

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

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The first Memorial Day: First remembrance honored fallen Civil War soldiers
By Jay A. Graybeal

Since 1868 Westminster's annual Memorial Day Parade and cemetery service has been the cornerstone of this holiday observance. The first Memorial Day observance was organized by Mary B. Shellman of Westminster. Shellman had heeded the call from Grand Army of the Republic Commander John Logan for members to decorate the graves of their fallen Union comrades on May 30. The June 4, 1868, Westminster *American Sentinel* carried a brief notice regarding the event: "In accordance with the notice some of the ladies of our City proceeded to the cemetery on Saturday, and strewed flowers on the Graves of our fallen heroes."

The historical society's photograph collection contains images of four local Union soldiers killed during the Civil War. All were members of the 6th Regiment, Maryland Volunteer Infantry. The first Memorial Day was held to honor them and others. These images and their service records proved a tangible link with the first Memorial Day.

Corp. John Wolf of Westminster enlisted on Aug. 11, 1862, in Co. A., for three years or the duration of the war. He was killed in action on 15 June 1863 during the Federal retreat from Winchester, Va.

Pvt. Thomas Harrison Murray enlisted on Aug. 12, 1862, in Co. H. for three years. He was wounded in action on Nov. 27, 1863, at Locust Grove, Va. His medical records note that he received a "Gunshot wound of knee joint of right leg, ball entering in its external aspect of one inch below the external edge of the patella, opening the joint and passing inwards lodging in the humerus." A Federal surgeon amputated the leg on Dec. 8 but Murray died on Dec. 19.

William "Billy" Burns enlisted as an ordnance sergeant in Co. A. on Aug. 12, 1862, for three years. Burns was commissioned a second lieutenant on Sept. 8 1862. He was killed in action on Sept. 19, 1864, at Winchester, Va. The Westminster Grand Army of the Republic Post was named in his honor.

Thomas Ocker of Westminster enlisted as 1st sergeant in Co. C. on Aug. 18, 1862, for three years. He was promoted to captain on Jan. 23, 1865. Capt. Ocker was wounded at Petersburg, Va., on April 2, 1865. His medical records show that he received a bullet wound in the knee

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which required an amputation. He died in the 6th Army Corps Field Hospital at City Point, Va., on May 4, 1865. His body and personal effects were handed over to friends.

Harry J. Shellman, editor of the *American Sentinel* and brother of Mary B. Shellman, praised the ladies of Westminster for their 1868 observance. His words seem appropriate as we prepare for tomorrow’s observance: “We hope this custom, so beautiful in its idea, will be continued as no more fitting tribute could be paid to the noble dead. May our countrymen never forget to give the laurel wreath to the living soldiers or to strew flowers over the departed braves.”

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: Corp. John Wolf, Co. A, 6th Regiment, Maryland Volunteer Infantry. Killed in action June 15, 1863.

Photo caption: Sgt. Thomas Hanson Murray, Co. F, 6th Regiment, Maryland Volunteer Infantry. Died of wounds December 19, 1863.

Photo caption: 2nd Lt. William “Billy” Burns, Co. A, 6th Regiment, Maryland Volunteer Infantry. Killed in action September 19, 1864.

Photo caption: Capt. Thomas Ocker, Co. A, 6th Regiment, Maryland Volunteer Infantry. Died of wounds, May 4, 1865.