## ORIGINS OF MEMORIAL DAY

Memorial Day, originally known as Decoration Day, has its origins in the aftermath of the American Civil War. In Charleston, South Carolina, shortly after the end of the Civil War, a group of newly freed African Americans gathered to pay tribute to Union soldiers who had perished in a prisoner of war camp. This poignant event took place in May 1865, a year before the official establishment of Memorial Day. The dedication of these former slaves in honoring fallen heroes highlights the deep and complex roots of this commemorative day.

The formal establishment of Memorial Day can be traced to May 5, 1868, when General John A. Logan, leader of a veterans' organization, issued General Order No. 11, designating May 30 as a day for decorating the graves of Union soldiers with flowers. This date was chosen because it was not associated with a specific battle, allowing it to serve as a day for all Civil War veterans to be remembered.



Over time, Memorial Day evolved to encompass the remembrance of all U.S. military personnel who had died in service to their country. In 1971, it was officially designated as a federal holiday to be observed on the last Monday in May, providing a long weekend for remembrance, parades, and patriotic activities.

A photograph from April 1865 depicts the graves of Union soldiers laid to rest at a former race course, which had been converted into a Confederate prison. Historians suggest that this site was where the earliest Memorial Day ceremony occurred.
Civil war photographs, 1861-1865, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Memorial Day carries deep cultural significance in the United States as a day of remembrance and tribute to the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of their country. It stands as a solemn occasion to honor their bravery and the debt of gratitude owed to them and their families.

The holiday is marked by various traditions, including visits to cemeteries and memorials, the decoration of graves with flags and flowers, parades, and gatherings with family and friends. It is a time when communities come together to pay their respects to fallen soldiers.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ENDING RACISM

In using Memorial Day as a day of remembrance, we can foster its power of solemn unity to spread empathy and understanding among diverse communities. Memorial Day highlights the diverse composition of the U.S. military throughout history. Throughout U.S. history, soldiers from all racial and ethnic backgrounds have made sacrifices for their country.

The observance of Memorial Day can encourage conversations about the profound impact of war and conflict on communities, including those that too often face racial discrimination. It prompts reflection on the disproportionate burden that marginalized groups have often endured in times of war.

The holiday serves as a reminder that the sacrifices of those who served extend beyond the battlefield. It serves as a call to action, inspiring individuals and communities to work toward a society that values diversity, equality, and justice for all.

We can use Memorial Day and its celebrations as a platform for dialogue, unity, and reflection on the shared values of freedom, equality, and the importance of a just society. It reinforces the idea that the pursuit of a more equitable and inclusive future is a collective endeavor, rooted in the remembrance of those who gave their lives for their country.

Ending
RACISM USA