

Origin of Confederate Memorial Day

On March 12, 1866, Mrs. Mary Ann Williams, a Confederate widow of the late Colonel Charles J. Williams, of Columbus, Georgia, was the Secretary of the Columbus Ladies Memorial Association. Mrs. Williams was instructed to write a letter to all the newspapers throughout the South to encourage the people to mark April 26 (the date that General Joseph E. Johnston surrendered the Army of Tennessee) as "Remembrance Day" or "Memorial Day". Mrs. Williams wrote,

"The ladies are now, and have been for several days, engaged in the sad but pleasant duty of ornamenting and improving that portion of the city cemetery sacred to the memory of our gallant Confederate dead, but we feel that it is unfinished work unless a day be set apart annually for its special attention. We cannot raise monumental shafts and inscribe thereon their many deeds of heroism, but 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 to be handed down through time as a religious custom of the South, to wreath the graves of our martyred dead with flowers, and we propose the 26th day of April as the day. Let every city, town and village join in that pleasant duty. Let all alike be remembered from the heroes of Manassas to those who expired amid the death throes of our hallowed cause."

The goal was that since there were many Ladies Memorial Associations formed throughout the South, each would hold a memorial on April 26, 1866, the appointed date, for the men who had fallen during the War. In Columbus, Georgia, the service began at St. Luke Methodist Church and moved to Linwood Cemetery. After the service concluded, the ladies decided to continue to commemorating this day *"as long as flowers grow and the memory of brave deeds last."* It wasn't until 1874 when the State of Georgia designated April 26th as "Memorial Day" and made it a public holiday, thanks to State Representative Thomas Rufus Lyon of Dougherty County.

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It is a matter of history that Mrs. Charles J. Williams, of Columbus, Ga., instituted the beautiful custom of decorating soldiers' graves with flowers, a custom which has been adopted throughout the United States. She married Maj. C.J. Williams on his return from the Mexican War. As a colonel of the First Georgia Regulars, of the Confederate Army in Virginia, he contracted disease from which he died in 1862, and was buried in Columbus, Ga.

Mrs. Williams and her little girl visited his grave every day, and often comforted themselves by wreathing it with flowers. While the mother sat abstractly thinking of the loved and lost one, the little one would pluck the weeds from the unmarked soldiers' graves near her father's and cover them with flowers calling them her soldiers' graves.

After a short time while the dear little girl was summoned by the angels to join her father. The sorely bereaved mother then took charge of these unknown graves for the child's sake, and as she cared for them thought of the thousands of patriot graves throughout the South, far away from home and kindred, and in this way a plan was conceived of setting apart one day in each year, that love might pay tribute to valor throughout the Southern States. In March 1866, she addressed a communication to the Columbus Times, an extract of which I give:

"We beg the assistance of the press and the ladies throughout the South to aid us in the effort to set apart a certain day to be observed from the Potomac to the Rio Grande, and to be handed down through time as a religious custom of the South, to wreath the graves of our martyred dead with flowers, and we propose the 26th day of April as the day."

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She then wrote to the Soldiers' Aid Societies in every Southern State, and they readily responded and reorganized under the name of Memorial Associations. She lived long enough to see her plan adopted all over the South and throughout the United States. Mrs. Williams died April 15, 1874, and was buried with military honors. The Legislature of Georgia set apart the 26th day of April as a legal holiday in obedience to her request.

Kingston GA. also claims to have held the 1st Decoration Day in 1865. It appears that it started in multiple locations right after the war ended,

- James King

First Decoration, or Memorial Day, was observed in Kingston in late April of 1865, and has been a continuous observance here since that day, the only such record held by any community in this Nation. The first Memorial, or Decoration Day, was observed while Federals still occupied this town, flowers being placed on both Confederate and Federal graves that day. Much credit is due the Dardens and other patriotic citizens of this town for their untiring efforts to keep alive memories of the gallant Confederates -- greatest fighting men of all time.

A Google search "Origin Memorial Day John A. Logan" brings up information on the origin of U.S. Memorial Day. Yankee General John A. Logan was angry that Southerners whom he considered traitors were decorating the graves of Confederate soldiers every year. So he started "Yankee" Memorial Day in 1868.

Origin of Confederate Memorial Day

President Eisenhower and Congress officially made the Confederate soldier equal to the union soldiers and it was a Congressional Act.

Enacted in 1958, Public Law 85-425 gave Confederate Veterans the same rights as any American Veteran. The complete act can be found in the United States Statutes At Large (passed by the 85th Congress in 1958)

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Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, Section 432 (e) "For the purpose of this section, and section 433, the term 'veteran' includes a person who served in the military or naval forces of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War, and the term 'active, military or naval service' includes active service in such forces."

Section 410

"The Administrator shall pay to each person who served in the military or naval forces of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War a monthly pension in the same amounts and subject to the same conditions as would have been applicable to such person under the laws in effect on December 31, 1957, if his service in such forces had been service in the military or naval service of the United States."

**The last Confederate Soldier died in 1959, so no pension was ever paid to a CSA Veteran by the U.S. Government.
The 1958 Law did allow Grave Markers/Tomb Stones to ordered at no cost for CSA Veterans.**

Posted by James W. King
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1896