



# The Garfield Telegraph

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## First Official National Decoration Day

May 30, 1868

The following is the beginning of the speech given by General James A. Garfield in Arlington Cemetery for the first National Decoration Day.

I am oppressed with a sense of the impropriety of uttering words on this occasion. If silence is ever golden, it must be here beside the graves of fifteen thousand men, whose lives were more significant than speech, and whose death was a poem, the music of which can never be sung. With words we make promises, plighted faith, praise virtue. Promises may not be kept; plighted faith may be broken; and vaunted virtue be only the cunning mask of vice. We do not know one promise these men made, one pledge they gave, one word they spoke; but we do know they summed up and perfected, by one supreme act, the highest virtues of men and citizens. For love of country they accepted death, and thus resolved all doubts, and made immortal their patriotism and their virtue. For the noblest man that lives, there still remains a conflict. He must still withstand the assaults of time and fortune, must still be assailed with temptations, before which lofty natures have fallen; but with these the conflict ended, the victory was won, when death stamped on them the great seal of heroic character, and closed a record which years can never blot.

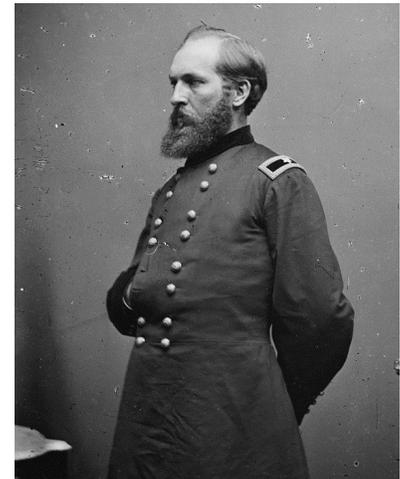


Card from 1908.  
([usmemorialday.org](http://usmemorialday.org))

### History of Decoration Day

Decoration Day dates back to the 1860s, when local groups from the North and South would lay flowers on the graves of the Civil War soldiers that fell in battle. The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), an organization of Union veterans, officially established Decoration Day in 1868.

The name Memorial Day would be used with or in place of Decoration Day over the next few decades, and after World War I, the day came to honor veterans from all wars, not only the Civil War. In 1971, Congress declared Memorial Day to be a national holiday, to be observed the last Monday in May.



James A. Garfield enlisted as a lieutenant colonel in the Union Army in 1861, and retired in 1863 as a Major General. ([loc.gov](http://loc.gov))

### First Military Burial in Arlington Cemetery: May 13th, 1864

Private William Henry Christman enlisted on March 25, 1864 at the age of 20. Two years earlier, his older brother, Barnabus, died in battle at the age of 20. Pvt. Christman served with Company G, 67th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers. On April 30, Pvt. Christman was admitted to Lincoln General Hospital, having fallen ill with measles eight days before. He passed away on May 11, 1864.

The first of many burials on May 13th, Pvt. Christman was laid to rest in Arlington Burial Ground, in what is today Section 27. A month later, Maj. Gen. Montgomery C. Meigs appropriated 200 acres officially for Arlington National Cemetery.

## Authors in the Garfield Library



This print of Ralph Waldo Emerson hangs in the Memorial Library. Garfield's copies of Emerson's works can be found in the Memorial Library.

### Ralph Waldo Emerson born May 25th, 1803

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was a poet, orator, philosopher, and writer, part of the Transcendentalist movement in the 19th century.

Garfield listened to an address Emerson gave during the summer of 1854 in Williamstown, Massachusetts. He wrote about Emerson after hearing him speak that summer day: "...I must say he is the most

startling original thinker I ever heard...I could not sleep that night after hearing his thunder-storm of eloquent thoughts. It made *me* feel so small and insignificant to hear *him*". Garfield said in later years that his intellectual life began as he listened to Emerson's address.

Many of Emerson's works are part of Garfield's extensive book collection at James A Garfield National Historic Site. These books include: *Essays: First Series*, *Essays: Second Series*, *Nature*, *Addresses and Lectures*, *Society and Solitude*, and *Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Five volumes).



This print is found inside Fuller's book: *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. The image is a print of a daguerreotype taken of Margaret Fuller in 1846.

### Margaret Fuller born May 23rd, 1810

Sarah Margaret Fuller Ossoli (1810-1850) was a writer, journalist, literary critic, women's rights advocate, and activist part of the Transcendentalist movement.

Margaret Fuller, as she was known, wrote one of the important early feminist documents of the 19th century: *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Her book was

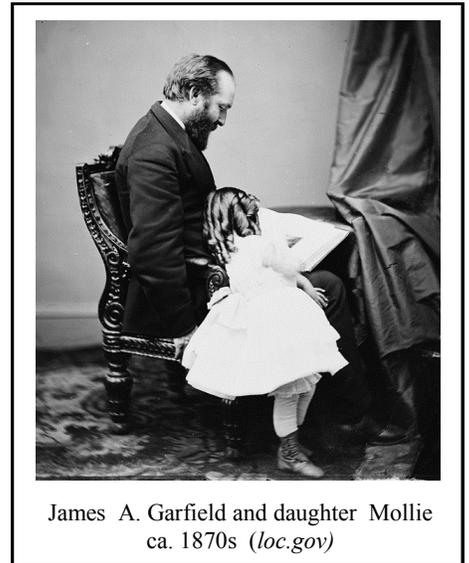
Emerson and Fuller worked together as editors for the literary and philosophical journal *The Dial*, and were close friends throughout their lives.

published in 1845; as a continuation of an essay published in *The Dial* in 1843 titled "The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men, Woman versus Women." Her essay, and later book, focused on gender equality and individualism; ideas that came from the earlier women's rights authors and the transcendentalism movement.

Lucretia Garfield read *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* while she was a student. The copy in the Memorial Library has Lucretia's signature inside the front cover. James A. Garfield read Fuller's works when writing a memorial for his close friend, Almida Booth.

## What would Garfield be reading about in the news this month?

May 24, 1844: Samuel Morse sends the first telegraph message  
 May 13, 1846: President Polk and Congress declare war on Mexico  
 May 20, 1862: President Lincoln signs the Homestead Act  
 May 10, 1865: Confederate President Jefferson Davis is captured  
 May 10, 1869: The Transcontinental Railroad is completed  
 May 17, 1875: The first Kentucky Derby horse race takes place  
 May 21, 1881: Clara Barton starts the American Red Cross



James A. Garfield and daughter Mollie ca. 1870s (*loc.gov*)

**For more information about James A. Garfield NHS:**  
[www.nps.gov/jaga](http://www.nps.gov/jaga)

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