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History Happened Here: From Decoration Day to Memorial Day — honoring the fallen vets over the years

By Andrew Amelinckx

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The procession moved up Warren Street in Hudson toward the cemetery with solemnity, while the band played a mournful march.

Once there the residents swept away the leaves and debris from the graves and laid the crosses, which were entwined with flowers, against the headstones.

Here and there children, some too young to have witnessed the conflagration that had torn America apart, ran about with garlands of flowers that they strung amongst the graves.

It was May 30, 1873 and Hudson was observing its first official Decoration Day. Earlier that month New York Gov. John Dix had declared the day a state holiday, adjured New Yorkers to decorate the graves of dead Union soldiers and to solemnize the occasion "with fitting observances" in "remembrance of the gallant dead who gave their lives for the preservation of the Union."

There are a number of conflicting stories on how the holiday first came to be observed, from freed slaves who reinterrred Union soldiers from a mass grave in South Carolina in 1865 to Southern women decorating the graves of their fallen Confederate soldiers.

President Lyndon B. Johnson even got into the tussle, declaring in 1966 that the birthplace of Memorial Day was Waterloo, NY, on the 100th anniversary of that city's first event.

Suffice to say that the holiday's official start date began on May 5, 1868, with a proclamation by General John A. Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic.

"The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet church-yard in the land," began the declaration.

By the 1880s Memorial Day was starting to replace Decoration Day as the holiday's name, but didn't fully come into complete usage until World War II. One can see the name shift in a Chatham Courier front page story from 1895 where in the accompanying image for the Decoration Day story boldly proclaims Memorial Day. The holiday also moved from one dedicated to the Union dead to all United States military dead after World War I.

Back in Hudson on that first Decoration Day in May, 1873, the citizenry left the cemetery and headed to City Hall for the second half of the day's observances.

Walking back down Warren Street many of the former soldiers who had "marched shoulder to shoulder behind the old flag through the Southern battlefields," in the words of the Hudson Weekly Star, talked about their old army days with one another.



Gen. George Sharpe, keynote speaker for Hudson's first Decoration Day, May 30th, 1873. (Contributed photo)

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The keynote speaker at the ceremony in City Hall was Gen. George H. Sharpe, who served on the staff of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and was at Appomattox Court House when Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered his army April 9, 1865.

Sharpe's speech that day was short on bravado, instead focusing on the solemnity of the occasion.

Decoration Day, he said, was only the second national anniversary celebrated in America, the first being July 4, a holiday that was "always a day of boasting. There was no tinge of sadness about it."

In opposition to July 4, said the general, Decoration Day would "teach us humility, as well as thanksgiving."

Sharpe, who seemed to be a modest man, told the crowd that they could have chosen any one of the great orators of the day to come to Hudson, but instead they chose "one to come who marched with the men behind the flag."

The general, who was born in Kingston in 1828, was a lawyer who studied at Yale College and served as Secretary of Legation at Vienna before joining the Union Army in 1861 as captain of volunteers in the 20th New York Infantry.

He rose through the ranks, fought at many of the major battles of the Civil War and served on the staffs of Generals Joseph Hooker, George G. Meade, as well as with Grant.

Grant set great stock by Sharpe's advice and put him in charge of paroling the Confederate Army.

Sharpe had seen plenty of death during his tenure as a soldier, and this seemed to color his speech.

"They died all over this broad land," he said of the Union soldiers. "These men died in prisons, in the lonely woods, amid peals of artillery or along the picket lines."

He recalled seeing the inmates of Andersonville prison after they were freed.

Andersonville was a notorious prison camp in Georgia where thousands of Union soldiers died from malnutrition and disease. He said it was "heart-sickening" to see their "skeletal forms." But was awed to see "with what eagerness they greeted once more the flag they so much loved."

During the events surrounding the surrender of Lee's army at Appomattox, he recalled Grant's order to immediately begin to feed the starving Confederates.

"This is the spirit which should control all these ceremonies," he said.

While Lee was under Sharpe's supervision they were riding north from the site of the battle when the two men came upon a vista overlooking the encamped Union Army. Sharpe said that the "camp, the Virginia hills and the starry flag altogether" was a moving site, not only for him but for his former enemy as well. "It is the grandest flag on the face of the earth," Sharpe recalled Lee telling him with tears in his eyes.

To reach reporter Andrew Amelinckx call 518-828-1616, ext. 2267 or e-mail aamelinckx@registerstar.com.

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