

Memorial Day

May 30 or Last Monday of May

Memorial Day is the day on which Americans honor those who have died for their country. It is celebrated on May 30th, or on the last Monday in May in order to make a three-day weekend. (On the calendar you may see “Traditional Memorial Day” on May 30th and “Memorial Day Observed” on the last Monday.) It is a legal holiday in most states. And, even though it falls in May, it is usually considered to be the mark of the beginning of summer.

Memorial Day was originally called Decoration Day because it was the day women in the South chose to decorate the graves of men who had died in the Civil War. These women honored the dead of both armies, Union and Confederate. It is thought that Cassandra Oliver Moncure, a Virginia woman of French ancestry, started the movement.

In the northern states, the Grand Army of the Republic, which was an organization of veterans of the Union Army during the Civil War, was in charge of Memorial Day celebrations. The American Legion took over this responsibility after World War I. Today they sell small artificial red poppies around Memorial Day to raise money to help disabled veterans.

Military parades are held on Memorial Day and special programs take place at Gettysburg and at Arlington National Cemetery. A highlight of these programs is often the reading of President Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

Making It Work

Ask your students if any have gone to a cemetery to decorate a grave. Was it a military cemetery? Was it the grave of someone who died in a war? Allow students to share experiences.

Ask students who come from different homelands to tell about ceremonies that honor the people who died in wars in the countries where they used to live. They may have first-hand experiences or they may wish to interview an older relative to get this information. Students may be interested in building an oral history of their family by tape-recording these interviews. (Make sure they get permission before recording an interview, even with a family member.)

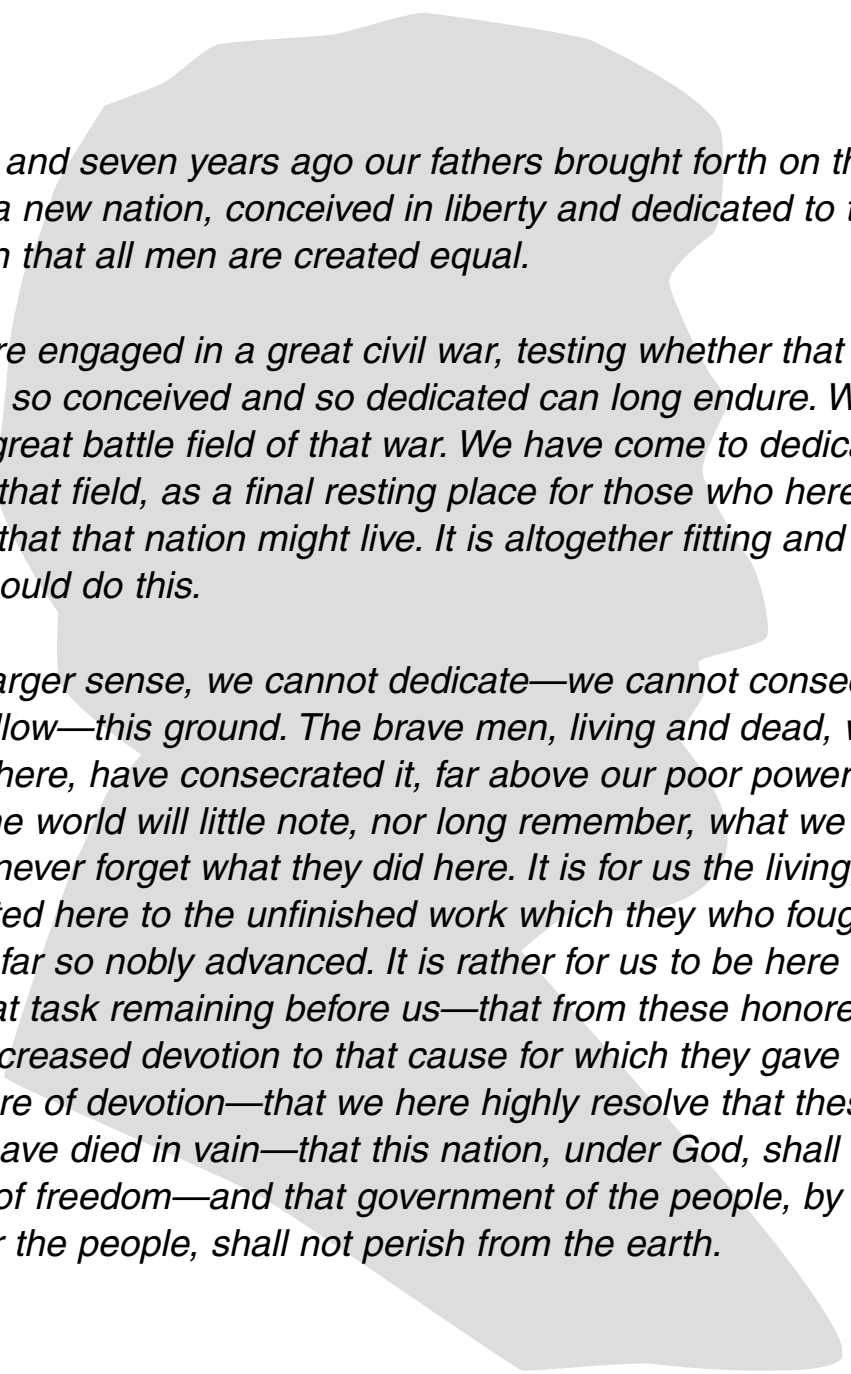
If there are no representatives of other backgrounds in your classroom, have students do some research in the library to find out how other countries honor those who died in wars. Students can write reports or give oral reports to the class.

Read Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to your students. Encourage them to memorize it. (See page 216.)

Find out about the American Legion and its use of red poppies. Often the American Legion holds competitions concerning patriotism, and poppies are a common theme. Find out if there is one such competition in your area.

The Gettysburg Address

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln gave a short but moving speech that has come to be known as the “Gettysburg Address.” The time was two years before the end of the Civil War, and he was dedicating a cemetery at the town of Gettysburg. Legend has it that he wrote out his remarks on the back of an old envelope while riding to Gettysburg in a train. Whether or not this is true, his remarks have gone down in history as one of the most powerful speeches ever given. Following is the complete text of the speech as it has been recorded.



Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battle field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.