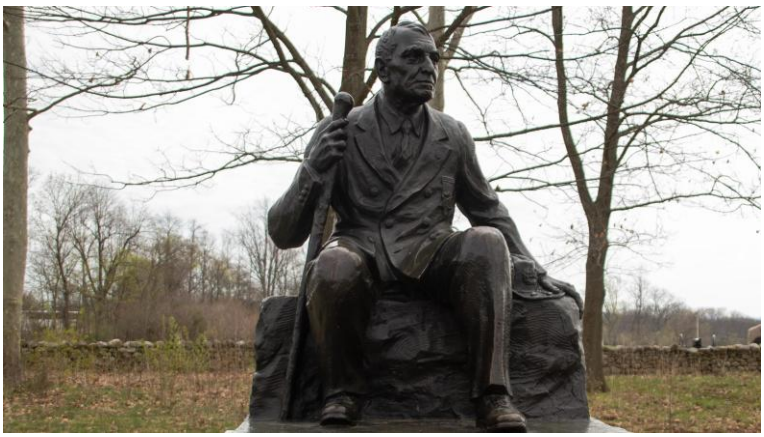
How Remembrance Day Began at Gettysburg

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On September 12, 1956, the National Auxiliary to Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War dedicated a monument at Gettysburg to the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). The bronze figure depicts Albert Woolson, a former Union Army drummer and bugler who became the last surviving member of the GAR. Woolson died on August 2, just six weeks before the dedication.

On November 16, 1957, more than 300 members walked from the High Water Mark to the GAR memorial in Ziegler's Grove for Gettysburg's first GAR Remembrance Day. For years, Pennsylvania members of the Sons and the Auxiliary had marked the anniversary of the cemetery dedication with a banquet near November 19. The procession gave them a way to remember the veterans at their new monument. The Sons of Veterans Reserve helped organize the observance from its first year.



The GAR memorial at Gettysburg depicts Albert Woolson. Photograph from the National Park Service.

Lincoln and the Unfinished Work

The Battle of Gettysburg, fought July 1 through 3, 1863, left an estimated 51,000 soldiers killed, wounded, captured, or missing. Many of the dead were buried in makeshift graves. With the backing of Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin, Gettysburg attorney David Wills secured about 17 acres on Cemetery Hill for a permanent burial place for the Union dead. Other Northern states helped establish what became Soldiers' National Cemetery.

Landscape designer William Saunders arranged the graves in a broad semicircle. The dead were grouped by state, with officers and enlisted men buried side by side. The uniform markers gave each grave the same simple dignity. Visitors can still see in that design something of the equality Lincoln spoke about that November.

At the cemetery dedication on November 19, 1863, Edward Everett spoke for about two hours. Abraham Lincoln spoke for only a few minutes. In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln recalled the nation's founding promise that "all men are created equal" and asked the living to take up the "unfinished work" of those who had fought there.

How Union Veterans Remembered

Union veterans founded the Grand Army of the Republic in 1866. Its posts gave veterans a place to gather, helped veterans and their families, and kept the memory of their service alive. In 1868, GAR Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan called on posts to decorate the graves of fallen Union comrades on May 30. That observance helped establish Decoration Day, which became Memorial Day.

Logan left each post free to decide how to observe the day. His order asked members to protect the graves from neglect and renew their pledge to help the widows and children of fallen soldiers and sailors. A community could honor its dead in a way that felt fitting to the people who had known them. The flowers on the graves were one visible part of a promise to care for those the war had left behind.

At Gettysburg, remembrance took shape in stone and bronze. The Soldiers' National Monument, dedicated in 1869, stands among the graves on Cemetery Hill. The Pennsylvania State Memorial, dedicated in 1910, bears the names of more than 34,000 Pennsylvania soldiers believed to have taken part in the battle. It's easy to remember Gettysburg by its dates and generals. Stand before those bronze tablets, though, and the battle becomes a story of individual men who had families, homes, and lives beyond the battlefield.



The Pennsylvania State Memorial at Gettysburg. Photograph from the National Park Service.

Look closely at the tablets and you'll see asterisks beside the names of men killed or mortally wounded in the battle. After the dedication, veterans and families pointed out errors and omissions in the rosters. The memorial commission ordered corrections, and hundreds of names were removed or added. The National Park Service now offers a searchable database of the names on the memorial. A name on a bronze tablet can be the beginning of a family's search for the person behind it.

The Reunions of 1913 and 1938

More than 50,000 Union and Confederate veterans gathered at Gettysburg for the battle's fiftieth anniversary in 1913. The government paid their rail fare, bringing veterans from across the country to the Pennsylvania town. Photographs of men in civilian coats and hats reaching for one another's hands helped make the reunion a symbol of national healing.



Union and Confederate veterans shake hands at the 1913 Gettysburg reunion. Photograph from the Library of Congress.

By the seventy-fifth anniversary in 1938, 1,845 veterans attended. Time had changed what it took to bring them to Gettysburg. Each veteran could bring an attendant at government expense. When the trains arrived, organizers met the veterans and took them by bus to a temporary camp, where National Guardsmen and Boy Scouts helped them reach their quarters. The camp had its own kitchens and a field hospital.

On July 3, 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the Eternal Light Peace Memorial. Its inscription, "Peace Eternal in a Nation United," expressed the hope behind the reunion. The flame atop the memorial gave visitors a way to remember that hope after the veterans had gone home.

The reunions also invite us to ask whose stories received less attention. When the Confederate army invaded Pennsylvania in 1863, Black residents of Gettysburg fled for fear of enslavement. Among them were Abraham Brian, a farmer on Cemetery Ridge, and his family. Their story belongs alongside the images of veterans shaking hands. It brings home what slavery and the fight for freedom meant to people who lived on the ground where the armies met.

What We Carry Forward

The Auxiliary's work at Gettysburg grew from a history that began while the veterans were still alive. In Philadelphia in 1883, the first Ladies Aid Society formed to support the Sons of Veterans. The Sons officially recognized it as their Auxiliary the next year. Similar societies formed in other states, and the first National Encampment of the Auxiliary was held in Akron, Ohio, in 1887.

By 1956, that commitment brought members back to Pennsylvania. During the national encampments of the Sons and the Auxiliary in Harrisburg, twenty buses and many private cars carried attendees to Gettysburg for the unveiling of the GAR memorial. According to the Sons' account of the dedication, about 3,000 people witnessed the parade and ceremony. The smaller procession to the monument the following November became the first observance of the tradition we continue today.

Gettysburg marks the anniversary of the cemetery dedication on November 19, known as Dedication Day. Remembrance Day is held on the Saturday nearest that date. For the Auxiliary and the other Allied Orders, the wreath-laying at the GAR memorial brings us back to the place where our observance began.

Each time we place a wreath, tend a grave, or help a family learn the story behind a soldier's name, we carry a little of that unfinished work forward.

Sources and Further Reading

The Origins of Remembrance Day · 1958 National Encampment Proceedings

GAR Memorial · Albert Woolson

Battle of Gettysburg · Soldiers' National Cemetery · Gettysburg Address

The Making of Soldiers' National Cemetery

A Brief History of the GAR · Logan's General Order No. 11

Soldiers' National Monument · Pennsylvania Memorial

Gettysburg and the 1913 Reunion · The Great Reunion of 1938

Caroline E. Janney's Remembering the Civil War · David W. Blight's Race and Reunion

History of the National Auxiliary · National Cemetery Virtual Tour

African Americans during the Gettysburg Campaign · Dedication Day

Roosevelt's Address at the Peace Memorial · Peace Memorial Inscription