Today in History - May 30

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Memorial Day

In 1868, *Commander in Chief* John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic issued *General Order Number 11* directing that **May 30** is a memorial day 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 churchyard in the land.*"

"Soldier's Memorial Day," Mary B. C. Slade, words; W. O. Perkins, music; Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1870. Historic American Sheet Music, Duke University Libraries.

Maj. Gen. John A. Logan, Brady's National Photographic Portrait Galleries, between 1860 and 1865. Civil War Glass Negatives and Related Prints, Prints & Photographs Division

The first national celebration of the holiday took place **May 30**, 1868, at Arlington National Cemetery, where both Confederate and Union soldiers were buried. Originally known as Decoration Day, at the turn of the century it was designated as Memorial Day. In many American towns, the day is celebrated with a parade.

Southern women decorated the graves of soldiers even before the Civil War's end. Records show that by 1865, Mississippi, Virginia, and South Carolina all had precedents for Memorial Day. Songs in the Duke University collection Historic American Sheet Music include hymns published in the South such as these two from 1867: "Kneel Where Our Loves are Sleeping," dedicated to "The Ladies of the South Who are Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead" and "Memorial Flowers," dedicated "To the Memory of Our Dead Heroes."

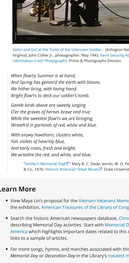
When a women's memorial association in Columbus, Mississippi, decorated the graves of both Confederate and Union soldiers on April 25, 1866, this act of generosity and reconciliation prompted an editorial piece, published by Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, and a poem by Francis Miles Finch, "The Blue and the Gray," published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The practice of strewing flowers on soldiers' graves soon became popular throughout the reunited nation.

President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed Waterloo, New York, as the "Birthplace of Memorial Day," because it began a formal observance on May 5, 1866. However, Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, also claims to have held the first observance, based on an observance dating back to October 1864. Indeed, many other towns also lay claim to being the first to hold an observance.

In 1971, federal law changed the observance of the holiday to the last Monday in May and extended the honor to all veterans who died in American wars. A few states continue to celebrate Memorial Day on May 30.

Today, national observance of the holiday still takes place at Arlington National Cemetery with the placing of a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the decoration of each grave with a small American flag. Protocol for flying the American flag on Memorial Day includes raising it quickly to the top of the pole at sunrise, immediately lowering it to half staff until noon, and displaying it at full staff from noon until sunset. For other guidelines see the Flag Code.

Many veterans of the Vietnam War, and relatives and friends of those who fought in that conflict, make a pilgrimage over Memorial Day weekend to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., where they pay their respects to another generation of fallen soldiers.



Gerald St. George Walker, New York, Lieutenant U.S.N.R., 1902-1945. Gravestone in cemetery. Theodor Horydczak, photographer, ca. 1920-1950. Horydczak Collection, Prints & Photographs Division

Salute and Bell at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia, John Collier Jr., photographer, May 1943. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs, Prints & Photographs Division

When Liberty Summer is at hand,
And Spring has painted the earth with bloom,
We hither bring, with loving hand,
Bright flowers to deck our soldier's tomb.

Gentle birds above are sweetly singing
O'er the graves of heroes brave and true;
While the sweetest flowers we are bringing,
Wreath'd in garlands of red, white and blue.

With snowy hawthorn, clustre white,
Fair violets of heavy blue,
And early roses, fresh and bright,
We wreathe the red, and white, and blue.

"Soldier's Memorial Day," Mary B. C. Slade, words; W. O. Perkins, music; Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1870. Historic American Sheet Music, Duke University Libraries.

