arose in the North and South over the decoration of the graves of the few enemy soldiers buried in several communities. During the Memorial Day commemoration at Arlington in 1869, the GAR placed guards around the handful of Confederate graves to prevent them from being decorated.”⁶

The GAR and Union Graves

What were the reasons given by the GAR for decorating only Union graves? In a written response to this observation (by some in the press) after the second annual Memorial Day ceremonies were held in May 1869, William T. Collins, Adjutant General, GAR wrote the following:

HEADQUARTERS GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC
ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE, 411 F STREET,

It seems proper, in view of the many misrepresentations and comments made by a portion of the press, here and elsewhere, in relation to the action at Arlington to prevent any demonstration over the graves of the rebel dead buried there, that some statement should be made with the view of indicating the motives and purposes of the Grand Army of the Republic in relation to the memorial services over the graves of those who died that the republic might live.

The committee in charge of the ceremonies at Arlington directed the placing of a guard over the graves of the rebel soldiers buried there, with the view of informing those who, supposing that Union soldiers lay beneath, might ignorantly place on them their floral offerings, and also to prevent any such unseemly act as the designed decoration of those graves, to effect which, it is well known, there was a purpose on the part of persons whose every sympathy was, and still remains, with the "Lost Cause."

It is believed that the charges against the Marines on guard, which originally appeared in the Sunday Herald, of this city, are willful exaggerations. The guard received their instructions from the committee, and it is believed that they discharged their duty in a proper manner and spirit.

We, however, address ourselves briefly to a statement of the design had in arranging this Memorial Day and its beautiful ceremonies.

The Grand Army of the Republic seeks to honor and preserve the principles and institutions for which its members and their dead comrades fought. To keep green the memory of the latter is to make stronger the devotion of those who survive. Hence the institution of "Memorial Day." Hence too, the necessity of confining it strictly to the one holy purpose indicated, that of honoring the men who died that the nation might live, and of thereby reviving in our hearts, and of those who are to come after us, the lofty devotion to freedom and republican nationality which marked the republic's grand army of the dead. Is such an act incompatible with the noblest idea of magnanimity? We know it is not. We strew flowers therefore on the graves of our comrades, and prevent their being strewn in the national cemeteries at the same time on the graves of the rebel dead as may be buried therein, not because we cherish any feelings of hate or desire to triumph over individual foes, but because we seek to mark in this distinction and manner the feelings with which the nation regards freedom and slavery, loyalty and treason, republican principles and those of a slave holding oligarchy. We are ready to forgive, we hold no malice, but we will never consent by public national tribute to obliterate the wide gulf which lies between the objects, motives, and the principles for which we fought and our comrades died, and for those which the rebel armies banded together, and for which their dead now lie in numerous graves. They were brave, and we know it; none can better appreciate that fact than those who fought against them. But mere courage never ennobled treason. It cannot turn slavery into liberty, nor make despotic intentions desirable and to be applauded as virtues. Our refusal to decorate rebel graves marks no hatred of their occupants or friends, but our undying hostility to the ideas for which they fought and died. To do less than keep this distinction fresh in the national mind is to undermine the republic itself."⁷

It wasn't until the mid 1870s that the federal government allowed southerners to decorate Confederate graves in Arlington National Cemetery and it wasn't until 1903 that any organized commemoration was allowed—and even then it had to take place the day after Federal Memorial Day.⁸

To ensure that Memorial Day was a “Union” commemoration, the following resolution was adopted by the GAR National Encampment, at Providence, Rhode Island in 1877: “Inasmuch as there have been some differences of opinion as to the intent and meaning of Memorial Day, this Encampment hereby calls attention to the language of Chapter V, Article XIV, of the Rules and Regulations, and, therefore, Resolved, That the Grand Army of the Republic seeks thus to preserve the memory of those only who fought in defence of the National Unity.”⁹

The GAR also felt that the designation of May 30th as “Memorial Day” needed some clarification (it was frequently referred to as Decoration Day): “The following was adopted at the [National] Encampment at Baltimore, 1882: ‘That the Commander-in-Chief be requested to issue a General Order calling the attention of the officers and members of the Grand Army of the Republic, and of the people at large, to the fact that the proper designation of May 30th is Memorial Day, and to request that it may be always so called.’”¹⁰

Conclusion

Memorial Day in 1868, taking place a scant three years after the end of the bloodiest war in American history, was a day to honor and decorate only the graves of the Union dead and it was strictly a GAR function from start to finish. The reasons given by the GAR for the decoration of only Union graves in 1869 were also true in 1868.

