

So, Why Memorial Day?

Although most people know that Memorial Day is a time to honor those who died defending their country, few may know how the holiday began. It was first proclaimed in 1868, by General John Logan, commander of the Grand Army of the Republic.

It was observed on May 30 of that year when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. Hence, its first name, Decoration Day.

In 1873, New York became the first state to recognize the holiday. In 1888, Congress made Decoration Day a federal holiday.

By 1890, it was recognized by all northern states, but the southern states refused to recognize that day, honoring their Civil War dead on other days. After World War I, Memorial Day was changed so that it honored any American who had died in any war, rather than just those who died during the Civil War.

In 1971, the National Holiday Act went into effect, and Memorial Day is now celebrated on the last Monday of May, allowing for the three-day weekend. It is observed by almost every state, although a few southern states have an additional separate day for honoring the Confederate war dead.

The Red Poppy

The red poppy sold and worn on Memorial Day was based on a poem by John McCrae called *In Flanders Fields* and written in 1915 – during WWI. It begins “In Flanders fields the poppies blow, between the crosses, row on row.”

Starting in 1922, the Veterans of Foreign Wars started selling poppies. In 1924, the VFW created a program where they sold artificial poppies made by disabled veterans.