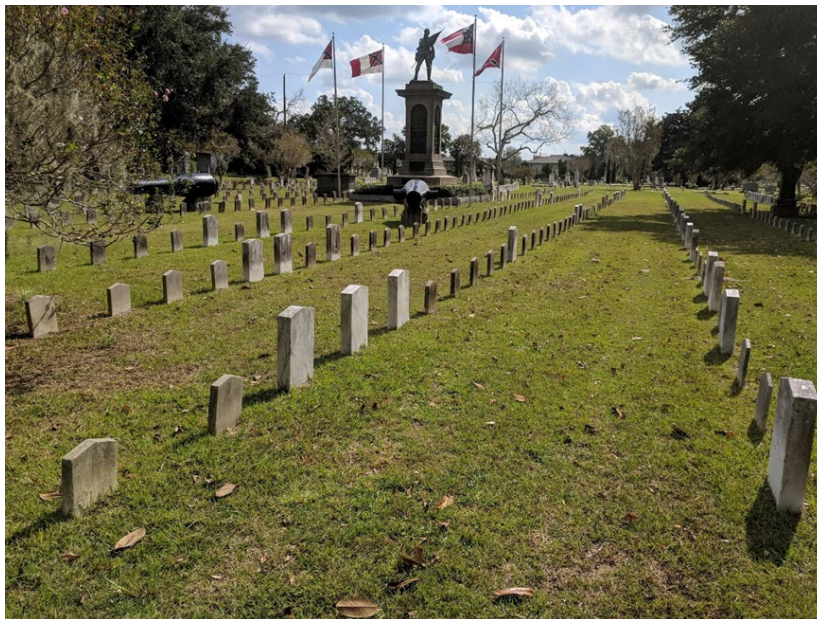


STANDARD DEVIATIONS: The Real Memorial Day

Greetings,

The custom of honoring the lives lost in military service goes back centuries if not millennia. Greek and Roman cultures decorated graves of soldiers with flowers and held feasts and festivals in their honor. The Athenian general Pericles is credited as far back as 431 B.C. with tribute for war dead of the Peloponnesian War.



{Confederate graves in Charleston, S.C.}

The history of Memorial Day in the United States is complex. Many sites claim to be originators of the American observance. More than 20 different towns make arguments for being first. Waterloo, New York, is officially recognized (1966 by LBJ) as the home of Memorial Day. President Johnson's recognition of Waterloo's centennial celebration first marked May 30th as the day of holiday; and the date was ratified in 1971 as the last Monday of May.

Memorial Day "officially" dates back to an 1868 ceremony in Decatur, Illinois, when Maj. Gen. John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic, a fraternal organization composed of veterans of the Union Army, called for a national "Decoration Day" to adorn the graves of the Union dead with flowers.

But the origin is actually linked to another event. On May 1, 1865, a mass burial site in Charleston, South Carolina was the site of the earliest commemoration. During the final year of the war, the Confederates had converted a plantation horse track, the Washington Race Course



and Jockey Club, into an outdoor prison. Union soldiers were kept in horrible conditions in the interior of the track; at least **257 died of exposure, infection and disease** and were buried in a mass grave behind the grandstand.

In April, 1865, twenty-eight black workmen went to the site, re-buried the Union dead properly, and built a high fence around the cemetery. They whitewashed the fence and built an archway over an entrance on which they inscribed the words, "*Martyrs of the Race Course.*" 10,000 freed slaves and U.S. Colored Troops paraded and decorated the new graves with flowers, May 1, 1865.



{Union POWs were held on the race course grounds; hundreds died from disease.}

African Americans across the South shaped the ceremony in its early days. It became popular as “Decoration Day”. White southerners who had supported the Confederacy promoted a different day as “Memorial Day” either May 30 or the last Sunday in April.

Of the 179,000 black men who served the Union forces, 30,000 (~20%) died of infection or disease. **Of the 700,000 total, who died in the war, 400,000 (57%) died from disease, infection and “sickness”**. J. Julian Chisholm, author of A Manual of Military Surgery (1861) wrote, the *“fire of an enemy never decimates an opposing army. Disease is the fell destroyer of armies, and stalks at all times through encampments. Where balls have destroyed hundreds, insidious diseases, with their long train of symptoms, and quiet, noiseless progress, sweep away thousands.”* Diarrhea/Dysentery, Typhoid Fever, Malaria, Fevers, Syphilis/Gonorrhea, Tuberculosis, Scurvy, Abscesses (septicemia), Measles and Mumps are all



referenced as diseases of the Civil War. Many historians argue that **poor hand-washing by troops and surgeons played a major role in deciding the outcome of the war.**



The real Memorial Day is a reminder of risk and hazards with communicable disease. This year, 2020, may prove to be a landmark year for re-discovering the importance of quarantine, pathogen awareness, and biosafety. COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons and sites where populations are confined in close quarters (nursing homes, cruise ships, processing plants) illustrate the risk and hazard of transmission, just as seen in Charleston, S.C. in 1865, during the Civil War. When will we recognize the risk and learn the lessons of infectious disease?

Many people feel that we are losing sight of the meaning behind Memorial Day and treat it as the first long weekend of summer instead of remembering our fallen. I hope you have a day that allows you to be safe with your families and give respect to those who served to protect. Our tribute should also act as a reminder of the importance of good hygiene and biosafety.

"What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others." - Pericles

Have a great week and be safe,

Bryan

