



Where Flowers Healed a Nation: The Origins of Memorial Day

Parker Hills, September 1, 2020
blueandgrayeducation.org



Monument to unknown Confederate soldiers, Friendship Cemetery, Columbus, Mississippi

It was just before dawn on a Sunday in April when the soldiers of the 3d Mississippi Infantry Battalion broke through dense blackjack thickets into the open area of a forty-acre, thistle-covered field. The 280 men, recruited from Grenada for the Confederate cause, attempted to adjust their broken line as they ventured into the furrows of Fraley Field. As the first streaks of light streamed through the trees facing them from the opposite side of the field, three shots rang out. With three shots, Maj. A. V. Hardcastle's Mississippians opened the Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee, on April 6, 1862. When the smoke had cleared two days later, 3,482 Americans lay dead, 3,844 were missing, and an incredible 16,420 soldiers had been wounded.

The Confederates, who occupied almost all of the battlefield at the end of the first day of the fight, evacuated huge numbers of wounded, both blue and gray, by wagon to Corinth, Mississippi, 18 miles south. When all available shelter was filled in the small town, the wounded were transported to points south via the Mobile and Ohio railroad, and thousands were routed into Columbus over the newly completed 15-mile Columbus branch of the M&O from Artesia.

All public, and mostly private, buildings in Columbus became makeshift hospitals for the next few months. Due to the primitive state of medical knowledge in 1862, the lack of proper facilities, and the severity of the wounds, over 1,400 soldiers found their final resting place in an 18-acre pasture used as a picnic and recreation area by the Odd Fellows of Columbus. Unlike their comrades who fell at Shiloh and were buried in mass graves, these soldiers, most of whose names are still unknown, were buried individually.

The Civil War ended in 1865, and three ladies of Columbus—Miss Matt Morton, Mrs. J. T. Fontaine, and Mrs. Green T. Hill—decided to visit the cemetery to clean and decorate the neglected graves. Their original intention was to decorate only the Confederate graves, but as they caught sight of the familiar American names on the Union soldiers' tombstones, they were deeply moved. These young men, too, were mourned by their mothers, sisters, and wives, and the ladies decorated their graves along with those of the sleeping southerners.



Twelve Gables by Parker Hills

The other ladies of Columbus found inspiration in this beautiful custom, and the parlor of Miss Morton's Columbus home, Twelve Gables, was used to plan an annual decoration. The first decoration day took place on April 25, 1866.

The following day, a local editor wrote:

The procession of yesterday, in honor of the Confederate dead, was large and imposing. First marched in twos, the young ladies and girls, dressed in immaculate white, each bearing her bouquet or chaplet of flowers. Next came the matrons dressed in mourning; like the others with flowers in their hands—their black dresses typical of the southern heart in gloom for its beloved dead—the fair flowers emblematic of woman's admiration and affection for all that was gallant and chivalrous in patriots. Lastly came the procession of carriages bearing the elderly ladies.

Arriving at the cemetery, the ladies assembled around the graves of the soldiers in the form of a square; from the center of the ground, an elaborate and eloquent address was delivered by Rev. G. T. Stanback, and following it, a fervent prayer by Rev. A. S. Andrews. The ladies then performed the beautiful and touching duty of decorating the graves with flowers.

We were glad to see that no distinction was made between our own dead and about forty Federal soldiers, who slept their last sleep by them. It proved the exalted, unselfish tone of the female character Confederate and Federal—once enemies, now friends—receiving this tribute of respect.

The graciousness of the ladies of Columbus was noticed by Horace Greeley's New York Tribune. In a small paragraph, the Tribune read: "The women of Columbus, Mississippi, have shown themselves impartial in their offerings made to the memory of the dead. They strewed flowers alike on the graves of the Confederate and the National soldiers."

