

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

America, Erie Region Celebrate Memorial Day's Message

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Memorial Day is rooted in the human psyche. It is a product of what makes us human. Memorial Day is a day set aside to honor the dead, particularly those who have fought and died in the wars to preserve American freedom. Memorial Day is a time when Americans come together and honor their dead through visits to cemeteries, family gatherings, and community parades. In recent decades,

Memorial Day has been celebrated on the last Monday of May, but for many years it was May 30.

Memorial Day was first celebrated in 1868 as Decoration Day. On the first Decoration Day, General James Garfield, a future President who served in the Civil War battles of Middle Creek, Shiloh, and Chickamauga, made a speech at [Arlington National Cemetery](#). At this first Memorial Day gathering, there were 5,000 participants who helped decorate the graves of the more than 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried in the cemetery. His words given at this first national day of remembrance follow:

"I am oppressed with a sense of the impropriety of uttering words on this occasion. If silence is ever golden, it must be here beside the graves of fifteen thousand men, whose lives were more significant than speech, and whose death was a poem, the music of

which can never be sung. With words we make promises, plight faith, praise virtue. Promises may not be kept; plighted faith may be broken; and vaunted virtue be only the cunning mask of vice. We do not know one promise these men made, one pledge they gave, one word they spoke; but we do know they summed up and perfected, by one supreme act, the highest virtues of men and citizens. For love of country they accepted death, and thus resolved all doubts, and made immortal their patriotism and their virtue. For the noblest man that lives, there still remains a conflict. He must still withstand the assaults of time and fortune, must still be assailed with temptations, before which lofty natures have fallen; but with these the conflict ended, the victory was won, when death stamped on them the great seal of heroic character, and closed a record which years can never blot. ... Hither our children's children shall come to pay their tribute of grateful homage. For this are we met today. By the happy suggestion of a great society, assemblies like this are gathering at this hour in every State in the Union."

Memorial' Day gradually became a national day of remembrance. In 1970, Congress changed the date from May 30 to the last Monday in May in order to provide a three-day time of reflection. Memorial Day became an official national holiday in 1971. In 2000, Congress passed the National Moment of Remembrance Act, asking people to stop at 3:00 p.m. on Memorial Day and remember all those who fought and those who gave their lives so that we may have freedom.

In 1989, Congress instituted the first National Memorial Day Concert, held on the Sunday before Memorial Day and has continued it every year since. The concert is free and is performed on the west lawn of the United States Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. This year the concert will be a streaming-only event as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be available through PBS, NPR, and will also be transmitted overseas to U.S. military personnel in more than 175 countries and aboard more than 200 U.S. Navy ships at sea on American Forces Network.

Traditionally, Americans observe Decoration Day/Memorial Day by visiting cemeteries or memorials, holding family gatherings, and participating in parades. In western Erie County, Girard, Fairview, Albion, and East Springfield have been famous for their Memorial Day parades. None of them will be held this year, though it is likely that many residents of Erie County will be visiting the area's cemeteries, placing flowers on family gravesites, shedding some tears, remembering their dearly departed family members and praying for their eternal happiness.



Erie County along with the other 66 counties in Pennsylvania has a Veterans Affairs Office. County Directors of Veterans Affairs provide county veterans and their

dependents direct assistance to identify, determine eligibility and assist in the preparation of applications for County, State and Federal veterans benefits and programs. The County Director is responsible for the payment of Burial Allowances and providing grave markers and headstones to be placed at the grave site of each deceased veteran. Each veteran gravesite has a marker which indicates the war in which the veteran participated. For Memorial Day these markers serve as holders for an American flag. Most cemeteries during the summer and fall months become a sea of waving American flags

The practice of placing flowers or ornaments on graves is one of the oldest human customs and appears to be universal among western societies. At ancient European sites, anthropologists have found pollen on graves indicating the use of cut flowers on graves that are more than 16,000 years old. Both the ancient Greek and Roman societies also decorated gravesites with flowers and other commemoration. It appears that mourners at ancient Chinese gravesites provided food and utensils believed needed in the afterlife as well as artifacts of wealth. In every case, throughout time and the world, graveside decoration is an expression of loss and desire of the mourners to commemorate the dead. Memorial Day goes beyond this. It is a national day of thanksgiving for all those who have fought to preserve our freedom and the land that we cherish.



Revolutionary War



War of 1812



Civil War



Spanish-American War



World War I



World War II



Korean War



Vietnam War



Persian Gulf War



Afghanistan War



Iraq War

References:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Lynch, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society. She was named the Jefferson's Decadean Scholar in 2018. She continues to serve on the Jefferson's Board of Trustees and was its first chairwoman. From 2004 to 2017, she served as Associate Professor of Political Science and History at Mercyhurst University. From 2002 to 2004, Dr. Lynch taught at Allegheny College and was part of the Civic Engagement Institute. Prior, she worked as an analyst for the CIA and served for 20 years as Erie County Executive. She received her Doctorate With Distinction in Political Science in 2001 from the University of Pittsburgh and her M.A. in Social Studies from Gannon University. Her undergraduate degree, a B.A. in History and Political Science, is from George Washington University.

