

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Confederate Memorial Day"

Carroll County Times article for 2 June 1995

By Jay A. Graybeal

The last time I wrote a column about Memorial Day, a reader asked why I never wrote about the Confederate Memorial Day. Although the holiday is not observed in Maryland, perhaps as many as 20,000 Marylanders fought for the Confederacy. Of these, at least 100 were from Carroll County. A thorough description of the holiday can be found in *The Book of Days* by Jane M. Hatch:

Although the idea of a memorial day, and of decorating the graves of the dead, is ancient, the institution of a purely American memorial day grew out of the desolation and heartbreak of the Civil War. There are contradictory claims as to where the first memorial day observance took place. Claimants include Vicksburg, Mississippi; Boalsburg, Pennsylvania; Petersburg, Virginia; Columbus, Mississippi; Waterloo, New York; Richmond, Virginia; and Charleston, South Carolina. It is certain, however, that all of the early observances grew out of spontaneous individual acts toward the end of, or just after, the Civil War. Confederate Memorial Day, widely observed in southern states, which were largely members of the Confederacy, is marked on a number of different dates - among them the fourth Monday in April (Alabama and Mississippi); May 10, the anniversary of the 1865 apprehension of Jefferson Davis by Federal cavalry (North Carolina and South Carolina); and June 3, Jefferson Davis' birthday (Kentucky and Louisiana).

April 26 is a legal holiday in Florida and Georgia. On this date in 1865, two notable events took place. One was the final surrender of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston to the Union army's General William T. Sherman at what is now known as Bennett Place State Historic Site, near Durham, North Carolina. That historic encounter took place 17 days after the war's near-conclusion with the surrender of General Robert E. Lee, commander in chief of Confederate forces, to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia.

On the same day that Johnston and Sherman were meeting near Durham, some women in Vicksburg, Mississippi, were performing a gesture of private grief and salutation by decorating the graves of soldiers who had fallen in the course of the conflict. In so doing, Sue Landon Vaughan and her companions paid tribute to those killed before the end of the 47-day siege of strategically located Vicksburg on July 4, two years earlier. What is now known as Vicksburg National Cemetery is situated two miles north of the bluff-tip city that dominated the Mississippi valley in the crucial early days of the Civil War. Interred within the cemetery's borders are more than 18,000 war dead, nearly 13,000 of them unidentified. They include not only those who lost their lives at Vicksburg, but also many who died within a 150-mile radius of that center. Vicksburg - partially surrounded by a crescent-shaped, 1,740-acre National Military Park on the site of the remarkably preserved defenses and siege lines - brings the saga, heroism, and tragedy of the war alive for today's visitors as much as any city in the nation.

Another of the important early observances of Confederate Memorial Day took place on April 25, 1866, in Columbus, Mississippi, where Friendship Cemetery houses the remains of men killed during the battle of Shiloh in 1862 and of others who died in the Columbus Military Hospital. Included in their number were between 1,400 and 1,500 Confederate soldiers and between 40 and 100 Union soldiers who died as prisoners of war.

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Like other early observances, the one at Columbus was spontaneous. During the early spring of 1866, several local women had busied themselves with tending the graves of the Confederate dead. Inspired by their example, other women joined them in a public memorial on April 25. All who participated carried with them spring flowers with which to decorate the graves. They arrived at the cemetery in a procession led by young girls in white dresses. These were followed by wives and widows dressed in black, and by carriages bearing elderly participants. At the graves, members of the procession formed themselves into a square while they listened to a prayer and a commemorative speech before placing their flowers on the graves of their dead. As if with a single spontaneous impulse they then remembered the Union dead who also lay nearby and turned to lay magnolia blossoms upon the graves of their former enemies.

Word of the generous gesture spread rapidly, evoking an appreciative response in the North. Horace Greeley's New York Tribune commented:

The women of Columbus, Mississippi, have shown themselves impartial in their offerings to the memory of the dead. They strewed flowers alike on the graves of the Confederate and of the National soldiers. Francis Miles Finch, a young attorney in Ithaca, New York, reacted with a poem called "The Blue and the Gray." Reprinted in newspapers, memorized by students, and widely discussed throughout the nation, it appeared originally in the September 1867 issue of the Atlantic Monthly and read in part as follows:

By the flow of the inland river,
Whence the fleets of iron have fled,
Where the blades of the grave grass quiver,
Asleep are the ranks of the dead;
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment day;
Under the one, the Blue;
Under the other, the Gray
From the silence of sorrowful hours
The desolate mourners go,
Lovingly laden with flowers
Alike for the friend and the foe;
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment day;
Under the rose, the Blue;
Under the lilies, the Gray
Sadly, but not with upbraiding,
The generous deed was done;
In the storm of the years that are fading
No braver battle was won;
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment day;
Under the blossoms, the Blue;
Under the garlands, the Gray.

Apart from the more widespread observances on April 26, May 10, or June 3, some individual communities have settled upon their own dates for marking Confederate Memorial Day. The choice of

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date is often tied to an event of local historical importance. Winchester, Virginia, for example, observes it on the anniversary of the death of General Turner Ashby, and Petersburg, Virginia, commemorates the anniversary of its own hours of defensive glory. The rest of the state of Virginia observes Confederate Memorial Day on a date coinciding with that of the national Memorial Day. (A number of southern states join officially in the national observance on May 30, observing an additional and separate Confederate Memorial Day. This is true of Florida, North Carolina, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Tennessee.) While the holiday is not observed in Maryland, local families have honored the graves of those who wore the gray in the War Between the States.

Photo Caption: Pvt. Mark Owings Shriver, Co. K, 1st Virginia Cavalry, C.S.A., c.1861. Pvt. Shriver's company became Co. K, 1st Maryland Cavalry, C.S.A. in July 1864. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection.