

The Emergence and Evolution of Memorial Day

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This year commemorates the sesquicentennial anniversary of Decoration Day/Memorial Day (30 May). Today Memorial Day commemorates the men and women who sacrificed their lives in the military during war. It originally commemorated the conclusion of a war; designed to promote continued peace and reconciliation.

It is our contention, however, that the narratives pertaining to the history and development of this holiday has been misinterpreted, misunderstood, and to many lost. The aim of this article is to provide a narrative in the interest of greater awareness and appreciation of the significance of the holiday.

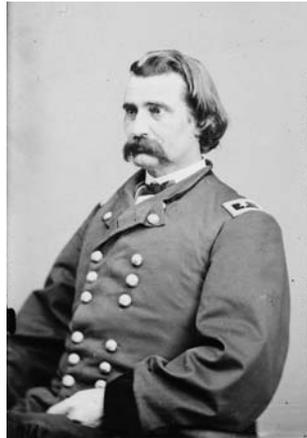
The story of the genesis of Memorial Day, an official holiday from May 1868, is not clear cut among historians, as it is traditionally taught.¹ Though there are a multitude of apocryphal claims regarding who started Memorial Day and where they started it, the vast majority of accounts were manufactured many decades after the fact and are easily dismissed as myths. Primary sources contradict and refute the retroactive fictional accounts of places like Waterloo, New York; Jackson, Mississippi; and Kingston, Georgia, among many others.² Other accounts of various individuals decorating graves and

dedicating cemeteries are true and accurate accounts, but they did not intend, nor did they effect, the creation of an annual holiday. Examples of the latter happened in Gettysburg in November 1863, in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, in July 1864; and in Charleston, South Carolina in May 1865.³

Our research will focus on the verifiable items pertaining to the genesis of Memorial Day, relying on primary sources. Examining the holiday as an artifact, the convention of *provenance* will safely guide us back to its origin. Provenance is the process whereby an historian determines a “chain of custody of an artifact,” or what the OED calls “the fact of coming from some particular source.” Determining provenance entails beginning in the present and working backward, identifying at every point where the artifact was transmitted from one source to the next, until arriving at the artifact’s ultimate genesis.

If we begin in the present and work backwards, we find that the current Memorial Day holiday in the United States was officially designated by the federal government to be observed on “the last Monday in May” beginning in 1971.⁴ This was an act of the 90th Congress and signed by President Lyndon Johnson. This, however, was certainly not the origin of the holiday, but rather one of the last in a sequence of events pertaining to this holiday. LBJ and the 90th Congress did not create the holiday, but only *adopted* and adapted the holiday to their political goals, viz., to assure federal workers a three-day holiday weekend every year in observance of Memorial Day. The law was a slight alteration to the hundred-year-old tradition of observing Memorial Day on 30 May. There is no controversy about the celebration of the Memorial Day holiday from 1868 to 1971. The first year that 30 May was officially observed as “Decoration Day” was 1868. There is also no controversy concerning who proposed the 30 May custom in 1868. It was General John A. Logan, commander-in-chief of the “Grand Army of the Republic” (GAR).⁵ All sources concur on these facts.

The GAR was the largest Union army veterans’ association of the post-Civil War.⁶ It was akin to the present day Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). In 1868, John A. Logan was its leader. On 5 May 1868,



Maj. Gen. John A. Logan (*Library of Congress*)

Logan issued a nationwide “order” to set apart May 30 on an annual basis to commemorate the Union dead. From 1868 until 1971, 30 May was observed across the United States as “Decoration Day,” later called “Memorial Day.”

As Logan’s order began to appear in print across the nation in 1868, journalists immediately recognized that Logan had *not* introduced a new holiday proposal, but only adopted a holiday that had already been observed in the southern states for three years. On 11 May 1868, just six days after Logan gave the “order” for Decoration Day, the *Boston Daily Advertiser* reported:

*General John A. Logan, commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, has issued a general order to the “posts” throughout the country designating the 30th instant as a day for strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defence [sic] of their country. . . This custom thus inaugurated is one that was started at the South soon after the close of the war, but is worthy of adoption at the North.*⁷

In Springfield, Massachusetts, the press justified borrowing the Southern holiday. “The custom of paying this tribute to the dead is **carefully cherished at the South . . . and worthy of imitation.**”⁸ A contemporaneous journalist in Maine made it clear that the genesis of the observance was in the South: “This is a custom which **had its origin in the South and which was observed upon stated days by Southern maids** and matrons.”⁹ The Columbus, Ohio, *Statesman* chastised Logan for taking three years to adopt the Southern custom:

*This custom has been observed in the Southern States annually since the close of the war, and the day there is generally observed. Why three years have been permitted to pass by without remembering the dead soldiers here, it is difficult to say.*¹⁰

The press in Fremont, Ohio, likewise acknowledged the Southern root of the holiday, but justified as appropriate its “universal adoption”:

*The custom of entire communities turning out to strew flowers on the graves of soldiers was **started in the South since the war.** It is a beautiful and appropriate tribute to the memories of fallen heroes and should become universal. **The North this year for the first time adopts the custom.***¹¹

