

PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT

Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War

Office of the Commander

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(To be read in camps and retained in Camp records)

Brothers,

Once more we come to the time of year that brings the one National Observance that we, as Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, are obligated to actively promote and participate in. Of course, this is Memorial Day. The National Observance this year will be on Monday, May 25th.

Our Order recognizes the founding of Memorial Day by its original name, Decoration Day. This event was ordered into existence by the G.A.R. National Commander in Chief, General John A. Logan in 1868 in his famous General Order Number 11. He ordered that we “strew with flowers or otherwise decorate the graves of the comrades who died in defense of their country in the late War of the Rebellion,” what we now call the American Civil War. In this Order he stated that “In this observance no form or 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 first Decoration Day as ordered by General Logan took place on May 30th, 1868 and became the traditional date for Decoration Day thereafter. The actual origins of Decoration Day are rather confused with no clear true first place of origin. It almost seems to be a National pastime for cities, villages, and organization all over the Country to claim to be the “first to observe Decoration Day.”

In truth, it seems that with all the horrible loss caused by the Civil War on both sides, multiple towns and cities had a similar idea at the same time to honor their local fallen before the war had even ended. Within a matter of a few short years other cities and towns across the country followed in their footsteps until it became a popular movement credited to more than 20 different locations and countless organizations and congregations both north and south. It would seem that General Logan, always running for public office, knew how to capitalize on public opinion and issued what was bound to become a well

known decree honoring the Union fallen. It did become well known and through the work of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) across the Country, Decoration Day became a unified National Observance for the first time.

In 1873 New York became the first State to recognize Decoration Day as an official Observance. By 1890 all northern states had joined in recognizing Decoration Day. It was not until after WWI that the southern states joined in recognizing Memorial Day as it became known once the observance was expanded to include the fallen of all wars.

Prior to this the southern states selected a different date to honor the fallen of the doomed rebellion. To this day the Sons of Confederate Veterans recognize a slew of separate Confederate Decoration Days. The oldest one is observed on April 26th, the date of Johnston's surrender to Sherman at Bennett Place, NC. Typical of the subject matter, along with every little town and village claiming to have originated Decoration Day, the woman who started this Confederate version claims that General Logan stole the idea from the Confederates. It has become verbal tradition this way in the south regardless of the truth. Other dates vary from state to state across the south.

At the first G.A.R. sponsored Decoration Day ceremonies at Arlington Cemetery, then President James Garfield spoke to the near 5000 participants. The SUVCW in the Department of the Chesapeake today still maintain this historic ceremony at the old amphitheater behind the Custis/ Lee mansion at Arlington Cemetery every May 30th. It is a ceremony worth attending and supporting.

After a famous battle between candidates for the "official birthplace of Memorial Day," President Lyndon B. Johnson officially decreed the town of Waterloo, NY above the Finger Lakes region of upstate NY, the winner of the officially recognized birthplace in 1966.

It was not until 1971 that Decoration Day/ Memorial Day was changed to the last Weekend in May by act of Congress in the "National Holiday Act." The goal was to create a three day federal holiday weekend. This action has arguably caused more harm to the observance than help. As the decades have rolled on since this act was placed into effect, the general populace has spent more and more time focused upon the unofficial start to the summer season with picnics and vacations. The original purpose is observed less and less every year. This tradition of honoring our fallen, which was once a national day of solemn remembrance, has become little more than a foot note to a three day party.

Memorial Day parades, once the normal event in every town, are becoming few and far between. The few remaining parades are under assault from city councils unwilling to invest in the patriotic value of civic pride. Even the church services honoring the fallen of their own congregations buried in the cemeteries outside cease to occur. This observance we as an Order are bound to promote and protect is dying from lack of interest and expense. Are we going to allow this to continue?

Therefore I call upon all brothers of the Pennsylvania Department to do as General Logan called upon the Grand Army of the Republic to do. I ask that all camps and brothers "will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit." As before, no form of ceremony is prescribed, but it is hoped that activities will be both respectful and very, very public.

If we are to turn the tide of apathy we absolutely must make the most public effort to reach out to the masses to remind them of the cost that their forefathers have paid in precious life's blood to provide to

them the blessings of this great Nation. It is not only fitting that we remember these sacrifices, it is essential that we instill in all generations the deep respect of those brave men and women who have fallen in the service of us all past and present.

Remember the statement made in the obligation each of us has taken at the time of our joining the Order.

“If deep in your heart there lives the love of freedom, and patriotic devotion to the principles and institutions for which your forefather fought, then no personal danger, no selfish consideration, can quench that love and make you ungrateful or disloyal to the Flag of the United States of America. Let us then entwine each thread of its glorious fabric around our hearts, and catching the spirit that breathes upon us from the battles and the victories of America’s sons, let us resolve that now and forever will we stand for that flag and the principles and institutions it symbolizes. It was waved over our cradles. Let us make the high resolve that, unchanged and unstained as it came from the hands of our fathers, it shall wave over our graves.”

I thank everyone for all they do to preserve this legacy and to teach and spread the stories of all our dear heroes who gave up their own lives in the belief that our Nation and way of life was worth protecting, thereby giving us all the gift of life in this most special Nation that they would never get to enjoy.

So ordered this 11th day of May, 2015.

Douglas P. McMillin commanding,
Pennsylvania Department
Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War

Attest:
Charles Kuhn, PCnC
Pennsylvania Department
Secretary/ Treasurer