

Memorial Day — What It Is and What It Isn't

Bloom's Level: Understand

Standard:

NCSS.II.1 — Understanding Historical Events

NCSS.THEME4.1 — Individual Development and Identity

TEKS §113.20(b)(20)(A) — Significance of American Celebrations

STUDENT EDITION



On Memorial Day, American flags and flowers are placed on the graves of soldiers who died in military service — a tradition dating back to the Civil War era.

Memorial Day — What It Is and What It Isn't

A Holiday Worth Understanding

Every year on the last Monday of May, families across the United States gather for barbecues, parades, and long weekends. Stores advertise sales, and social media fills with red, white, and blue. But beneath the celebrations lies a solemn purpose that many people overlook — or confuse with another holiday entirely. Memorial Day is not the same as Veterans Day, and understanding the difference matters more than you might think.



On Memorial Day, American flags and flowers are placed on the graves of soldiers who died in military service — a tradition dating back to the Civil War era.

Where Memorial Day Came From

To understand Memorial Day, we need to travel back to the years immediately following the Civil War (1861-1865). That war was the deadliest in American history, claiming the lives of an estimated 620,000 soldiers — and some historians believe the number was even higher. Entire communities were left grieving, and people needed a way to honor those losses together.

As early as 1865, formerly enslaved Black Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, held a ceremony to honor Union soldiers buried in a mass grave. They cleaned the graves, built a fence around the burial site, and held a parade. Many historians consider this one of the earliest Memorial Day observances in the country.

By 1868, General John A. Logan — a leader of a veterans' organization called the **Grand Army of the Republic** (a civic group made up of Union soldiers who had served in the Civil War) — officially called for a national day of remembrance. He named May 30th as **Decoration Day**, a day to decorate the graves of soldiers who had died in the Civil War with flowers and flags. Over time, the holiday expanded to honor Americans who died in all wars, and its name gradually changed to Memorial Day. In 1971, Congress officially declared it a **federal holiday** — meaning a nationally recognized day off established by law — and moved it to the last Monday of May.

What Memorial Day Specifically Commemorates

Here is the key distinction: **Memorial Day honors Americans who died while serving in the military.** It is a day of mourning and remembrance for the fallen.

Veterans Day, observed on November 11th, is different. That holiday honors all military veterans — living and deceased — who have served in the U.S. armed forces.

Think of it this way: if you have a grandparent who served in the military and came home safely, Veterans Day is a day to thank them. Memorial Day is specifically set aside to remember those who did not come home.

Mixing up these two holidays doesn't just create confusion — it can feel disrespectful to the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Understanding the difference is a small but meaningful way to honor both groups correctly.

How the Holiday Has Evolved

Over the decades, Memorial Day has changed in both tone and tradition. In the late 1800s, observances were deeply solemn — communities gathered at cemeteries, listened to speeches, and placed flowers on graves. Schools and churches played central roles in the ceremonies.

Today, the holiday looks quite different for many Americans. The long weekend has become associated with the unofficial start of summer, and the original purpose can get lost in the noise. Some veterans' groups and historians have expressed concern that the solemn meaning of the day is fading from public memory.

At the same time, many communities still hold meaningful ceremonies. The National Moment of Remembrance, established by Congress in 2000, asks all Americans to pause for one minute of silence at 3:00 p.m. on Memorial Day. The tradition of placing flags on the graves of fallen soldiers continues at national cemeteries across the country.

Memory, History, and National Identity

How a country chooses to remember its dead says a great deal about its values. Memorial Day reflects a national commitment to acknowledging sacrifice — to saying, these lives mattered, and we will not forget them. That act of collective memory connects generations and shapes how a society understands itself.

As you grow older, you will encounter many national holidays. Taking time to ask why a holiday exists — not just what it involves — is how history stays alive.

Discussion Questions:

- How would you explain the difference between Memorial Day and Veterans Day in your own words?
- Why do you think it matters whether people understand the original purpose of a holiday?
- How do communities balance celebration with remembrance?

