

Carroll Yesterday

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Origins of Memorial Day and Grand Army of the Republic

By Mary Ann Ashcraft

As Memorial Day approaches, it is worth taking a deeper look at this important holiday, both as it is observed across the country and here in Carroll County. Its roots lie in America's Civil War, but its interpretation has expanded to honor those who served the country in all wars. The name changed from "Decoration Day" to "Memorial Day" many years ago. A few former Confederate states still commemorate the role of their veterans on special days which do not coincide with the national holiday.

Carroll County will celebrate Memorial Day this year on May 29th with a parade in Westminster ending with a ceremony at Westminster Cemetery. Small flags will decorate the graves of soldiers from all of America's wars there and in other cemeteries across the county. Carroll's tradition, dating to 1868, is one of the longest to be continuously observed in the United States. It owes much to Westminster-born Mary Bostwick Shellman and her desire to honor Union veterans, but she had support from local citizens and the veterans themselves, especially those who later joined the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.).

What was the G.A.R.? For former Union soldiers and sailors of the Civil War, it was what the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars are to veterans of our more recent wars. Founded in 1866 by a former Union Army surgeon and a chaplain, the fraternal organization kept alive the camaraderie of brothers in arms. It also preserved the memory of those killed in battle, aided their widows and orphans, helped men who came home crippled in mind and body, and fought for pension increases or other benefits. Although not a political organization, the G.A.R. exerted significant influence on behalf of Union veterans and their dependents.

Members wore special uniforms and their posts (local chapters) were organized along the lines of military units with commanders, quartermasters, chaplains, and other officers. Their rituals were based on aspects of Freemasonry. Over the years, members met locally at their posts, at encampments (reunions) at the state level, and at 83 national encampments. The latter were huge affairs, especially during the 1880s and 1890s, when they attracted tens of thousands of members who flooded cities like Boston, Denver, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Women participated as members of auxiliaries such as the Women's Relief Corps or the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic. They, too, attended encampments.

By 1890, approximately half a million men were G.A.R. members and represented 8,000 posts across the country, principally in former Northern states. Five presidents—Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Harrison, and McKinley—were members. Ironically, Garfield and McKinley were both killed by bullets but long after the war had ended.

Carroll County's four G.A.R. posts – Burns in Westminster, Pickett in Winfield, Thaddeus Stevens in New Windsor, and Miller in Taneytown—were founded in the 1880s. The Burns Post, largest of the four, was named for William H. Burns who died at the Battle of Winchester,

Virginia, in October, 1864. Its record books, held at the Historical Society of Carroll County, list members' names, date of enlistment, regiment and company, wounds suffered, and often death dates. Minutes provide glimpses into its activities within the community for over 30 years.

The Pickett Post was named for Corporals Noah and Celious A. Pickett, two of the many Carroll County men who made the ultimate sacrifice during fierce fighting in Virginia in May 1864. Thaddeus Stevens, a fiery abolitionist from Pennsylvania who served in the U.S. House of Representatives, lent his name to the New Windsor post which was formed by local African Americans who joined the United States Colored Infantry. Unfortunately, little is known about Taneytown's Miller Post, including the source of its name. Posts usually bore the names of fallen soldiers, political heroes, or significant battles.

In 1884, over 2,000 members of Pennsylvania G.A.R. posts encamped near State College, erecting a small city of tents and celebrating their reunion as follows: "Eating, drinking, singing, dancing and a general abandonment of all else to pleasure, was the order of the day." Encampments at both the state and national level were a mixture of serious business with fun. The horrors of the Civil War must have seemed a hundred years away.

On a more serious note, it is possible that one of Carroll's posts helped widow Susan Angel Lynn of Middleburg whose husband, Samuel, died late in the war. When Samuel enlisted in 1862, he left behind a pregnant wife and six children. The following year Susan lost her newborn child and three little daughters. Although Samuel survived many hard-fought engagements, his luck ran out in February 1865 at the Battle of Hatcher's Run. To the best of anyone's knowledge, his body rests at Poplar Grove National Cemetery near Petersburg, Virginia, with about 4,000 other "unknowns" killed there in 1864 and 1865.

In 1877, 15 years after Samuel Lynn enlisted, Susan still was owed some of the bounty money due him. She wrote officials asking for financial help. "[After] the sad news of Mr. Lynn's death my nerves give way & I was unable to read for several years or no about the laws that was passed by congress." She died ten years later and was laid to rest beside her daughters in the Mt. Union Lutheran Cemetery, Middleburg.

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Image 1: Statue atop the grave of Frederick Richter in Westminster Cemetery. This was standard piece of statuary placed on a grave or erected in a community park as a memorial to local soldiers. Credit: Submitted photo.



Image 2: Members of Winfield's Pickett Post, G.A.R., pose in their G.A.R. uniforms long after the Civil War. Credit: Historical Society of Carroll County.