



## Lost Heroes; Finding Worth in the Sacrifices of War

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The Blue and The Gray  
Francis Miles Finch (1827-1907)

By the flow of the inland river,  
Whence the fleets of iron have fled,  
Where the blades of the grave-grass quiver,  
Asleep are the ranks of the dead:  
Under the sod and the dew,  
Waiting the judgment-day;  
Under the one, the Blue,  
Under the other, the Gray

From the silence of sorrowful hours  
The desolate mourners go,  
Lovingly laden with flowers  
Alike for the friend and the foe;  
Under the sod and the dew,  
Waiting the judgment-day;  
Under the roses, the Blue,  
Under the lilies, the Gray.

No more shall the war cry sever,  
Or the winding rivers be red;  
They banish our anger forever  
When they laurel the graves of our dead!  
Under the sod and the dew,  
Waiting the judgment-day,  
Love and tears for the Blue,  
Tears and love for the Gray.

Readings:

"This was the first Memorial Day. African Americans invented Memorial Day in Charleston, South Carolina. What you have there is black Americans recently freed from slavery announcing to the world with their flowers, their feet, and their songs what the war had been about. What they basically were creating was the Independence Day of a Second American Revolution."<sup>[15]</sup>

["Blight, David W., Lecture: "To Appomattox and Beyond." Oyc.yale.edu.](#)

Three northern philanthropic societies paid the salaries of Redpath's teachers [in Charleston]: the National Freedmen's Aid Association, the New England Freedmen's Aid Society and the American Missionary Association. According to one visiting observer, Redpath's "sagacity and firmness" brought about a system of cooperation among the freedmen's groups, rather than competition that flared in many other southern states. Redpath's secular attitude, however, did generate some tensions with the American Missionary Association's Charleston manager,...[who] complained that Redpath had hired teachers rumored to be "godless or Unitarians."

Forgotten Firebrand: James Redpath and the Making of Nineteenth-century America By John R. McKivigan 2008

Good morning. Indeed, let us stand upon the rock for freedom, justice and liberty. Thank you choir, musicians, Matt & Jera.

I come to share a story of Memorial Day.

It's a single story that deserves to be told from three perspectives, each showing its own facet of sacrifice in the search for truth and meaning.

We'll look in turn at the soldiers, the freed slaves and the abolitionists. Honoring all their sacrifices in the responsible search for truth and meaning as part of our first principle.

So, Memorial Day,

Officially and rightly it is the weekend we set aside to honor fallen men & women who had been in the service of our country.

Culturally Memorial Day has become the holiday weekend marking the beginning of summer, the pools open, we picnic, veterans wear regalia, communities have parades and many decorate cemeteries. All these are fitting observations of our national day of remembrance.

Since World War I, the whole nation has come together each year on Memorial Day to honor all of our fallen and decorate their graves with flowers. Some of you may remember the red poppies.

However, before WWI the practice of decorating graves was an almost exclusively Northern or Union practice though some southern states did have a separate day for decorating confederate graves. It was principally an ongoing expression of loss and remembrance for the too many dead of the Civil War.

Memorial Day or Decoration Day, was first officially observed May 30, 1868, when the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers were decorated at Arlington National Cemetery.

In the 1860's many towns and cities, north and south, decorated graves of fallen soldiers.

The sacrifices of the Civil War touched every part of our country with tragic losses of so many lives. Estimates of the toll of the Civil War recently established at about three quarters of a million killed, on both sides. As many as all other American wars combined, that's all wars including up to present day. The Civil War was the country's first war of mass deaths, dead on both sides Americans, proportionally to today's population as if 7 million died.

Most Civil War deaths did not occur on the battlefield, only about a third of the deaths were from combat. Of non-combat deaths a great cause of death was captured soldiers who may have been exposed to starvation, disease and abuse at the hands of their captors, for example at Andersonville, Georgia about 13,000 prisoners died.

So let us turn to Charlestown South Carolina in the spring of 1865, at the time the largest city in the south and occupied by the Union Army. The fire of commitment burned bright that spring. The ceremonies there drew national attention.

During the last year of the war, the planters' horse track, the Washington Race Course and Jockey Club, had been used as an outdoor prison. In sight of houses and buildings of Charleston, Union soldiers were kept in horrible conditions in the interior of the track; more than 250 died of exposure and disease and were buried in mass graves behind the grandstand.

Redpath described: "Accompanied by a few friends, I went out one day and saw their graves; and on them the marks of the hoofs of cattle and horses and of the feet of men. Very sad we felt when we looked on these melancholy red mounds and on this wicked profanation of the resting-places of our martyrs."

The very least we can do for the fallen soldier is to provide a respectful disposition of remains.

There was outrage at the accounts of the prisoners' mistreatment and the disrespected graves. A committee was established to arrange for enclosing the graveyard, about half an acre. Two newly formed local black groups, the "Friends of the Martyrs" the "Patriotic Association of Colored Men," who, without compensation, built and painted a fence for the graveyard with materials donated by the US Army from demolished rebel buildings. The arch at the entrance bore the inscription "Martyrs of the Race Course"

Years later, these dead soldiers were reinterred in national cemeteries and Charleston created a park and named it for a Confederate general.