Also telling is the quote from Garfield’s speech which was directed to the children of the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Orphan Asylum: “And here are children, little children, to whom the war left no father but the Father above. By the most sacred right, theirs is the chief place to-day. *They come with garlands to crown their victor fathers* (emphasis added). I will delay the coronation no longer.”

Unfortunately, the frequently published—and often parroted—erroneous versions of that first Memorial Day are only examples of the tremendous amount of misinformation that has been written about the Civil War.

Notes:

1. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2021 March 5) *Memorial Day History*. Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs. <https://www.va.gov/opa/speceven/memday/history.asp>
2. Antietam National Battlefield (2012 May 28) *Memorial Day*. Retrieved March 5, 2021, from <https://www.facebook.com/notes/1001881160297151/>
3. *Memorial Ceremonies at the National Cemetery Arlington, Virginia under the Auspices of the Grand Army of the Republic May 30, 1868*. McGill & Witherow 1868
4. *Civil War Journal: The Legacies V 3*, History Channel 1999
5. Wikipedia (2020 December 26) *Confederate Memorial Day*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confederate_Memorial_\(Arlington_National_Cemetery\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confederate_Memorial_(Arlington_National_Cemetery))
6. McPherson, J. M. (1996 May 25) *When Memorial Day Was No Picnic*. New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/25/opinion/when-memorial-day-was-no-picnic.html>
7. *The National Memorial Day: A Record of Ceremonies over the Graves of Union Soldiers May 29 and 30, 1869*. Washington City: Headquarters Grand Army of the Republic, 1870, p 36
8. Meriwether, Jeffrey Lee & Laura D’Amore, *We Are What We Remember: The American Past Through Commemoration*, Cambridge Scholars 2013, p 372
9. *Grand Army Blue Book 1886* Article XIV—Chapter V.
10. Ibid

2021

Appendices:

Grand Army of the Republic General Orders 11 and 21: Source: *The National Memorial Day: A Record of Ceremonies over the Graves of Union Soldiers May 29 and 30, 1869*. Washington City: Headquarters Grand Army of the Republic, 1870

GENERAL ORDERS.

HEADQUARTERS GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC

ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE, 446 FOURTEENTH STREET,

GENERAL ORDERS }
No. 11. }

WASHINGTON, D.C., May 5, 1868

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 his 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.

N. P. CHIPMAN,
Adjutant General.

OFFICIAL:

Wm. T. COLLINS, *A. A. G.*

GENERAL ORDERS.

HEADQUARTERS GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC

ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE, 411 F STREET,

WASHINGTON, D.C., April 12, 1869

GENERAL ORDERS }
No. 21. }

I. The 30th day of May, proximo—a day set apart by the Grand Army of the Republic to commemorate the glorious deeds of our departed comrades—will be observed throughout the United States in such a manner as befits the solemnities of the occasion, and as will testify the undying love of a grateful people for the memory of those who died that this nation might live.

This is the second public observance of the occasion, which it is trusted will reoccur yearly while there remains a heart loyal to the cause in which our comrades fell, and while the moving principle of that struggle is worth preserving. If our organization had no other object, that alone of keeping green the resting-places of our nation's defenders, by this annual commemoration, would be motive enough to hold us together in a fraternal band.

The Commander-in-Chief desires to thank those patriotic men and women who gave their aid and sympathy on a former occasion to make successful this National Memorial Day, and they are cordially invited to unite with the comrades of the Grand Army in the approaching ceremonies; and he thanks the loyal press everywhere, through whose generous aid a lasting record has been made of the observances one year ago. To the Congress of the United States the comrades are especially indebted for authorizing the publication, in book form, of the proceedings of last May and for the promise held out that each year a compilation will be made and published, as a national recognition of sympathy with these memorial observances.

II. It has been determined not to prescribe any form of ceremony for universal observance, but each post, or any number of posts, may arrange together such fitting services as circumstances will permit. Department commanders will use every effort to perfect arrangements for the occasion. The newspaper press are requested to give publication to this order.

III. Department and post commanders are specially enjoined to preserve and forward to these headquarters a copy of the proceedings (in printed form, as far as possible) which take place in carrying out this order.

IV. As the 30th of May occurs on Sabbath, posts are at liberty to observe either that day, or Saturday, the 29th.

By order of

JOHN A. LOGAN,
Commander-in-Chief.

N. P. CHIPMAN,
Adjutant General.

OFFICIAL:

Wm. T. COLLINS, *A. A. G.*