In Vermont, the press commented on the Southern holiday and Logan’s decree: “Their soldiers’ cemeteries have been the scenes of the most solemn and inspiring ceremonies. The custom is appropriate

and **worthy of imitation.**"¹² The *Denver Daily Rocky Mountain News* applauded Logan's adoption of the Southern practice. "It is a custom universally observed in the South," argued the Colorado editor. "Should we be less mindful of those who gave their lives for us?"¹³

A writer in the *Springfield Daily Republican* explained why Southerners should welcome General Logan's order. After all, "this has been a sacred usage at the South since the war. A beautiful and befitting tribute, **we adopt it from them**, and hallow it."¹⁴ On 5 June 1868, the *New York Times* reported that Logan had adopted the plan that "the ladies of the South instituted."¹⁵

Even General Logan's wife was abundantly clear that Logan co-opted the Southern holiday. She reported that General Logan expressed regret that it was Southerners rather than Northerners who launched these "beautiful ceremonies." General Logan then said it was "not too late for the Union men of the nation to *follow the example of the people of the South*,"¹⁶ and "we have been neglecting our dead, while they have honored theirs."¹⁷ Here we find none other than Logan himself explaining where his idea for Memorial Day originated. His remarks point clearly to the southern geographical location of the holiday's birth.

Logan's own Grand Army of the Republic reluctantly acknowledged the obvious. One of their authors admitted in 1869, "Though perhaps not acknowledged in so many words, it has been tacitly conceded that the Southern people originated the beautiful custom, as far as America is concerned, at least, of decorating the graves of soldiers."¹⁸

The words "adoption," "imitation," or "copying" were used in nearly every report of Logan's order in the North. The Southern language used to describe Logan's deed was more blunt. For example, *Flake's Bulletin* (Galveston, TX) of 23 May 1868, was harsh:

*Gen. Logan . . . has issued a general order . . . for strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country . . . This is **stealing Confederate thunder with a vengeance.***¹⁹

Not every commentator in the North who recognized that Logan



John Logan's wife quoted her husband, saying that Southerners were the inspiration for his National Memorial Day proclamation. *Library of Congress*

was borrowing from the ex-Confederates approved of the measure. Some squarely criticized Logan's adoption of a "rebel" endeavor. The *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch* censured Logan's decision as "a slavish imitation of rebel customs."²⁰ The Harrisburg, Pennsylvania *Patriot Union* likewise described Logan's order as "clap-trap after the manner of the unreconstructed rebels."²¹ A letter to the editor in Ohio written two days after Logan's order was carried out complained that "the practice of strewing graves of soldiers with flowers originates with the rebels" and accordingly excoriated "this effort of the Grand Army [GAR] to imitate the rebels."²² Accordingly, another article in the *New York Times* the following year addressed Southerners on the origin of Memorial Day: "Your ladies began it two years before the Grand Army of the Republic resorted to it as a measure of retaliation."²³ A letter to the editor of the Washington *National Republican* questioned whether it be "impolitic for our party to imitate the South in decorating the graves and tombs of our dead heroes."²⁴

Logan's adoption of the Southern custom was transparent to nearly everyone living in America in 1868. His Decoration Day decree was made to co-opt the Southern precedent. In other words, when Logan issued an "order" for Northerners to observe an annual decoration day, it was immediately apparent to Americans everywhere that he simply adopted the Southern holiday for the North.

In early 1866, the city that witnessed the last major military engagement of the Civil War²⁵ had a problem. The city cemetery in Columbus, Georgia, where many of the unknown dead were buried, was in disrepair. The ladies of the Soldiers' Aid Society answered calls by the local paper for action.²⁶ As they looked after the graves, the ladies of Columbus began to wonder what they could do on a permanent basis to remember their fallen heroes. They brainstormed the idea of inaugurating an annual holiday during which they would decorate the graves of those who died in the war. The date chosen for the holiday was 26 April, to coincide with what they considered to be the end of the war: the anniversary of the surrender agreement between Generals Johnston and Sherman in 1865.²⁷

In 1866, the Columbus Soldiers' Aid Society was reconstituted as the Ladies Memorial Association of Columbus and Mrs. Mary Ann Williams was elected its first secretary. It became her responsibility to compose an open letter promoting their idea of a new holiday.



Earlier in the war, a Boston woman, Sarah Mary Ann Williams

Josephine Hale, successfully instigated an annual national holiday by writing a letter to Abraham Lincoln. After several years of appealing for a Thanksgiving holiday in her magazine, *Godey's Ladies' Book*, in 1863 she wrote a petition to the president himself. In response to her letter, Lincoln designated the fourth Thursday in November as a national day of Thanksgiving, which endures today.²⁸ It is possible that Mrs. Williams had Mrs. Hale's achievement in mind as she wrote her letter.²⁹

Instead of writing to the president, however, Mrs. Williams transmitted her letter to newspapers across the South. The idea she communicated was for the women of the South to establish an annual Memorial Day for the purpose of decorating the graves of their fallen dead. The letter was first published in the Columbus, Georgia, papers on 11 March 1866. It proposed as follows:³⁰

. . . we can keep alive the memory of debt we owe them by dedicating at least one day in the year, by embellishing their humble graves with flowers, therefore we beg the assistance of the press and the ladies throughout the South to help us in the effort to set apart a certain day to be observed, from the Potomac to the Rio Grande and be handed down through time as a religious custom of the country, to wreath the graves of our martyred dead with flowers. . . Let the soldiers' graves, for that day at least, be the Southern Mecca, to whose shrine her sorrowing women, like pilgrims, may annually bring their grateful hearts and floral offerings. . .

