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Marching in Step: USCT Veterans and the Grand Army of the Republic

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Abstract
For many United States Colored Troops, remembering the Civil War and their comrades who fell in it became an important part of their post-war life. One of the primary opportunities for public expression of remembrance was Decoration Day, now known as Memorial Day. African Americans played a critical part in the creation of this holiday. On May 1, 1865, the newly-freed black residents of Charleston asserted their place in Civil War memory by leading a parade to a recently constructed cemetery for Union prisoners at the city's horseracing course. The procession heaped flowers upon the graves of the honored dead, after which ministers from the town's black congregations gave dedicatory speeches. This event, known among some in the North as the "First Decoration Day," exemplified African American interest in perpetuating the memory of the Civil War. However, the resentment of white Southerners at the time towards this instance of black agency led to the marginalization and eventual forgetting of the event in the mind of the public at large.

Keywords
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Comments
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ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Marching in Step: USCT Veterans and the Grand Army of the Republic

By Ryan Bilger '19

USCT Veterans on Parade, Easton, PA. Postcard. Black veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic were, like their white counterparts, very active in the realms of commemoration and politics. "Decoration Day," the precursor to our modern Memorial Day, officially started with the GAR in 1868, and served both purposes. Courtesy of Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College.

For many United States Colored Troops, remembering the Civil War and their comrades who fell in it became an important part of their post-war life. One of the primary opportunities for public expression of remembrance was Decoration Day, now known as Memorial Day. African Americans played a critical part in the creation of this holiday. On May 1, 1865, the newly-freed black residents of Charleston asserted their place in Civil War memory by leading a parade to a recently constructed cemetery for Union prisoners at the city's horseracing course. The procession heaped flowers upon the graves of the honored dead, after which ministers from the town's black congregations gave dedicatory speeches. This event, known among some in the North as the "First Decoration Day," exemplified African American interest in perpetuating the memory of the Civil War. However, the resentment of white Southerners at the time towards this instance of black agency led to the marginalization and eventual forgetting of the event in the mind of the public at large.

The tradition of Decoration Day took greater hold in the post-war years with the rise of the Grand Army of the Republic, a powerful Union veterans' organization that played a key role in organizing and promoting the memory of the conflict. Though GAR posts

were sometimes self-segregated as a consequence of racial tensions, Decoration Day ceremonies commonly saw posts of both races working in conjunction with one another. For example, soldiers from black and white posts marched together in parades and collaborated on commemorative ceremonies at local cemeteries. In some areas of the Deep South, where former Confederates were outright hostile to any Union commemorations, much less those led by African Americans, black posts had the duty of decorating the thousands of graves of both black and white Union soldiers. Through these actions, African Americans were able to take part in and in some cases direct the formation of Civil War memory.

The procession in Easton, Pennsylvania, that is depicted in this photograph may be an example of USCT participation in a Decoration Day parade. The holiday held great significance for the people of Easton. In 1874, for example, many citizens marched in a procession to the city cemetery and adorned the graves of the fallen. USCT veterans would have likely joined in the parade to show their solidarity with the cause of remembrance. Though no other groups are visible, these men may have been marching along with local white posts, reflecting a collective GAR memory. While these combined commemorations may have been positive in that they broke away some of the barriers of segregation, the fact that they were predominantly directed by the white posts meant that the white narrative of the war generally became the one that was preserved. Instead of the Civil War being labeled clearly as a struggle for freedom and equality for African Americans, the interpretations of the Lost Cause and the "brothers' war" became increasingly popular. Thus, USCT participation in Dedication Day ceremonies and other celebrations of memory was surely positive, but it did not achieve the lasting effect that those veterans would have desired. Instead, narratives took root that minimized the role of race and the service of the USCTs, clearing the way for new forms of institutionalized racism in the South and apathy toward these abuses in the North.

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