On the morning of the first of May 1865 a procession of about ten thousand people gathered at the Race Course.

Many bore flowers. Overwhelmingly freed slaves, the procession included soldiers, about three thousand students, teachers, and others black and white. One of the northern freedman's teachers later recalled that each "person in passing threw [their flowers], which had been brought for the purpose of decorating the burial-ground, till it was entirely covered and the earth below could not be seen."

"Quietly the ugly mounds were covered with flowers strewn by black hands which knew only that the dead they were honoring had raised them from a condition of servitude."  
'Road to Reunion 1865-1900' Paul Buck 1937 115

The mass choir sang John Brown's Body, the Star Spangled Banner and other patriotic songs. Preachers preached. Speakers spoke. Soldiers marched and a grand picnic was enjoyed in the infield till dusk.

Among the full brigade of Union infantry participating was the famous 54th Massachusetts and the 34th and 104th U.S. Colored Troops, who performed a special double-columned march around the gravesite. The war was over, and Decoration Day had been founded by African Americans in a ritual of remembrance and consecration. The war, they had boldly announced, had been all about the triumph of their emancipation over a slaveholders' republic, and not about state rights, defense of home, nor merely soldiers' valor and sacrifice.

A jubilee ... a day to honor the dead and celebrate freedom.

The assembly had elected James Redpath chair of the proceedings that day in Charleston.

James Redpath, was a militant abolitionist journalist. As part of Reconstruction he had been appointed superintendent of schools in occupied Charleston. The vast majority of the pupils in those occupation schools were freed slaves that had been forbidden to seek education through their years of bondage. Some schools were integrated but classrooms were not.

Redpath was born in Scotland near the border with England. The family immigrated to America and settled in Michigan. But, he became dissatisfied with agrarian life and took up journalism and the cause of abolition. He was recruited to New York and the New York Tribune by Universalist and abolitionist Horace Greeley. His journalism was often first person and he traveled through the south before the Civil War and reported extensively about the conditions of slaves.

He also became closely involved with the militant abolitionist, John Brown, in Kansas and even carried a firearm as part of that work. Though Redpath didn't participate in Brown's notorious raid on a pro-slavery encampment that resulted in the murder of five, he did

report extensively from bloody Kansas. John Brown was dedicated to starting a slave uprising and was captured and hung after his unsuccessful raid on the armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Brown's militant abolitionism that was widely reported by the likes of Greeley and Redpath contributed much to the public appetite for the Civil War. Redpath also wrote the authorized biography of John Brown. Toward the end of the war he'd been a journalist attached to Sherman's Army, when he was appointed school superintendent.

But, Redpath's tenure as school superintendent didn't last. He left at the end of the year and did not return. He went on to establish a Lyceum Bureau with clients the likes of Emerson & Twain and eventually to become biographer and friend of former Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

Unfortunately, after a few years of effort the country turned away from Reconstruction. Southern society, with northern acquiescence, returned to a segregated and stratified one with blacks excluded and exploited, a legacy we live with today.

While preparing for this sermon I came across many interesting materials, principally website and books, about our history of Memorial Day and consequently the Civil War, Reconstruction, Abolition and the Jim Crow era. I observed a variety of perspectives. I was particularly moved by a 1937 Pulitzer Prize winning history of Reconstruction that coldly and methodically lays out systemic segregation, disenfranchisement, exploitation and outright oppression. It sets forth an eight point American credo of frank racism that may underlie today's issues. (Buck pages 283 & 296)

Some history sites made no mention of the event in Charleston, others presented a strictly military perspective, others recognize the event as a freedom jubilee, others ignored the abolitionists and others gave all the credit to Redpath and the abolitionists.

Those dead prisoners gave their very lives in sacrifice, to preserve their country and free the slaves. Their sacrifices must be honored fully and unreservedly. Like many old veterans, let us be advocates for justice avoiding violence to bring about lasting peace. Fallen soldiers should never be the excuse for further warfare.

The freed slaves had involuntarily sacrificed their freedom and potential. Although they were yoked with segregation and discrimination for decades to come, freeing the slaves from bondage ought be honored and celebrated. We have a lot of work to do to end our heritage of oppression, let us be about that work.

The abolitionists prodded us to reject slavery. They, too, sacrificed to lead the country to reject slavery. Let us honor their contribution too. Those of us who are dissatisfied with the status quo should learn how they struggled against the great injustice of their time.

Let us remember our history, all deserve honor this Memorial Day.  
Pause

The hymn that we're about to sing, 'John Browns Body' is an old one.

It was a frequent marching song of the Union forces.  
It was sung, repeatedly I understand, by the children's choir of three thousand that first Memorial Day in Charleston and it also pays homage to an abolitionist who gave his life in the war to free the slaves.

The verses on the insert in your Order of Service. You'll know the tune.