While the original letter contained no date, 26 April was chosen (perhaps by Lizzie Rutherford), since it was the anniversary of General Johnston's surrender. The date was published within a few days.³¹ In addition to the letter's appearance in two of the Columbus, Georgia, newspapers, Mrs. Williams's letter appeared in full or in part, or references thereto, in at least twenty-six different contemporaneous newspapers in cities across the entire South:

1. *Montgomery* [Alabama] *Daily Mail*, March 15, 1866.
2. *Atlanta* [Georgia] *Daily Intelligencer*, March 21, 1866.
3. *Augusta* [Georgia] *Weekly Constitutionalist*, March 21, 1866.
4. *Macon* [Georgia] *Messenger*, March 21, 1866.
5. *Savannah* [Georgia] *Daily Herald*, March 21, 1866.
6. *Richmond* [Virginia] *Daily Richmond Examiner*, March 22, 1866.
7. *Macon* [Georgia] *Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, March 26, 1866.
8. *Staunton* [Virginia] *Spectator*, March 27, 1866.
9. *Memphis* [Tennessee] *Daily Avalanche*, March 27, 1866.
10. *Anderson* [South Carolina] *Intelligencer*, March 29, 1866.

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11. Natchez [Mississippi] *Democrat*, March 29, 1866.
12. Columbia [South Carolina] *Daily Phoenix*, April 4, 1866.
13. Wilmington [NC] *Journal*, April 5, 1866.
14. New Bern [NC] *Journal of Commerce*, April 6, 1866.
15. New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, April 6, 1866.
16. Winnsboro [NC] *Tri-Weekly News*, April 10, 1866.
17. Pulaski [Tennessee] *Citizen*, April 13, 1866 (Apr 25).
18. Woodville [Mississippi] *Republican*, April 14, 1866.
19. Baton Rouge [Louisiana] *Weekly Advocate*, April 14, 1866.
20. Panola [MS] *Star*, April 14, 1866 (Apr 25).
21. Staunton [Virginia] *Valley Virginian*, April 18, 1866.
22. Louisville [KY] *Courier*, April 21, 1866.
23. East Feliciana [Louisiana] *Patriot*, April 21, 1866.
24. Alexandria [Virginia] *Gazette*, April 24, 1866.
25. Galveston [Texas] *News*, April 25, 1866.
26. St. Louis [Missouri] *Republican*, April 26, 1866.

In the North, the Columbus, Georgia, plan was announced in states like Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Ohio.³² In Ohio, the proposal was detailed, "The ladies of Columbus, Georgia, recommended that the 26th of April, each year, be set apart for honoring the Confederate dead, either by pronouncing eulogies upon them, or by adorning their graves."³³ Providence, Rhode Island, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, also printed the news of the impending holiday.³⁴ The proposed annual event even showed up in New York where the *Times* announced that "preparations are being made at various points throughout the south to observe the 26th of April as an anniversary in honor of the rebel dead."³⁵

Mrs. Williams' plea was met enthusiastically. A record of the various decorations on 26 April 1866 can be found in newspapers across the entire South. Many cities in the North also reported the activities of the southern ladies. A contemporaneous report in the *Baltimore Sun* was the first to call it "Memorial Day," and more specifically attributed the holiday to "a lady in Columbus, Georgia, at whose instance, it would appear, that the anniversary was almost universally observed."³⁶ No other claim to starting the annual holiday has been supported with that kind of primary source attribution.

It would seem the Memorial Day holiday established in the South in 1866 only honored the Confederate dead. Some may say it was therefore only *Confederate Memorial Day*.³⁷ Southern purists and some anti-Southern radicals today might even argue that Mrs. Williams's proposal had nothing to do with the nationwide Memorial Day of the present. The facts regarding what happened in the spring of 1866

suggest otherwise. This point needs to be highlighted—whether intentional or not, the initiative of the ladies of Columbus, Georgia, April 1866, did more than just inaugurate an annual tribute to the *Confederate* dead. The first Memorial Day holiday in 1866 was an event that, in fact, honored both Confederate *and* Union dead. In response to Mrs. Williams' proposal, an inclusive practice spontaneously emerged that made awareness, admiration, and eventually imitation of the annual ritual spread quickly and forcefully in the North.

During the inaugural southern Memorial Day observances in April 1866, many of the southern participants graciously honored both the graves of the Confederate soldiers as well as those of their former enemies who fought for the Union. If the contemporaneous reports of these touching stories did not exist, it would be very easy to suppose that this element of the narrative is sentimental folklore. But the evidence is strong, and this is the most dramatic and meaningful feature of this entire narrative. This element resulted in Logan's embrace of the annual southern tradition.