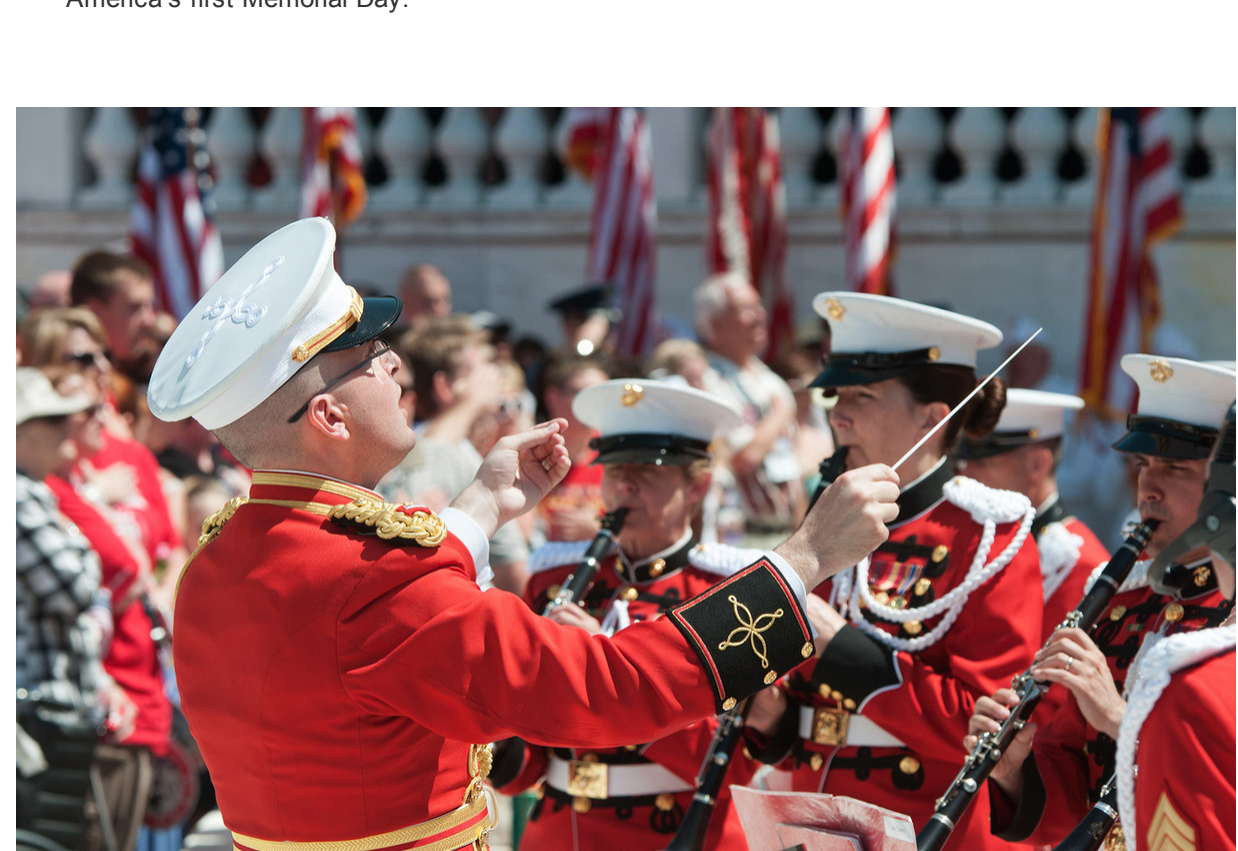


Stereograph depicting President Ulysses S. Grant and Gen. John Logan seated at the flag-draped Old Amphitheater, Arlington Cemetery, for Decoration Day ceremonies on May 30, 1873, the fifth official celebration of Decoration Day | LOC

Much bitterness and rancor remained from the war, and the act of the ladies impressed many of Greeley's readers as a symbol of peace. Francis Miles Finch, a young attorney in Ithaca, New York, who later helped found Cornell University, wrote a poem entitled "The Blue and the Gray."

In September of 1867 "The Blue and the Gray" was required recitation by many of America's schoolchildren, and served to aid in the nation's healing. The healing was to go deeper when, in 1868, Congress dedicated May 30 as "Decoration Day," a day for the graves of all soldiers to be adorned, and for their memories to be commemorated. Today, "Decoration Day" is known as Memorial Day.

Ironically, in October of 1867, the remains of the Union dead were disinterred from the cemetery in Columbus and buried in the National Military Cemetery at Shiloh. Still, the cemetery in America's first Memorial Day Friendship Cemetery, forever has the distinction of hosting America's first Memorial Day.



The United States Marine Band at Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day

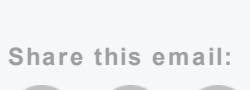
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