Summary

Memorial Day began after the Civil War as a way to honor soldiers who died in battle. It has grown into a federal holiday specifically dedicated to remembering Americans who gave their lives in military service. It is distinct from Veterans Day, which honors all who have served. While the holiday has evolved over time, its core purpose remains: to remember, to reflect, and to honor the fallen.

Lesson Objective

In this lesson, you will explore the origins and meaning of Memorial Day, tracing how it developed from post-Civil War remembrance ceremonies into a federal holiday. You will also learn to explain the key difference between Memorial Day and Veterans Day, and describe why understanding a holiday's history matters for how we honor it today.

Standard: NCSS.II.1 — Understanding Historical Events; TEKS §113.20(b)(20)(A) — Significance of American Celebrations

Bloom's Level: Understand

Bloom's Goal: Students will be able to explain the historical origins of Memorial Day and describe how its meaning and purpose differ from Veterans Day.

Explanation: At the Understand level, students move beyond simply recalling facts to making sense of what those facts mean. Here, students will interpret the causes and effects behind Memorial Day's creation and put the holiday's significance into their own words.



Communities across the United States hold Memorial Day ceremonies each year to honor and remember those who gave their lives while serving in the military.

Application Questions

Read each question carefully, think about what you learned in the article, and write a complete answer in your own words.

1. Explain the difference between Memorial Day and Veterans Day. Why does mixing up these two holidays matter?

Think about: Think about who each holiday is specifically meant to honor and why that distinction is important to certain families.

2. How did Memorial Day begin, and how has its tone and purpose changed over time?

Think about: Think about the events after the Civil War that led to the holiday and how modern celebrations compare to early observances.

3. According to the article, why is it important for a country to remember and honor those who died in military service?

Think about: Think about what the article says about collective memory, national identity, and what honoring sacrifice tells us about a society's values.

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Primary Source Analysis (DBQ)

Read the primary source excerpt below carefully. Then answer the four questions that follow. Use evidence from the source and what you have learned about Memorial Day to support your answers.

General Logan's Order Establishing Decoration Day [\[Official Order / Proclamation\]](#)

The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated 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. In this observance no form of ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit. We are organized, comrades, as our regulations tell us, for the purpose, among other things, of preserving and strengthening those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors, and marines who united to suppress the late rebellion. What can aid more to assure this result than cherishing tenderly the memory of our heroic dead?

— General John A. Logan, General Order No. 11, Grand Army of the Republic, May 5, 1868

1. Who wrote this document, and what was his role? Why might his position make him a trustworthy — or possibly biased — source when it comes to honoring Civil War soldiers? [\[Sourcing\]](#)

2. This order was written in 1868, just three years after the end of the Civil War. What was happening in the United States at that time that helps explain why General Logan felt it was important to create a national day of remembrance? [Context]

3. According to the document, what were people supposed to do on May 30th, and what reason does General Logan give for why remembering the fallen soldiers is important?

[Close Reading]

4. The article describes an earlier ceremony held in 1865 by formerly enslaved Black Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, to honor Union soldiers. How does that event support or add to the ideas expressed in General Logan's order? What do both sources suggest about why Americans felt the need to honor the war dead? [Corroboration]

Timeline Construction

The five events below are listed out of order. Arrange them in the correct chronological order by writing the letter IDs from earliest to most recent. Then, for each event, answer the significance prompt in one or two sentences using what you learned from the article.

A. Congress officially declared Memorial Day a federal holiday and moved it to the last Monday of May.

Date / Period:

Significance:

Why was it important for Congress to make Memorial Day an official federal holiday?

B. General John A. Logan called for a national Decoration Day on May 30th to honor soldiers who died in the Civil War.

Date / Period:

Significance:

Why was the creation of Decoration Day a significant step for the country after the Civil War?

C. The National Moment of Remembrance was established by Congress, asking Americans to pause for one minute of silence at 3:00 p.m. on Memorial Day.

Date / Period:

Significance:

Why might Congress have felt it was necessary to create a formal moment of silence for Memorial Day?