Though these inclusive gestures occurred in various locations, it does not appear that this activity was premeditated. It is a part of the story that can be legitimately attributed to synchronicity and common impulses. The records of the benevolent gestures were immediate, diverse, and widespread. Just one week after the 26 April 1866 events, newspaper coverage in the nation's capital highlighted the magnanimous behavior. Reporting that Southern women's tributes were "paid to the union as well as the confederate soldiers," the *Washington Daily National Intelligencer* responded with great praise: "The action of the ladies on this occasion, in burying whatever animosities or ill-feeling may have been engendered in the late war towards those who fought against them, is worthy of all praise and commendation."³⁸ This same Northern article surveyed several of the 26 April 1866, Memorial Day occurrences at various locations in the South and chronicled a series of magnanimous activities. Regarding Macon, Georgia, the following conciliatory message was printed: "all resentments vanished from the pure hearts of the Macon fair, and they adorned, indiscriminately, the graves of the dead of both sections as the victims of a common calamity."³⁹ The paper reported a parallel occurrence in Mississippi where the ladies

*also paid some mark of respect to the memory of some forty Federal soldiers buried near by. This act elicits the approval of the press of that city, which claims that the war being over, no distinction should be made between the departed heroes of opposite sides.*⁴⁰

With reference to this same event, an article from the Columbus

Mississippi Index was reprinted in the Northern press. "We are glad to see that no distinction was made between our own dead and about Forty federal soldiers, who slept by them. It proved the exalted, unselfish love of the female character."⁴¹ On 9 May 1866, the *Cleveland Daily Leader* lauded the actions of Southern women during their first annual Memorial Day. "The act was as beautiful as it was unselfish," according to the article, "and will be appreciated in the North."⁴² Another Cleveland editor noted that the charity of Southern women was not limited to a single location. The report suggested that all Northerners should approve of this new Southern custom. "This tender, kindly, Christian act cannot fail to touch the heart of everyone in the North," according to the Cleveland paper. The article continued, "It kindles a spark of hope that we may at some future time become, in heart, one people."⁴³ An editor of the *Vicksburg Herald* explained what motivated his female neighbors to place flowers on their former enemies' graves:

*They only knew, as they viewed those solitary graves of strangers in a strange land, that they were sleeping far away from home, far from mothers and sisters, and as they dropped the Spring roses of our own sunny clime upon their silent resting places, it was with the Christian hope that some fair sister in the North, in a like charitable spirit, might not overlook the silent graves of our Southern sons which are scattered among them.*⁴⁴

The *New York News* published a statement commending the Southern women for their grave decoration ceremonies.

*There scarcely can be conceived a more touching spectacle than this. These women, orphaned of their treasures—for where is there, at the South, a woman who has not been called on to sacrifice to country a father, or brother, or husband, or son?—decking, with tear-bedewed wreaths, the humble tombs of the lamented dead.*⁴⁵

A newspaper editor in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, urged Northern women to admire the widespread 1866 news accounts of the Memorial Day activities of their Southern counterparts:

*Women of the North, as you read of the sorrow of those of your sex of the South, those you have been taught to hate, those who have suffered beyond their strength, as you read of their love for those who fought for them, let your hearts warm and soften for those who never wronged you.*⁴⁶

The evidence is clear that the first Memorial Day in 1866 was not just, in practice, a Confederate Memorial Day. If it were intended as

such, it failed *de facto*, to be exclusive.⁴⁷ In Petersburg, Virginia, the first annual Memorial Day in 1866 included honoring the dead on both sides. "The Federal graves that were among those of Confederates were repaired in the same manner. . . . All the graves, Federal and Confederate, were tastefully decorated."⁴⁸ In St. Louis and Atlanta the first Memorial Day holiday in 1866 also included the decoration of both Confederate and Union graves. In both locations there were Federal soldiers who felt moved to participate.⁴⁹ The Northern report of the Atlanta commemoration told of the way in which the Southerners' tribute immediately inspired the Unionists who were in attendance to imitate their actions:

*Those battle-scarred soldiers at Atlanta, far from having their animosity aroused by the pious act of the glorious Southern women of that city in paying honor to the memory of their dead heroes, imitated it. The incident has about it something of the sublime, and would furnish, to a great artist, a theme for an immortal picture.*⁵⁰

Instead of a great artist, as suggested by this newspaper article, it was a great *poet* who immortalized the conciliatory incidents. Francis Miles Finch penned a verse titled "The Blue and the Gray" based on one of these reports of the magnanimity of Southern ladies during their first Memorial Day ceremony.⁵¹ Finch's poem quickly became part of the American literary canon.⁵² Finch was moved by one of the most widely circulated reports in Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. The *Tribune* report, which appeared in a dispatch to Finch's hometown newspaper in Ithaca, New York, read as follows: "The women of Columbus, Mississippi . . . strewed flowers alike on the graves of the Confederate and National soldiers."⁵³ Finch explained that this is what inspired him to write his celebrated poem. "When I read those lines it struck me that the South was holding out a friendly hand, and that it was our duty, not only as conquerors, but as men and their fellow citizens of the nation, to grasp it."⁵⁴

