

Memorial Day may have begun with a small, touching moment

*Your silent tents of green
We deck with fragrant flowers;
Yours has the suffering been,
The memory shall be ours.*

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The actual origin of Memorial Day, once called Decoration Day, is unclear, except that at first it was most certainly a response to the terrible tragedy of the Civil War in which so many Americans on both sides died on and off the battlefields.

While Waterloo, N.Y., was officially declared the birthplace of Memorial Day by President Lyndon Johnson in May 1966, more than two dozen American towns and cities lay claim to the distinction.

There is, in fact, evidence that organized women's groups in the South were decorating graves before the end of the Civil War: a hymn published in 1867, "Kneel Where Our Loves are Sleeping" by Nella L. Sweet carried the dedication "To The Ladies of the South who are Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead."

But perhaps the most touching story of this special day's origin comes from Boalsburg, a quaint little village in Centre County, Pa., just off Route 322 a few miles south of Penn State University, in the picturesque foothills of the Alleghenies. It's only a dot on the map, and a casual driver might drive past it without even being aware that it is nestled there in the rolling valley beneath a coverlet of oaks and pines and cedars - were it not for a plain little marker by the side of the road: "Boalsburg. An American Village - Birthplace of Memorial Day."

As Herbert G. Moore recorded for the National Republic Magazine in May 1948, the event happened in October 1864.

It was a pleasant Sunday and in the little community burial ground behind the

village, the pioneers of colonial times slept peacefully side by side with the recently fallen heroes of the Civil War.

On this day a pretty teenage girl named Emma Hunter and her friend Sophie Keller decided to gather some garden flowers and to place them on the grave of Emma's father, Dr. Reuben Hunter, a surgeon in the Union Army, who had died only a short while before. And on this same day, an older woman named Elizabeth Meyer elected to strew flowers on the grave of her son, Amos, a private in the Union ranks who had fallen on the last day of battle at Gettysburg, Pa.

And so the two girls and their friend met, kneeling figures at nearby graves: a young girl honoring her officer father, a mother paying respects to her enlisted-man son, each with a basket of flowers which she had picked so carefully and lovingly. And so they got to talking.

The mother proudly told the girl what a fine young man her son had been, how he had left his farm duties and enlisted in the Union Army at the outbreak of the war, and how bravely he had fought.

The daughter respectfully took a few of her flowers as a token and placed them on the son's grave. The mother in turn laid some of her freshly cut blooms on the father's grave. The two women had found in their common grief a common bond as they knelt together in that little burial ground in Central Pennsylvania where Mount Nittany stands guard over those who sleep there.

Nor did they realize at the same time that their meeting had any particular significance - outside of their own personal lives. It was just that they seemed to lighten their burdens by sharing them. However, as it happened these two women were participating in what the town of Boalsburg believes was the first Memorial Day service.

As the story goes, before the two women left each other that Sunday in October 1864, they agreed to meet again on July 4 of the following year so that they might honor not only their own lost loved ones, but others who might have no one left to kneel at their lonely graves.

During the weeks and months that followed, the two women discussed their little plan with friends and neighbors, who responded enthusiastically. The report was that on the appointed day in 1865, what had been planned as an informal meeting of only two women turned into a community service. All Boalsburg was gathered there. A local clergyman preached a sermon, and every grave in the small cemetery was decorated with flowers and flags.

It seemed such a fitting and proper way of remembering those who had died that it became an annual event in Boalsburg, and one by one the neighboring communities adopted a similar plan of observing "Decoration Day" each spring.

On May 5, 1868, just four years after that first meeting in the little burial ground, Gen. John A. Logan, then commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, issued an order naming May 30, 1868, as a day "for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country." It was observed that day, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.

The first state to officially recognize the holiday was New York in 1873. By 1890 it was recognized by all of the northern states. The South refused to acknowledge the day, honoring their dead on separate days until after World War I (when the holiday changed from honoring just those who died fighting in the Civil War to honoring Americans who died fighting in any war). It is now celebrated in every state on the last Monday in May (passed by Congress with the National Holiday Act of 1971 (P.L. 90 - 363) to ensure a three-day weekend for federal holidays).

We come, not to mourn our dead soldiers, but to praise them. – Francis A. Walker