D. Formerly enslaved Black Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, held a ceremony to honor Union soldiers buried in a mass grave.

Date / Period:

Significance:

Why is this ceremony in Charleston considered historically significant in the story of Memorial Day?

E. The Civil War ended after claiming an estimated 620,000 or more soldiers' lives, leaving communities across the country in grief.

Date / Period:

Significance:

Why did the enormous loss of life in the Civil War make it necessary to create a day of national remembrance?

Civic Action Scenario

Read the scenario below carefully. Identify the stakeholders involved and answer all three questions using complete sentences. Support your answers with evidence from what you have learned about Memorial Day and civic responsibility.

Scenario: The city council of Maplewood is planning its annual Memorial Day event. A local business association has proposed turning the town square ceremony into a large summer festival with live music, food vendors, and carnival rides, arguing it will boost tourism and bring the community together. However, a group of Gold Star families — families who have lost a loved one in military service — has formally objected, stating that the proposed changes disrespect the solemn purpose of the holiday. The city council must decide how to structure the event in a way that serves the whole community. They have scheduled a public meeting and invited residents to share their views before a final vote is taken.

Stakeholders: Gold Star families who have lost a loved one in military service | Local business owners and the business association | City council members responsible for making the final decision | General community members and residents of Maplewood

1. Why is it important for the city council to understand the original historical purpose of Memorial Day before making their decision about the event?

2. How might the Gold Star families and the business association each view their civic rights and responsibilities differently in this situation?

3. What civic process is the city council using to resolve this disagreement, and why is community participation in that process important?

Close Reading Passage

Read the passage carefully. Then answer the five questions that follow. Use evidence from the text to support your responses.

The Origins of Memorial Day

To understand Memorial Day, we need to travel back to the years immediately following the Civil War (1861-1865). That war was the deadliest in American history, claiming the lives of an estimated 620,000 soldiers. Entire communities were left grieving, and people needed a way to honor those losses together. As early as 1865, formerly enslaved Black Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, held a ceremony to honor Union soldiers buried in a mass grave. They cleaned the graves, built a fence around the burial site, and held a parade. Many historians consider this one of the earliest Memorial Day observances in the country. By 1868, General John A. Logan officially called for a national day of remembrance. He named May 30th as Decoration Day, a day to decorate the graves of soldiers who had died in the Civil War with flowers and flags. Over time, the holiday expanded to honor Americans who died in all wars, and its name gradually changed to Memorial Day. In 1971, Congress officially declared it a federal holiday and moved it to the last Monday of May.

1. According to the passage, what did General John A. Logan call the national day of remembrance, and what were people supposed to do on that day? **[Comprehension]**

2. What two changes did Congress make to Memorial Day in 1971? **[Comprehension]**

3. Why might historians consider the 1865 ceremony in Charleston, South Carolina to be significant, even though it was not officially declared a national holiday at the time?

[Inference]

4. Based on the passage, what does the evolution of Memorial Day from Decoration Day suggest about how the United States changed its understanding of who deserves to be honored? **[Inference]**

5. The author includes specific dates and numbers throughout the passage, such as "620,000 soldiers," "1865," and "1868." What effect does this use of precise details have on the reader, and why might the author have chosen to include them? [Craft]

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Hypotheticals

Read each scenario carefully, then answer both questions using what you have learned about Memorial Day and its history.

Scenario 1: Imagine that General John A. Logan had never officially declared Decoration Day in 1868. Without a nationally organized day of remembrance, communities across the country continued to grieve the losses of the Civil War in private, disconnected ways. Years pass, and no federal holiday is ever established to honor fallen soldiers. It is now the present day, and the United States has no Memorial Day.

a) How might the absence of Memorial Day affect the way Americans remember and honor soldiers who died in military service?

b) Why do you think a shared, national day of remembrance might be more powerful than individuals grieving separately on their own?

