



While there are competing claims as to the origins of Memorial Day, Congress has declared its birthplace as Waterloo, New York. There, on May 5, 1866, a year after its conclusion, a small ceremony was held to honor local residents who had fought in the Civil War. Businesses closed, flags were flown at half-staff, and flowers were draped on the graves of those who had fallen. Two years later, in 1868, John A. Logan, a former major general of the Union Army, declared that May 30 — a date supposedly chosen because "the choicest flowers of springtime" would be in bloom throughout the nation — would be a day to decorate "the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country." In so doing, he stated, "We should guard their graves 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."

Then called "Decorations Day," its inaugural observance occurred at Arlington National Cemetery where Gen. Ulysses S. Grant presided over a gathering of 5,000 people. Then, as now, small American flags were placed on each grave — a tradition followed at many national cemeteries today. In addition, flowers were strewn over the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers, while prayers were said and hymns sung.

After the First World War, the day was set aside to honor all those who have perished while serving in the armed forces.

This Monday, we will celebrate Memorial Day. Besides time with friends and family, and perhaps a Nathan's hot dog or the first swim of summer, it's an opportunity to remember the sacrifices of the 1.1 million Americans who have died in our nation's wars. And why is remembrance important? It allows us to be thankful. To remember that the freedoms we enjoy were won on the battlefield. That our intimate relationship with God is allowed through the sacrifice of Jesus. If we forget the value of our heritage and the source of our blessings, we risk taking for granted all that we have and all that we are.

So, let's take a moment, not just on Monday but regularly, to be reminded of the indebtedness we owe to those who have given the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. Our lives are inextricably woven into theirs.

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13).

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