Finch's poem first appeared in the September 1867 *Atlantic Monthly*, and it was prefaced by the news coverage of the ceremony that took place in 1866 in Mississippi.⁵⁵ The lines of Finch's poem that seemed to extend a full pardon to the South include these words: "They banish our anger forever when they laurel the graves of our dead."⁵⁶ Almost immediately, the poem (which was always accompanied by the account of the Memorial Day in Mississippi) circulated from Atlantic to Pacific in America.⁵⁷ As a result of the ubiquitous publication of Finch's celebrated rhyme, by the end of 1867 southern Memorial Day was a familiar phenomenon throughout the entire United States. By the end of the nineteenth

century, school children across the country were required to memorize Finch's poem.⁵⁸

As soon as reports reached the north that southern women decorated Union graves, Northerners began suggesting that the U.S. government might benefit from the precedent. "Let this incident, touching and beautiful as it is, impart to our Washington authorities a lesson in conciliation" wrote a commentator in the *New York Commercial Advisor* on 9 May 1866.⁵⁹ On the night of 4 October 1866, a Georgian who had moved to New York was invited to speak before a crowd of 4,000 at the Academy of Music in Brooklyn. In his speech he suggested that reconciliation might be partially achieved if the women of the North would adopt for themselves the holiday that the women of the South inaugurated earlier that spring:

*Let but the daughters of the north and the daughters of the south meet
with their floral offerings annually, on some great memorial day . . .
and let their flowers mingle their fragrance as their tears fall together
upon the pillows of the loved and the lost. Let them kneel together
there, and let their prayers for the welfare of our common country rise
. . . sectional prejudice will pass gradually away.*⁶⁰

Over the course of the next two years, numerous Northerners echoed these invitations.⁶¹ One such Northerner was General John A. Logan.

The fact that the gestures of the southern women were well publicized in the North served to provide a strong impetus for Northerners to embrace and mimic the Southern practice. For many, adopting the holiday in the North would be a stride toward reconciliation. The *Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer* dealt plainly regarding the proposal to extend Memorial Day in the north: "They have, by honoring their dead, admonished us of a duty we owe to ours. And let it be hoped, that, in **following their example**, the people of the two sections may be brought together."⁶²

As more Unionists expressed the view that Northerners "should **imitate** those who had been called their enemies in so commendable an observance,"⁶³ General Logan became acutely aware of these opinions and had heard at least three individuals urge him to act on behalf of the Union.⁶⁴ These reports of southern magnanimity provided the impetus in 1868 when Logan gave the order for 30 May to be set aside annually as "Decoration Day" *throughout* the United States. When Logan's order was published in various newspapers in May of 1868, Francis Finch's poem about the charity of the southern women was sometimes appended to the order.⁶⁵

But what about the 26 April date (the date commemorating the surrender of Johnston to Sherman effectually ending the war)? If



Honoring the Civil War dead. *Library of Congress*

Logan was copying the Southern practice, why not adopt the anniversary of the surrender? Logan's wife explained, "He realized that it must be a time when the whole country was blooming with flowers." Anyone familiar with the climate of Wisconsin or Vermont can tell you that April 26 is too early for flowers. When is optimal? Late May. Logan designated May 30, 1868 to be the first Memorial Day observed throughout the entire Union.

It was not long before Logan's GAR veterans agreed that they would not only adopt the Southern custom of Memorial Day, but also the Southern custom of "burying the hatchet." A GAR group in Philadelphia explained their plans to comply with Logan's order:

Wishing to bury forever the harsh feelings engendered by the war, Post 19 has decided not to pass by the graves of the Confederates sleeping in our lines, but divide each year between the blue and the grey the first floral offerings of a common country. We have no powerless foes. Post 19 thinks of the Southern dead only as brave men.⁶⁶

Immediately after Logan's order, reports of reciprocal magnanimity began to abound in the North. Perhaps the most touching was reported in the New Hampshire press in reference to a ceremony in Indiana in 1868. A ten-year-old child whose father perished in Andersonville prison made a wreath of flowers and sent it to the overseer of the ceremony with the following note attached:

COL. LEAMING:—Will you please put this wreath upon some rebel soldier's grave? My dear papa is buried at Andersonville [Georgia], and perhaps some little girl will be kind enough to put a few flowers upon his grave.⁶⁷

It would indeed take a heart of stone to be unmoved by the sublime nature of that child's request.⁶⁸ It is also not too much of a stretch to assert that President Lincoln would have greatly approved of these conciliatory gestures. His wish that there be "malice toward none" and "charity for all"⁶⁹ was rather visible in the actions exhibited during the Memorial Day observances in those first three years. The first Memorial Days became opportunities for healing and reconciliation. The conciliatory nature of the holiday increased its popular appeal and led to its rapid spread in those first few years. Chauncey Mitchell Depew, a well known and eloquent New York senator gave an address on Memorial Day in 1879, which recapped how and why the southern holiday got transferred to the North.