Scenario 2: Suppose that over the next twenty years, Memorial Day becomes almost entirely focused on sales, barbecues, and the start of summer. The National Moment of Remembrance is quietly discontinued, parades honoring fallen soldiers disappear from most cities, and surveys show that fewer than one in ten Americans

can correctly explain what Memorial Day commemorates. A group of veterans' families petitions Congress to take action.

a) What might be lost — for individuals and for the country as a whole — if the original meaning of Memorial Day fades from public memory?

b) What are two specific actions that communities or schools could take to help restore the solemn purpose of Memorial Day without eliminating the celebrations people enjoy?

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-3 complete sentences using information from the article.

1. How did Memorial Day begin, and what was its original purpose?

2. What is the difference between Memorial Day and Veterans Day?

3. How has the way Americans observe Memorial Day changed over time?

Discussion Questions

Read each question carefully and answer in complete sentences. Use details from the article to support your thinking. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

1. In your own words, explain the difference between Memorial Day and Veterans Day. Why do you think it is important for people to understand this difference?

2. Memorial Day began after the Civil War as a way for communities to grieve and honor the fallen. How has the meaning or observance of the holiday changed over time, and what do you think caused those changes?

3. The article states that "how a country chooses to remember its dead says a great deal about its values." What does Memorial Day tell us about American values, and do you think modern celebrations reflect those values? Explain your reasoning.

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Vocabulary

Read each term and its definition carefully. These words appear in the lesson article about Memorial Day. Knowing these terms will help you better understand the history and meaning of the holiday.

Memorial Day

A federal holiday observed on the last Monday of May to honor Americans who died while serving in the military.

Explain in your own words:

Veterans Day

A holiday observed on November 11th that honors all military veterans – both living and deceased – who have served in the U.S. armed forces.

Explain in your own words:

Civil War

A deadly war fought in the United States from 1861 to 1865 that claimed the lives of an estimated 620,000 or more soldiers.

Explain in your own words:

Decoration Day

The original name for Memorial Day, established in 1868, when people decorated the graves of Civil War soldiers with flowers and flags.

Explain in your own words:

Grand Army of the Republic

A civic organization made up of Union soldiers who served in the Civil War, whose leader officially called for a national day of remembrance in 1868.

Explain in your own words:

federal holiday

A nationally recognized day off from work or school that is established by law, such as Memorial Day, which Congress officially declared in 1971.

Explain in your own words:

commemorate

To honor or remember an important person or event, especially through a ceremony or tradition.

Explain in your own words:

solemn

Serious and respectful in tone or manner, often associated with ceremonies that honor loss or sacrifice.

Explain in your own words:

National Moment of Remembrance

A tradition established by Congress in 2000 that asks all Americans to pause for one minute of silence at 3:00 p.m. on Memorial Day.

Explain in your own words:

collective memory

The shared remembrance of historical events by a group or society that helps connect generations and shape a community's identity.

Explain in your own words:

Exit Ticket

Answer the following two questions based on what you learned in today's lesson.
Write your answers in complete sentences.

1. What is the difference between Memorial Day and Veterans Day?

2. How did Memorial Day begin, and what was it originally called?



On Memorial Day, American flags and flowers are placed on the graves of soldiers who died in military service — a tradition dating back to the Civil War era.

