

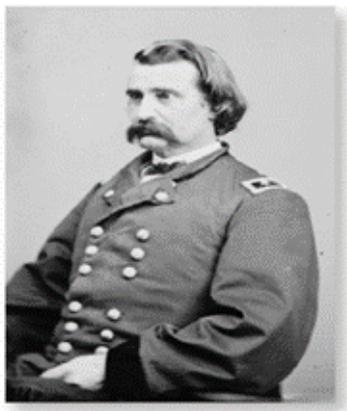
The History of Memorial Day

Originally called Decoration Day, when Americans took time to decorate the graves of soldiers who gave their lives in the Civil War, today's national holiday of Memorial Day honors all American soldiers who died in defense of the nation. While several towns claim to be the site of the first Memorial Day celebration, one man, John A. Logan, deserves much of the credit for the establishment of Memorial Day as a national holiday.

John A. Logan was born 9 February 1826 in Jackson County, Illinois. He served as an officer with the 1st Illinois Volunteer Infantry during the Mexican War but did not see any combat. Upon his return home to Illinois, he became involved in state politics and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat in November 1858. A powerful orator, he staunchly defended the Union during the months leading up to the Civil War despite representing an area of Illinois that harbored secessionist sentiments. In fact, his oratorical skills swayed many of his constituents to change their views and support the Union.

Upon the outbreak of hostilities in 1861, Logan volunteered his services as a soldier and served with a Michigan regiment at the Battle of First Bull Run on 21 July 1861. After the battle, he returned home to Illinois to recruit a regiment, the 31st Illinois, and was named the regiment's colonel. Nicknamed "Black Jack" for his black hair and dark eyes and complexion, Logan led his regiment into combat for the first time at Belmont in November 1861. He proved to be a natural military leader and later fought with distinction at Fort Donelson, Corinth, and Vicksburg, and rose to the rank of major general of volunteers. During the Atlanta campaign, he commanded XV Corps, was wounded, and then temporarily commanded the Army of the Tennessee. He was replaced as corps commander by Major General O.O. Howard, a decision made by Major General William T. Sherman because of Sherman's mistrust of "political" generals, not because of Logan's fighting abilities. The decision led Logan to despise professional soldiers, especially West Pointers, for the rest of his life. Logan, however, dutifully served under Sherman for the rest of the war until the surrender of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston in April 1865 in North Carolina. Many historians consider Logan the best of the Union Army's political generals.

Following the Civil War, Logan was instrumental in the founding of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR); a veterans group comprised of former Union Army soldiers and served as the GAR's second elected national commander. On 3 March 1868, Logan issued General Order No. 11 which called for a national day of remembrance for Civil War dead, thus serving as the basis for what is now observed as Memorial Day.



General Order No. 11

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