*... the widows, mothers, and children of the Confederate dead went out and strewed their graves with flowers; at many places the women scattered them impartially also over the unknown and unmarked resting places of the Union soldiers. As the news of this touching tribute flashed over the North, it roused, as nothing else could have done, national amity and love, and allayed sectional animosity and passion. It thrilled every household where there was a vacant chair by the fireside, and an aching void in the heart for a lost hero whose remains had never been found; old wounds broke out afresh, and in a mingled tempest of grief and joy the family cried, "Maybe it was our darling." Thus, out of sorrows, common alike to the North and the South, came this beautiful custom.*⁷⁰

Another historian/eyewitness judiciously summarized the long-term effect of the Southern women's efforts during their Memorial Days:

*The mothers, widows and children of the Confederate dead went out to decorate the graves of the ... resting places of the federal and Confederate dead. Oh, what a revolution of feeling did this create in the hearts of the people of the North. It aroused feelings of amity and friendship. It allayed sectional animosity, and it gave birth to a general [nationwide] day of decoration.*⁷¹

A paper in New York City summarized "the confederate origin of the beautiful custom ... a public institution, which the victors copied from the vanquished."⁷² The Southern press certainly included great praise for the magnanimity of their ladies. One of the Alabama dailies

published this assessment of their women:

*. . . they recognized the claims of a common humanity, and they strewed with flowers the graves of the men who had come among them only to desolate and destroy. It was an act of magnanimity too lofty to be appreciated by the small-souled detractors of the women of the South, but it will be another leaf in the crown of that noble army of martyrs.*⁷³

The “small-souled detractors” referenced above were not just a small sect of people against the holiday. Remember that the years following the Civil War were characterized by radical Republicans on one end of the spectrum, bent on punishing the South; and of the first Knights of the Ku Klux Klan on the other end, trying to operate as if the CSA still existed. Some of this narrowness found expression in the attempt to obstruct inclusive Memorial Day events in the North and South.⁷⁴ Therefore, it is no surprise that the news reports do not exclusively tell of magnanimous gestures toward former foes. Many Northerners despised the concept of Memorial Day insofar as it was clearly of southern origin, and many Southerners despised Logan’s order for the same reason.

Perhaps this is what makes this part of the story most compelling. It required the triumph of amity over enmity. In spite of the presence of a significant strain of grudge-holding, animosity, and vengeance, those who were of the most charitable sentiments won their case and the day with the permanent establishment of the institution of Memorial Day—a national holiday which emerged out of the sentiment of graciousness toward the foe.

It is said that imitation is the highest form of flattery. In the case of Memorial Day, it was a form of reciprocation. The Memorial Day holiday was first created by those defeated, and yet among their women arose a spirit of magnanimity propelling them to pay respect to the dead of their conquerors.⁷⁵ That gracious spirit was embraced and reciprocated by the victors to the extent that the triumphant “Yankees” even *adopted* their former foes’ yearly custom.

ENDNOTES

1. The most thorough treatments of the holiday’s history include Ellen Litwicky’s first chapter of *America’s Public Holidays* (2000), David Blight’s discussion in *Race and Reunion* (2001), and Harmond & Curran’s *A History of Memorial Day* (2002). These researchers provide a variety of accounts that attempt to explain how the commemoration originated and developed. They tend to agree that it is quite a challenge to separate the gold from the dross among the multitude of conflicting origination claims that abound.

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2. E.g., the case of Waterloo, NY, is particularly highlighted because the U.S. government officially declared it “the birthplace of Memorial Day.” However, the account is contradicted by the claimants’ own sources as well as earlier sources than they provided. See Richard Gardiner and Daniel Bellware, “The Origin of Memorial Day in Waterloo, New York: A Case Study of an American Creation Myth,” <http://sites.google.com/a/columbusstate.edu/waterloomyth/> (accessed January 12, 2018).
3. E.g., David Blight, the principal proponent of the Charleston, South Carolina, claim, relayed to the *New York Times* on May 27, 2012, that he has no evidence that the events in Charleston have any connection to Logan’s Memorial Day decree of 1868.
4. 90th U.S. Congress, 2nd Session, 1968, “National Holiday Act of 1971,” Public Law 90 - 363. Resulting from House Resolution 15951.
5. John A. Logan, General Orders No. 11, May 5, 1868 in *The National Memorial Day: a Record of Ceremonies* (Washington, D.C., 1870), p. 7.
6. Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997).
7. *Boston Daily Advertiser*, May 11, 1868. Emphasis ours.
8. *Springfield [MA] Daily Republican*, May 11, 1868. Emphasis ours. This report also appeared in the *St. Johnsbury [VT] Caledonian* on May 15, 1868.
9. *Portland, ME Star*, in *Bangor, ME Daily Whig & Courier*, May 20, 1868. Emphasis ours.
10. *Columbus, OH Daily Ohio Statesman*, May 29, 1868.
11. *Fremont, OH Weekly Journal*, May 29, 1868.
12. *St. Johnsbury [VT] Caledonian*, May 15, 1868. Emphasis ours.
13. *Denver, CO Daily Rocky Mountain News*, May 19, 1868.
14. *Springfield [MA] Daily Republican*, June 1, 1868. Emphasis ours.
15. *New York Times*, June 5, 1868.
16. General John Logan, quoted by Mrs. John A. Logan, *Reminiscences of a Soldier’s Wife* (Scribner’s, 1913), p. 246. Emphasis ours.
17. General John Logan, quoted by Mrs. John Logan, “Grand Old Lady Tells History of Memorial Day,” *Rockford [IL] Morning Star*, May 29, 1921.
18. *The National Memorial Day: a Record of Ceremonies* (Washington, D.C., 1870), 584. See also page 644. The authors attempt to excuse the embarrassing reality by suggesting that the first graves decorated in the South were those of Union soldiers.
19. *Galveston, TX Flake’s Bulletin*, May 23, 1868. Emphasis ours.
20. *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch*, in the *Richmond Southern Opinion*, June 6, 1868.

