The Origins of Memorial Day

You may know that this year marks the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the American Civil War. However, as we observe Memorial Day this weekend, you may be suprised to know that the origins of Memorial Day can be traced back to the Civil War. By order of General John A. Logan, ‘Decoration Day' was first widely observed by Americans in 1868. On this day, citizens, friends, and family would decorate the

graves of fallen Union and Confederate soldiers to honor their memory. In 1971, Congress officially declared Memorial Day a national holiday.

Memorial Day has become a rich American tradition that honors the valor, courage, and bravery of our fallen soldiers. As we remember all those who gave the ultimate sacrifice to preserve our country and our freedoms, I'm always reminded of a letter written by First Sergeant Aaron T. McNaghten, a Union soldier serving in the 62nd Ohio Volunteer Infantry.

I have included an excerpt of the letter below. Sgt. McNaghten wrote this letter on July 8, 1863, from Folly Island, S.C., on the day before he gave his life in defense of his nation at the Second Battle of Fort Wagner, famously recreated in the movie "Glory".

Head Quarters Co. D. 62nd Regt O.V.I

Folly Island S.C.
July 8, 1863

Dear Parents, Brother + Sisters,

This evening I will attempt to address you probily for the last time: and in so doing it is a pleasure to know that if it is the last time I lost my life in helping to defend a Government which has protected you and me since our existence and hope it may yet stand the storm and be handed down to succeeding generations of man for ages yet to come: One reason why I write this is because on tomorrow the Greate Battle is to take place and there is no telling who is to be numbered among the dead and if I should be one of the number. I wish you to know how I feel about meeting death in this critical hour. All I have to say I have no fears as regards my eternal destination As I believe God does all things well and he will take care of me in the last hour of death. When I go into the battle my trust will be in the God who directs and works all Battles and my last hopes will be of meeting these loved ones at home in a better country where wars are not knowen and friends never part: and I make one more request that is to not mourn after me for it is gods work that has been fulfilled and no one should murmur at his doings or teachings: I have sent home some little money since I have been in the service and left some with you when I entered the field besides some property.

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A few more words and then I close remember my regards to all my acquaintances tell them I do not harbor a hard thought to no man on earth. but tell them who all in opposition to this war that sooner or later they will see there folly and that all true men look upon them as workers of Iniqinty: Now a few words to Sisters Millie, Rebecca Ellie and Brother James I wish you to remember and obey your dear parents and live in the fear of God. That when you come to die you may rejoice that you lived a Godly life and hope to meet you in the world where parting is never Knowen. I now bid you all an affectionate farewell may the lord bless you and protect you in the prayers and wishes of your unworthy but affectinate Son and Brother. I now subscribe myself in my full name for the last time on earth.

Aaron T. McNaghten
1st Sergt Co D 62nd Regt
Ohio Vol. Inft.

I hope you take a few moments to honor the sacrifice of our Soldiers, Airmen, Marines, Sailors, and Coastguardsmen, and reflect on the great meaning of their service and contributions to the United States and her eternally grateful citizens.

Honoring the memory of our fallen is at the very core of what it is to be an American, and for that I am proud, humbled, and grateful. I hope you enjoy your holiday weekend and never forget the service of those who have defended our nation and paid the ultimate sacrifice.

I remain respectfully,

JOHN CAMPBELL

History of Memorial Day

History of Memorial Day - U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

About the American Flag - Joint Committee on Printing, U.S. Congress

Support Our Troops

Help your Country - USA.gov

USO - United Service Organizations

Send a Message to the Troops - Department of Defense

Volunteer to help Veterans - Department of Veterans Affairs