Learn More

- View Maya Lin's proposal for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the Memory section of the exhibition, American Treasures of the Library of Congress.
- Search the historic American newspapers database, Chronicling America, for articles describing Memorial Day activities. Start with Memorial Day: Topics in Chronicling America which highlights important dates related to this commemoration and includes links to a sample of articles.
- For more songs, hymns, and marches associated with this holiday, search on the terms *Memorial Day* or *Decoration Day* in the Library's related music offerings online.
- There are many photographs of Memorial Day celebrations in the Library's collections of Photos, Prints, & Drawings. Search the collections on *Memorial Day* or *Decoration Day* for images including:
  - Memorial Day, 1920, in an American cemetery in France, captioned Cérémonie du "Memorial Day" au Cimetière Américain de Suresnes, le 30 Mai 1920, in Panoramic Photographs
  - Memorial Day, 1942, in both Southington, Connecticut, and Washington, D.C., in the collection Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs.
- Search the following collections on the phrase *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*, cemetery, or soldier's monument for more photographs:
  - Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives
  - Panoramic Photographs
- Visit the Today in History entry about Veterans Day.

Lincoln Memorial

[T]he true treasure of Lincoln is in his place today in the heart of American citizenship, though more than half a century has passed since his colossal service and his martyrdom. In every moment of peril, in every hour of discouragement, whenever the clouds gather, there is the image of Lincoln to rest our hopes and to renew our faith. Whenever there is a glow of triumph over national achievement, there comes the reminder that but for Lincoln's heroic and unalterable faith in the Union, these triumphs could not have been.

Address at the Dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, W. Warren G. Harding, May 30, 1922. The American Presidency Project.

On **May 30**, 1922, the Lincoln Memorial was officially dedicated in Washington, D.C. Created in memory of President Abraham Lincoln, who served throughout the harrowing years of the U.S. Civil War until he was assassinated shortly before the war ended, the structure has come to take on a larger-than-life role as a symbolic platform for showcasing the nation's hopes and aspirations in the context of national unity. Its prominent placement as the visual anchor of West Potomac Park, directly aligned with the Washington Monument and the U.S. Capitol Building across almost two miles of distance, has helped to solidify the vast open space of the National Mall as the preeminent site for civic gathering, national commemoration, and peaceful protest in the century that followed its opening. Today, the Lincoln Memorial remains a vibrant symbol, and a one of Washington, D.C.'s most visited locations.

Dedication Lincoln Memorial, 5/30/22. Glass negative, May 30, 1922. National Photo Company Collection, Prints & Photographs Division

[Dedication of the Lincoln Memorial], No 5 / Photo by E. Dickson. 1922. Panoramic Photographs, Prints & Photographs Division

While the Lincoln Memorial celebrates Lincoln's life as well as the preservation of the Union, events staged on its steps over time have also enlarged its meaning. Marian Anderson's 1939 Easter Sunday concert, for example, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom of 1963, compound its compelling legacy as a place for asserting civil rights and racial equality. In October, 1843, a group of more than four hundred rabbis walked from Union Station to the Capitol, Lincoln Memorial, and White House to raise awareness of the mass killing of European Jews by the Nazi regime. In October, 1967, more than 100,000 Vietnam War protestors gathered near the Lincoln Memorial on the day it was stated they would "levitate the Pentagon." On Juneteenth (June 19) in 1970, the Black Panther Party held a rally at the Memorial to promote their proposed "Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention" planned for later in the year. Such examples highlight the Lincoln Memorial's iconic role as a setting that elevates the historical resonance of events.

Crowd gathered at the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington. Deed Lowell Harris, photographer, August 28, 1963. Prints & Photographs Division

The Lincoln Memorial was many decades in the making. Congress's first authorization of a memorial association dates to 1867, but that initial group failed to raise its needed funds. When the successful Lincoln Memorial Commission was finally approved by Congress in 1910, their first task was to determine a location for the structure. The Memorial's eventual placement became an important component of the recently-instituted McMillan Plan (1902), to create a monumental core plus a park system for Washington, D.C. As the second monument—and first monument—to grace the extended National Mall, the Lincoln Memorial helped to define the strong geometries and neoclassical style of the landscape, as well as its commemorative character. Both would be fully solidified with the completion of the Jefferson Memorial two decades later.

The Lincoln Memorial's groundbreaking was held on February 12, 1914, with foundation work alone taking more than a year because the structure was built on reclaimed tidal flats. The massive cornerstone was laid on February 12, 1915. Construction continued steadily until the interruptions of World War I, along with a decision to double the size of Lincoln's statue to ensure its visibility, extended the length of time to completion. Once the interior chamber—made of granite, marble, and limestone—was completed, Lincoln's larger-than-life statue was assembled and completed on site in 1919-1920. Finishing work on the Memorial, along with extensive landscaping and creation of the long Reflecting Pool to the Memorial's east, continued through the following year, and even after the official dedication and opening.

Lincoln Memorial. Under Construction. Glass negative, Harris & Ewing, photographer, 1915. Harris & Ewing Collection, Prints & Photographs Division

Lincoln Memorial. Under Construction. View from Air. Glass negative, Harris & Ewing, photographer, 1919. Harris & Ewing Collection. Prints & Photographs Division

Architect Henry Bacon worked closely with sculptor Daniel Chester French on the Lincoln Memorial's design, which is modeled after the ancient Greek Parthenon still standing in Athens. Construction was undertaken by the George A. Fuller Company. At ninety-nine feet tall and two hundred feet wide, and with sixty foot interior ceilings, the structure is indeed monumental. A long flight of 58 steps leads from the plaza to its entrance on the eastern facade. Thirty-six exterior Doric columns symbolize the thirty-six states in the Union at the time of Lincoln's death, with the name of each state included in the frieze above the columns. On the upper attic frieze, all states at the time of the Memorial's dedication are included. Inside, the Memorial is divided into three chambers separated by columns, with French's dramatic nineteen-foot-tall sculpture of a seated President Lincoln occupying the center. North and south side chambers contain carved inscriptions of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address and his Gettysburg Address along with painted murals portraying governing principles. Skilled carving of French's massive portrait sculpture design was done by New York's Piccirilli Brothers, and took four years to complete. Ernest C. Bairstow and Evelyn Beatrice Longman provided architectural carving including inscriptions, while Jules Guerin designed and painted the murals.

As many as 50,000 people, including Civil War veterans from both the Union and the former Confederacy, attended the Memorial's dedication ceremony. Also among the distinguished guests was President Lincoln's adult surviving son, Robert Todd Lincoln, then age 78. Speakers included former president and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court William Howard Taft (who had also served as president of the Lincoln Memorial Commission), President Warren G. Harding—whose speech was broadcast on the radio using experimental technology—and Robert Moton, President of Tuskegee Institute. Poet Edwin Markham read his "Lincoln, the Man of the People."

Edwin Markham, poet, who dedicated a poem to the Lincoln Memorial. Photographic print, May 30, 1922. National Photo Company Collection. Prints & Photographs Division

With the National Mall's commemorative context now firmly in place, in the years since the opening of the Lincoln Memorial a set of additional monuments and memorials has been raised on the National Mall and in West Potomac Park, most notably: Jefferson Memorial (1943), Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982), Korean War Memorial (1995), Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial (1997), World War II Memorial (2004), and Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial (2011). Equally large in scale but all very different in character, each brings its own history and architectural contribution to this meaning-filled landscape—from the abstract "V" and wall of names at the Vietnam Memorial, to the vignettes in time and space at the Roosevelt, to the monumental portrait of Dr. King emerging from uncarved stone. The stories this monumental landscape tells us are embedded in a nation's shared past but also, like the Lincoln Memorial itself, will continue to grow and change with successive generations.

Learn More

- View historical film footage of the Lincoln Memorial Dedication held at the National Archives and read the text of Robert Moton's speech.
- View design drawings by architect Henry Bacon related to the Lincoln Memorial as well as an architectural survey featuring extensive photo documentation from the Historic American Buildings Survey collection. Search for additional photographs and drawings using *Lincoln Memorial* as a search term.
- Read Today in History features on Abraham Lincoln including Lincoln's Birthday, Abraham Lincoln's First Inauguration, Emancipation Proclamation, Gettysburg Address, Lincoln Shot at Ford's Theater, and O Captain! My Captain!
- Learn even more about Abraham Lincoln through the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress and The Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana, and consult Abraham Lincoln: A Resource Guide to find additional sources.

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