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21. Harrisburg, PA *Patriot Union*, May 21, 1868.
22. Letter to the Editor of the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, June 1, 1868, in the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, June 3, 1868.
23. "The Origin of Decoration Day," *New York Times*, June 14, 1869. Emphasis ours.
24. *Washington National Republican*, April 30, 1874, in John Montgomery Gordon, *Southern Rights and Northern Wrongs* (by the author, 1874), p. 15.
25. Charles Misulia, *Columbus 1865: The Last True Battle of the Civil War* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010); and Richard Gardiner, "An Identification of the Last Battlefield of the Civil War and Its Preservation," *Journal of America's Military Past* (Spring/Summer, 2013). Volume XXXVIII: 5-23.
26. "The Ladies and the Cemetery," *Columbus Daily Sun*, March 3, 1866, p. 3.
27. "Our Confederate Dead," *Columbus Enquirer* March 13, 1866, 3. Though Lee surrendered to Grant on April 9, 1865, which is now the best-known "end" of the war, General Johnston still had about 90,000 soldiers that had not surrendered and did not surrender until April 26.
28. James W. Baker, *Thanksgiving: The Biography of an American Holiday* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2009), p. 78.
29. *Godey's Ladies Book* was consumed in Columbus, Georgia throughout the Civil War. Mrs. Williams' letter mentions that her holiday proposal is one that should be approved of by female abolitionists in New England, among whom was Sarah Josepha Hale.
30. "The Graves of the Soldiers," *Columbus Enquirer*, March 11, 1866, 3; and "For the Sun and Times," *Columbus Sun and Times*, March 11, 1866, p. 3.
31. "Our Confederate Dead," *Columbus Enquirer* March 13, 1866, p. 3.
32. Boston, MA *American Traveller*, March 24, 1866; Hartford, CT *Hartford Daily Courant*, April 16, 1866; Perrysburg Ohio, *Weekly Perrysburg Journal*, April 20, 1866.
33. *Weekly Perrysburg Journal*, April 20, 1866.
34. *Providence Evening Press*, April 13, 1866; *Philadelphia Daily Age*, April 13, 1866.
35. "News of the Day," *General News, New York Times*, April 12, 1866, p. 4.
36. "Memorial Anniversary," *Baltimore Sun* May 8, 1866.
37. The holiday was never called "Confederate Memorial Day" until some who wished to keep it distinct from the later Northern observance that Logan adopted in 1868 later added the label "Confederate" to the name of the original holiday they wished to claim for themselves. But the ladies who created it called in "Memorial Day" from the beginning.

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38. Washington, DC *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 9, 1866.
39. Ibid. This report also appeared in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* on May 5, 1866.
40. Washington, DC *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 9, 1866.
41. Portland, ME *Daily Eastern Argus*, May 29, 1866.
42. Cleveland *Daily Leader*, May 9, 1866.
43. Cleveland [OH] *Daily Plain Dealer*, May 28, 1866.
44. *Vicksburg Herald*, in the *Springfield Republican*, June 2, 1866.
45. New York *News*, reprinted in the Columbia *Daily Phoenix*, May 23, 1866.
46. Lacrosse, WI *Democrat*, reprinted in the Anderson, SC *Intelligencer*, August 23, 1866.
47. A June 2, 1920 report in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* identified Mary Ann Williams of Columbus, Georgia, as one who graciously decorated a lone Union grave at the Linwood cemetery in Columbus. This report was written 54 years after the fact and is therefore dubious. However, the fact that a lone Union grave existed at Linwood cemetery that the ladies took care to decorate is corroborated in the April 26, 1892, edition of the *Columbus Daily Enquirer*. During the first Memorial Day in Columbus, Georgia, in 1866, several Union soldiers who died in the Battle of Columbus were buried there. They were not reinterred at Andersonville until October.
48. *The New Orleans Times*, June 17, 1866.
49. *Newark Daily Advertiser*, May 1, 1866; Washington, DC *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 9, 1866.
50. Washington, DC *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 9, 1866. Emphasis in the original.
51. Francis Miles Finch, "The Blue and the Gray," *Atlantic Monthly* (September 1867) Vol. 20: 369. Another popular artistic tribute to Southern memorial days appeared in 1867 in the form of a song written by Nella Sweet entitled, "Kneel Where Our Loves are Sleeping," sheet music published by A.E. Blackmar, New Orleans, 1867.
52. School children were required to memorize this poem by the turn of the century. See Luther Clark Foster, *Selections for Memorization* (Boston: Ginn, 1893), p. 58.
53. *New York Tribune*, June 1, 1866; see also *Historical Readings: An Introduction to the Study of American History*, Helen Bennett and Joseph Haniphy, eds. (New York: Rand McNally, 1920), p. 386.
54. Francis Miles Finch, quoted in *Historical Readings: An Introduction to the Study of American History*, Helen Bennett and Joseph Haniphy, eds. (New York: Rand McNally, 1920), p. 386.

