

ORIGIN OF MEMORIAL DAY

By Ernest C. Klein

For more than ten years, I have been researching the origin of Memorial Day. It began as a hobby when I was a pastor in Boalsburg, Penn., where it was claimed that the decoration of some graves July 4, 1864, made that village the "Birthplace of Memorial Day." As a matter of record, a total of 25 places have been named in connection with the origin of Memorial Day. One of the oldest claims is that of Jackson, Miss., where Sue Landon Vaughan, a descendant of President John Adams, put out a call to decorate Confederate graves on April 26, 1865. Her act is commemorated in stone on a monument erected 1888 on the old State Capital grounds at Jackson, now known as Confederate Park.

Perhaps the most beautiful "claim" is the event at Columbus, Miss., where four women in Friendship Cemetery on April 25, 1866, decorated the graves of their fallen soldiers. It was here that the additional act of decorating the graves of 40 Federal soldiers buried there brought about the writing of the poem, "The Blue and Gray" by Francis Miles Finch. Mr. Finch, an attorney in Ithaca, N. Y., had read of the act in a New York newspaper and included a historical note with his poem, which was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1867. This poem, no doubt, did much to make the Columbus event the best known of all celebrations of Memorial Day.

Iowa's Claim to Origin

Hopkinton (Delaware County), Iowa, dedicated a monument on Nov. 7, 1865, to the 44 soldiers from Lenox College who served in the Civil War.¹ Although believed to be the first monument to Civil War soldiers, and thus establishing the basis of Hopkinton's claim to have been the first town in the nation to celebrate Memorial Day, earlier monuments were erected at Kensington, Conn.,² and Stones River

¹ Belle Bailey, *Stories of Delaware County History* (Manchester, Iowa, 1935), p. 46.

² Joseph N. Kane, *Famous First Facts*, (H. W. Wilson Company, 1950), p. 294.

National Battlefield, Murfreesboro, Tenn.³

An even earlier event is the decoration of graves by Mrs. George H. Evans (maiden name, Sarah J. Nichols) in a ceremony in Arlington Heights which is near Washington, D. C. Arlington National Cemetery received its first Union soldier for burial in May, 1864.⁴ When Mrs. Evans' husband from Hudson, Mich., enlisted in the Union Army, Mrs. Evans served as a nurse. On April 13, 1862, with the wife of Chaplain May of the Second Michigan Volunteers and two other women, Mrs. Evans decorated 17 graves of soldiers who died in the defense of the capitol. The decoration was repeated in 1863 and 1864. Mrs. Evans was recognized in 1873 by the G.A.R. Post 12, Des Moines, as "Originator of Memorial Day."⁵

Virginia's Claims

Richmond, Va., has several variations; one is that Cassandra Oliver Moncure decorated, or had a part in decorating graves in the Hollywood Cemetery. Another is that early services were held on Belle Isle in James River near Richmond. Winchester, Va., had a Women's Memorial Society and observed June 6, 1866, the anniversary of the death of Gen. Turner Ashby. But, many southern women established Memorial Societies to organize the return of their dead soldiers to a burial place near home. Petersburg, Va., observed June 9, 1866, the anniversary of the assault of 1864. In Blandford Cemetery, the stone of the grave of Nora Fontaine Maury Davidson credits her as "originator of Memorial Day which was inspiration for the National Decoration Day."

Mrs. John A. Logan, wife of the commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic recounted more than once of her trip in March, 1868, to see the battle fields around Richmond and Petersburg. Because the General, who was serving in Congress at the time, was busy with his legislative

³ John W. Allen, *Legends and Lore of Southern Illinois* (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Ill., 1963), p. 221.

⁴ John Vincent Hinkel, *Arlington: Monuments to Heroes* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1965), p. 131.

⁵ *The Register and Leader*, Des Moines, Iowa, May 30, 1905.

duties and thus unable to make the trip, Mrs. Logan described the trip to him, giving him the details about the decorated graves and tiny flags. According to Mrs. Logan, General Order Eleven was written at that time.

Another version credits Mrs. Henry S. Kimball of W. Philadelphia, Penn., for suggesting the custom to Gen. Logan in a letter she wrote after her return from a southern tour. Yet a third version is given by Logan's Adj. Gen. of the G.A.R., N. P. Chipman, who claims that a comrade of German background, from Cincinnati, suggested the custom of decorating the graves with flowers. According to this version, Chipman wrote most of General Order Eleven.

Carbondale, Ill., the home area of Gen. Logan, held a service on April 29, 1866, in which returned veterans planned and participated in decorating graves of their buddies who had fallen in battle. Significant is the fact that the speaker was Gen. Logan, who so heartily sponsored Memorial Day services throughout the nation. It was reported by several of Gen. Logan's friends, and repeated in his funeral sermon, that he considered General Order Eleven the "proudest act of his life." One historian writes that no one act did more to remove public prejudice against the G.A.R. than did the inauguration of Memorial Day.

Lloyd Lewis, a newspaperman and friend of Carl Sandberg, suggested that Memorial Day was established in the wild delirium following the funeral of Abraham Lincoln. Another newspaper reporter, James Redpath of Charleston, S. C., told of the decorating of 257 graves of Union soldiers by the families of former slaves on May 1, 1865. However, this was, properly speaking, a cemetery dedication.

As a result of the meeting of some women in Columbus, Ga., Mrs. Mary Williams wrote a letter in the local newspaper there on March 12, 1866, which was reprinted throughout the south. She appealed to the women to cover the graves of their soldiers with flowers. April 26 was chosen as the date for the event because that was the anniversary of the surrender of Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, the last of the forces of the Confederate Army. In Linwood cemetery, a tomb-

stone marks the grave of Lizzie Rutherford Ellis, crediting her with the suggestions for originating Memorial Day.

In Waterloo, N. Y., Henry C. Welles and Gen. John B. Murray are given credit as the originators of the day. Their first observance was May 5, 1866. Their claim is qualified as the "first formal village-wide observance of the day." By a Joint Resolution of Congress, Waterloo has been recognized the "The Birthplace of Memorial Day."

CIVIL WAR EXPERIENCES OF JOHN McALLISTER

The following article was taken from the CEDAR RAPIDS REPUBLICAN, April 10, 1927. The article was entitled "John McAllister, Civil War Veteran, Was Confined in Libby Prison for Three Months; Wounded in Battle" and was written by Russell C. Landstrom.

"I have heard people say that they would rather starve than eat a certain thing, but that isn't true; a hungry man will eat anything. When we were in Libby prison we were glad to eat absolutely anything — even bugs and maggots. During those months I realized the truth of what I had often read, but disbelieved—that men could eat their own flesh."

Thus speaks John McAllister, 1526 Second avenue, 86-year-old Civil War veteran and former member of the Iowa state legislature.

That was in 1863.

John McAllister, with a wounded left hand, had been taken prisoner in Tennessee by Confederates and shipped with other Union soldiers to the infamous Libby prison at Richmond, Va.

The trainload of prisoners had been moving about the country for days—from Tennessee to Georgia—from Georgia

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