

Memorial Day Women Who Made The Day: While there is no dispute that Memorial Day originated as a celebration to honor those who lost their lives in the battles of the Civil War (1861-65), it is difficult to authenticate the original, very first, Memorial Day celebration. Numerous folklore stories of “first” celebrations exist. Most indicate that the day began with women. One legend, and its women, was officially documented in an 1862 newspaper article in the *Savannah Republican* titled “A Beautiful Tribute.” An excerpt follows:

“Yesterday being the anniversary of the Battle of Manassas,* a number of ladies went to Laurel Grove Cemetery and commemorated the day by appropriately decorating the graves of the gallant Bartow** and his comrades in arms who fell in the memorable struggle of the 21st of July. It is a [fir] task for noble woman, and we hope her patriotism and love for the dear departed will move her annually to lay these beautiful tributes on the resting places of the brave.”

*The Battle of Manassas was the first battle of the Civil War.

**The gallant Bartow was Francis S. Bartow, the first high-ranking Georgian to be killed in the Civil War. He had been a US senator, former attorney general of the United States, and one of the largest slaveholders in Georgia.

Three other legends about women beginning the day that circulate with some credence, but without data documentation, are retold as follows:

1) In 1864, women from Boalsburg, Pennsylvania put flowers on the graves of their dead from the just-fought Battle of Gettysburg.

2) In 1865, a group of women decorated the graves of soldiers buried in a Vicksburg, Mississippi cemetery.

3) In 1866, in Columbus, Mississippi, a group of women visited a cemetery to decorate the graves of Confederate soldiers who had fallen in battle at Shiloh. Nearby were the graves of Union soldiers neglected because they were the enemy. Disturbed at the sight of the bare graves, the women, in a gesture of humanity and reconciliation, placed some of their flowers on their graves, as well. This particular story has been told and retold in Mississippi as the original Memorial Day.

However, the US National Park Service, as well as numerous historical scholars, attribute the beginning of Memorial Day to the documented story of the ladies of Savannah, Georgia. Regardless of the exact date or location of its origin, one thing is clear – Memorial Day was born out of the Civil War and a firm resolve by women to honor the war dead.

In 1868, General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic (an organization of Union veterans) officially proclaimed Memorial Day as a day designated for the nation to decorate the graves of the war dead with flowers. That same year, three years after the Civil War ended, graves of the war dead lie in every state across the land, and Memorial Day events were held in 183 cemeteries. One year later, Memorial Day events expanded to 336 cemeteries.

In 1871 Michigan made Memorial Day an official state holiday. By 1890, every northern state had followed suit. Resolute women continued to contribute as the ceremonies were sponsored by the women's auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), known as the Women's Relief Corps, which had 100,000 members.

The poem “In Flanders Fields,” written in 1915 during the First World War by Canadian physician Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae who served in the war, references the red poppies

that grew over the graves of soldiers in the damaged battlefields of Flanders. Red poppies naturally sprouting up over the graves of soldiers have been observed since the Napoleonic Wars as one of the few plants to survive in the brutally trampled fields of war. McCrae's poem inspired another resolute woman to actively support honoring the war dead with a poem of her own that same year, followed by her actions to inspire others to honor those who died in war.

Professor Moina Michael, an American professor at the University of Georgia, titled her poem "We Shall Keep the Faith." And, in 1918, at the end of World War I, she resolved to wear a red poppy to honor the soldiers who had died in the war. She was the first to wear a poppy as an outward symbol of her resolve. She acquired all the artificial silk red poppies she could find and began to sell them to her friends using the monies to benefit servicemen in need.

Professor Michael then conceived the idea for everyone to wear red poppies on Memorial Day in honor of all who died serving the nation during war. She campaigned to have poppies adopted as an official symbol of remembrance by the American Legion. And in 1920, the Legion adopted her Memorial Poppy as its symbol to be worn by Legion members and supporters annually on Armistice Day (November 11).

Anna Guérin, another resolute woman, was a member of the YWCA in France and founder of the "American and French Children's League." Madame Guérin was devoted to the French orphans, the innocent children victims of war, in the war-devastated regions of France (the Flanders' fields). While attending the American Legion convention in America in 1920, she observed the sale of red poppies to benefit victims of war. She noted that such a practice in her home country also could fund support for those still suffering the after effects of war, particularly orphaned children and widowed women.

Madame Guérin began production of fabric poppies and relentlessly travelled the world encouraging countries to adopt the symbol and to raise funds. Working with Professor Michael, Madame Guérin made arrangements for the first nationwide distribution of poppies in America, saw to the promotion of the poppy in Canada and the adoption of it by the Canadian League. She also promoted its use in New Zealand and Australia.

In 1921 she met with Field Marshal Earl Douglas Haig, founder and president of the British Legion, and persuaded him to adopt the poppy as an emblem for the Legion. The first British Legion Poppy Day appeal began in the autumn of 1921 with hundreds of thousands of French-made poppies selling across the country. And, the Franco-American Children's League sold poppies nationally to benefit war orphans of France and Belgium. When the League disbanded a year later, Madam Guérin approached the VFW for help.

In 1922 the VFW became the first veterans' organization to nationally sell poppies. Two years later their "Buddy" Poppy program was selling artificial poppies made by disabled veterans. In 1948 the US Post Office honored Professor Michael for her role in founding the National Poppy movement by issuing a red three cent postage stamp with her likeness on it.

In 1971, Memorial Day was declared a national holiday by an act of Congress to ensure the sacrifices of America's fallen heroes are never forgotten.

In 1996, another resolute woman Carmella LaSpada, then a White House Special Projects aide, speaking to a group of school children visiting Washington, DC mentioned the upcoming Memorial Day that next Monday and asked if the children knew the meaning of Memorial Day.



When, almost in unison, they said, oh, that's the day the swimming pools open, LaSpada worried the day's true purpose - to honor those killed while serving in the armed forces - was being lost. She had an idea for everyone to stop whatever she or he is doing for a quiet moment of reflection at 3 p.m. local time on Memorial Day. She officially petitioned Congress to establish a National Moment of Remembrance.

In 2000, the US Congress passed, and the president signed into law, "The National Moment of Remembrance Act" creating the White House Commission on the National Moment of Remembrance. It encourages all Americans to pause wherever they are at 3 p.m. local time on Memorial Day for a minute of silence to remember and honor those who have died in service to the nation.



In 2004, Moment of Remembrance founder LaSpada was appointed director of the White House Commission on Remembrance, making her the most recent of Memorial Day Women Who Made The Day!

Sources: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial_Day; Daniel Bellware and Richard Gardiner, The Genesis of the Memorial Day Holiday in America (Columbus State University, 2014).; <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/francis-s-bartow-1816-1861>; <http://www.npr.org/2015/05/25/409421351/memorial-day-national-moments-of-remembrance>; <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/community/stories/remembrance/moina-michael/>; <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/community/stories/remembrance/anna-guérin/>; <https://poppyladydamadameguerlin.wordpress.com/chapter-6-madames-childrens-league-usa-poppy/>; http://www.niaf.org/niaf_event/white-house-commission-on-remembrance-director-and-no-greater-love-founder-carmella-laspada-to-be-honored-at-italian-american-gala-in-washington-dc/