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55. Francis Miles Finch, "The Blue and the Gray," *Atlantic Monthly* (September 1867) Vol. 20: 369.
56. Ibid.
57. E.g., see the San Francisco, CA *Evening Bulletin*, September 24, 1867; The Ripley, OH *Bee*, September 4, 1867; and the New Hampshire *Statesman*, October 4, 1867.
58. Luther Clark Foster, *Selections for Memorization* (Boston: Ginn, 1893), p. 58.
59. *New York Commercial Advisor*, May 9, 1866.
60. Colonel Andrew Dawson, quoted in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 7, 1866; see also *Columbus Daily Enquirer*, June 15, 1902.
61. E.g., Martha Kimball, cited by Josiah Henry Benton, *What Women Did for the War and What the War Did for Women: A Memorial Day Address* (Boston, 1894), p. 2; Mrs. John A. Logan, *Reminiscences of a Soldier's Wife* (Scribner's, 1913), p. 243. General John Murray in *Seneca Falls County Courier*, June 4, 1885, p. 2.
62. *Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, June 1, 1868. Emphasis ours.
63. *Springfield [MA] Daily Republican*, June 2, 1868. Emphasis ours.
64. Junius Simons, quoted in *Kimball Family News* (Topeka, KS: June, 1902), p. 83. Also, Josiah Henry Benton, *What Women Did for the War and What the War Did for Women: A Memorial Day Address* (Boston, 1894), p. 2; *Seneca Falls County Courier*, June 4, 1885, p. 2; Mrs. John A. Logan, *Reminiscences of a Soldier's Wife* (Scribner's, 1913), p. 246.
65. "Decoration of the Heroes Graves," *Salem, MA Register*, May 28, 1868.
66. *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*, May 28, 1869.
67. "Touching Incident," *New Hampshire Patriot*, July 15, 1868.
68. As a result of our research, the administrators of Andersonville Prison determined to make sure that little Jennie Vernon finally achieved her goal. A little girl has placed flowers on Jennie's "papa's" grave since 2012. See <http://www.nps.gov/ande/historyculture/flowersforjennie.htm>
69. Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," Abraham Lincoln papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837-1897: Abraham Lincoln, March 4, 1865.
70. Chauncey M. Depew, "Oration on Decoration Day at the Academy of Music, New York, May 30, 1879," in Chauncey M. Depew, *Orations and Speeches of Chauncey M. Depew*, edited by John Denison Champlin (New York, 1910), Vol. III, p. 288.
71. *Gardener's Chronicle* (1913), p. 378.

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72. New York *Truth*, May 31, 1881.
73. Quoted in *The Ladies' Memorial Association of Montgomery, Alabama: its Origin and Organization, 1860-1870* (Alabama Printing Co., 1902), p. 75.
74. It was widely and angrily reported in the North that the organizers of the first Augusta, Georgia, Memorial Day refused to allow blacks to adorn the graves of Union soldiers in a parallel tribute. "No Flowers for Union Soldiers," Lowell, MA *Daily Citizen and News*, May 16, 1866; "Rebel Insolence," Trenton, NJ *Daily State Gazette*, May 17, 1866; Galveston, TX *Flake's Bulletin*, May 20, 1866. In Raleigh, North Carolina, the southern women were warned by the federals that if they went in a group to the cemetery, they would be shot; see news account quoted in *The Ladies' Memorial Association of Montgomery, Alabama: its Origin and Organization, 1860-1870* (Alabama Printing Co., 1902), p. 75. Also, "Confederate Memorial Ceremonies Prohibited," *Baltimore Sun*, April 26, 1867.
75. In this respect, the Southern ladies share an element of the importance of Robert E. Lee in reuniting the nation. Historians such as Jay Winik (*April 1865: The Month that Saved America*) credit Lee with being crucial to the reconciliation of North and South by the magnanimous way in which he accepted defeat and worked toward reconciliation. Lee wrote, "All should unite in honest efforts to obliterate the effects of war and to restore the blessings of peace." He committed to doing "all in my power to encourage our people to set manfully to work to restore the country." John W. Jones, *Personal Reminiscences, Anecdotes, and Letters of Gen. Robert E. Lee* (1875), p. 203.