



## Celebrate! Holidays In The U.S.A.

# Memorial Day

(Last Monday in May)

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It was 1866 and the United States was recovering from the long and bloody Civil War between the North and the South. Surviving soldiers came home, some with missing limbs, and all with stories to tell. Henry Welles, a drugstore owner in Waterloo, New York, heard the stories and had an idea. He suggested that all the shops in town close for one day to honor the soldiers who were killed in the Civil War and were buried in the Waterloo cemetery. On the morning of May 5, the townspeople placed flowers, wreaths and crosses on the graves of the Northern soldiers in the cemetery. At about the same time, Retired Major General Jonathan A. Logan planned another ceremony, this time for the soldiers who survived the war. He led the veterans through town to the cemetery to decorate their comrades' graves with flags. It was not a happy celebration, but a memorial. The townspeople called it Decoration Day.

***In Retired Major General Logan's proclamation of Memorial Day, he declared:***

*"The 30th 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 and during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard 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."*

The two ceremonies were joined in 1868, and northern states commemorated the day on May 30. The southern states commemorated their war dead on different days. Children read poems and sang civil war songs and veterans came to school wearing their medals and uniforms to tell students about the Civil War. Then the veterans marched through their home towns followed by the townspeople to the cemetery. They decorated graves and took photographs of soldiers next to American flags. Rifles were shot in the air as a salute to the northern soldiers who had given their lives to keep the United States together.

In 1882, the name was changed to Memorial Day and soldiers who had died in previous wars were honored as well. In the northern United States, it was designated a public holiday. In 1971, along with other holidays, President Richard Nixon declared Memorial Day a federal holiday on the last Monday in May.

Cities all around the United States hold their own ceremonies on the last Monday in May\* to pay respect to the men and women who have died in wars or in the service of their country.

Memorial Day is not limited to honor only those Americans from the armed forces. It is also a day for personal remembrance. Families and individuals honor the memories of their loved ones who have died. Church services, visits to the cemetery, flowers on graves or even silent tribute mark the day with dignity and solemnity. It is a day of reflection. However, to many Americans the day also signals the beginning of summer with a three-day weekend to spend at the beach, in the mountains or at home relaxing.

In Waterloo, New York, the origin has not been lost and in fact the meaning has become even more special. President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed Waterloo the birthplace of Memorial Day in 1966, 100 years after the first commemoration. Every May 30, townspeople still walk to the cemeteries and hold memorial services. They decorate the graves with flags and flowers. Then they walk back to the park in the middle of town. In the middle of the park, near a monument dedicated to soldiers, sailors and

marines, the Gettysburg address is read, followed by Retired Major General Logan's Order # 11 designating Decoration Day. The village choirs sing patriotic songs. In the evening, school children take part in a parade.

Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia is the nation's largest national cemetery. Not only are members of the armed forces buried here; astronauts, explorers and other distinguished Americans have all been honored with a special place here. President John F. Kennedy is buried in a spot overlooking Washington, D.C..

Here in the early hours of the Friday morning before Memorial Day, soldiers of the Third U.S. infantry walk along the rows of headstones. Each soldier stops at a headstone, reaches to a bundle of flags he is carrying, pulls one out and pushes it into the ground. These soldiers are part of a special regiment. the Old Guard. Most consider it a privilege to place flags on the more than two hundred thousand graves of soldiers who served in the wars or who died in them. "They have done their job," said one soldier, "and now it's my turn to do mine."

It is an equal honor to guard the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier all year. There are actually four soldiers buried in this spot: the unknown soldiers of the two World Wars, the Korean conflict, and the Vietnam War. Each soldier represents all of those who gave their lives in the modern wars. Soldiers from the Army's Third Infantry guard the tomb twenty-four hours a day. Wreath-laying ceremonies take place all through the year and people from all over the world come to watch the changing of the guard. On another hill of Arlington Cemetery there is a mass grave of unidentified soldiers from the Civil War.

On Memorial Day, the President or Vice President of the United States gives a speech and lays a wreath on the tombs. Members of the armed forces shoot a rifle salute in the air. Veterans and families come to lay their own wreaths and say prayers. There is a chance that one of the soldiers buried here is a father, son, brother or friend.

*\*Some southern states continue to celebrate Memorial Day on various days, i.e. June 3rd in Louisiana and Tennessee called "Confederate Memorial Day" and on May 10th in North and South Carolina.*

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**Embassy of the United States of America**