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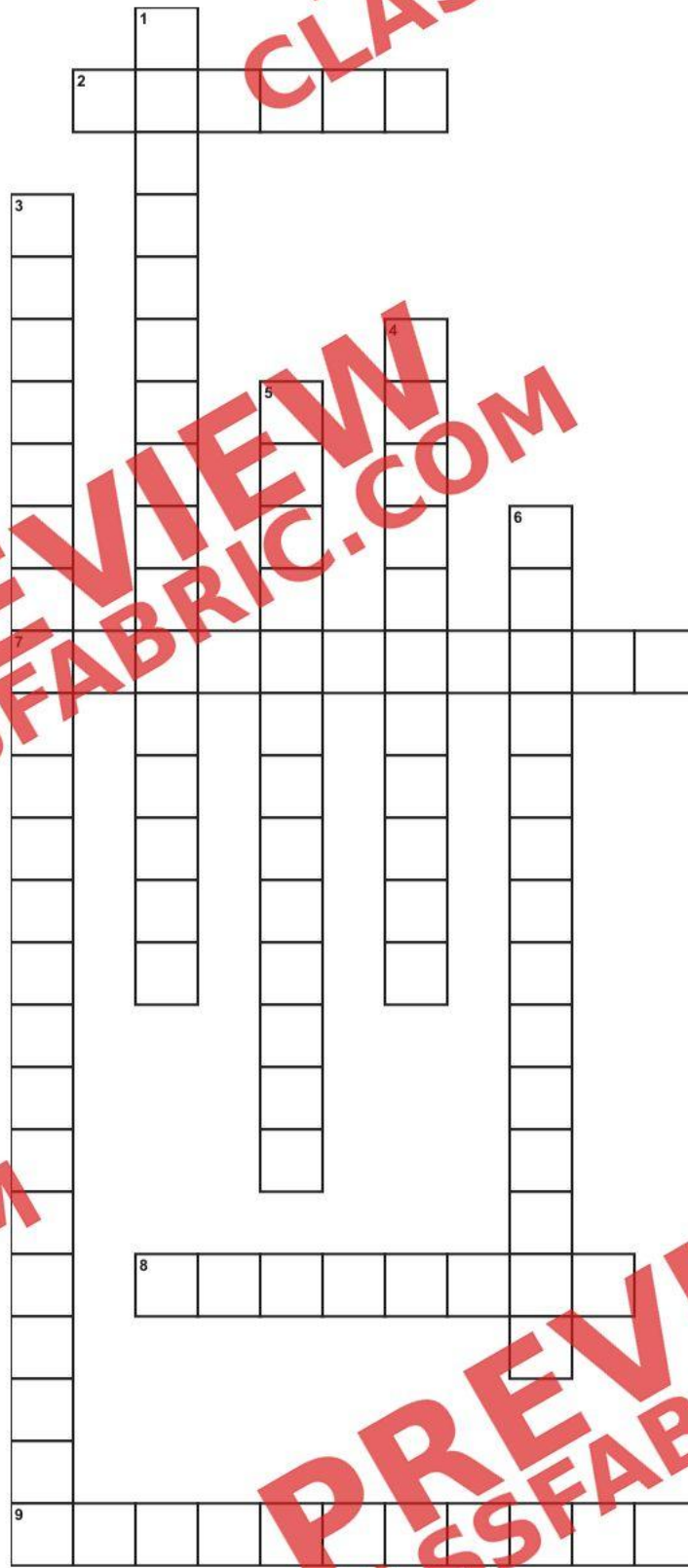


Communities across the United States hold Memorial Day ceremonies each year to honor and remember those who gave their lives while serving in the military.

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Memorial Day — What It Is and What It Isn't

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ACROSS

2. Serious and respectful in tone or manner, often associated with ceremonies that honor loss or sacrifice.
7. A federal holiday observed on the last Monday of May to honor Americans who died while serving in the military.
8. A deadly war fought in the United States from 1861 to 1865 that claimed the lives of an estimated 620,000 or more soldiers.
9. To honor or remember an important person or event, especially through a ceremony or tradition.

DOWN

1. The shared remembrance of historical events by a group or society that helps connect generations and shape a community's identity.
3. A civic organization made up of Union soldiers who served in the Civil War, whose leader officially called for a national day of remembrance in 1868.
4. A holiday observed on November 11th that honors all military veterans — both living and deceased — who have served in the U.S. armed forces.
5. The original name for Memorial Day, established in 1868, when people decorated the graves of Civil War soldiers with flowers and flags.
6. A nationally recognized day off from work or school that is established by law, such as Memorial Day, which Congress officially declared in 1971.

Memorial Day — What It Is and What It Isn't

WORD SEARCH

Y T G N M J E P Q V C H N Z K C F R X T S A J P
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I E R X O P Y O E R F Q M E M O R I A L D A Y X
O C O L L E C T I V E M E M O R Y F R O O X X Q

FIND THESE WORDS

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