

Today in Columbus History:

On March 10, 1866, Mary Ann Williams (Mrs. Charles J.) secretary of the newly formed Ladies' Memorial Association wrote a letter to the *Columbus Enquirer* and the *Columbus Sun and Times* requesting help in establishing an annual holiday to honor the dead of the recent war by decorating their graves with flowers. This letter set in motion a chain of events that led to the inauguration of the regional "Confederate" Memorial Day as well as the national Memorial Day holiday.

The letter appeared the next day in both papers. Unfortunately, neither one is available on the Digital Library of Georgia site. I am including a portion of the version from the *Columbus Daily Enquirer* that I retrieved from the Columbus Public Library on microfilm.

In the subsequent weeks, newspapers in Atlanta, Augusta, Macon, Milledgeville, Rome, and Savannah reprinted the letter. It also appeared in newspapers in Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. The Wikipedia page for Mary Ann Williams has external links to several of them from free-access newspaper sites.

The letter gave no date for the observance and the editors offered several alternatives. However, another writer (almost certainly Lizzie Rutherford) suggested the 26th of April in the very next issue of the *Columbus Daily Enquirer*, also not available from the Digital Library of Georgia.

Northern newspapers passed along the Southern plans. On April 12, 1866, the *New York Times* announced, "Preparations are being made at various points throughout the South to observe the 26th of April as an anniversary in honor of the rebel dead." The same announcement appeared in the newspapers in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and others.

While most places observed April 26, tributes ranged from April 9 to June 9 that year. People also observed the holiday in different ways. As the intent was to decorate the graves of Southern soldiers, at least one place (Augusta, GA) prevented the decoration of Union graves. That caught the attention of former Union General John A. Logan, who noted that "Traitors in the South have their gatherings, day after day, to strew garlands of flowers on the graves of Rebel soldiers." in a speech to veterans in Salem, Illinois on July 4, 1866.

However, some places like Macon, GA and Columbus, MS decorated Northern graves, as well. Many in the North saw the stories of Southern ladies decorating the graves of Union soldiers as acts of reconciliation. After the third Southern decoration in 1868, General Logan, now the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) adopted the observance and ordered all GAR posts to perform the same tribute for Northern graves on May 30, 1868.

Today, many find the Lost Cause references in the letter troubling. However, like it or not, Mrs. Williams' letter was the spark that started the two holidays. Columbus recognizes the founding of Confederate Memorial Day with a historic marker on 2nd Ave, and monuments on Veterans Parkway, and in Linwood Cemetery. The founding of the national holiday is currently not publicly recognized. However, plans to correct the situation are underway.

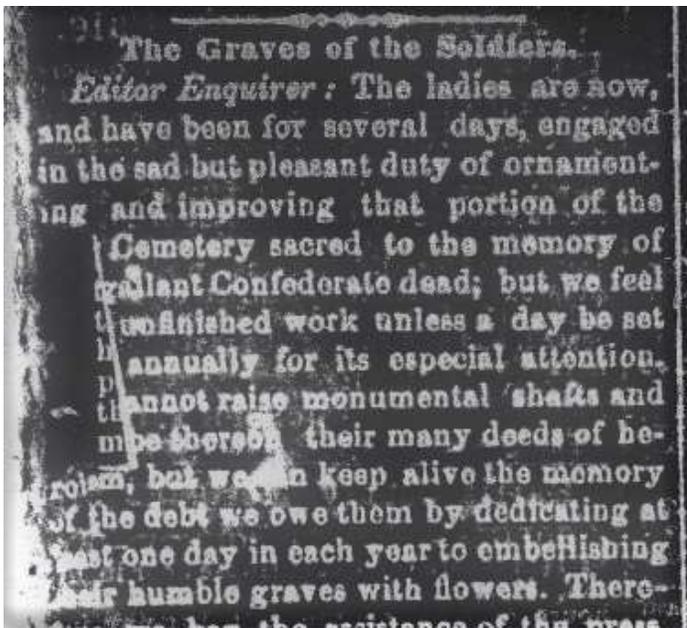
Compiled by Daniel A. Bellware, Muscogee Genealogical Society

Clipping from Georgia Historic Newspapers (GALILEO).

Our weekly snippets of Columbus history are usually based on a few days-worth of searching through the most popular sources for Muscogee County history. Meant to inspire readers to explore more about Columbus history, they are not exhaustive dissertations on the topic and may contain mistakes. If you have corrections or additional information, feel free to share them with the group.



Mrs. Mary Ann Williams from [Mary Ann Williams – Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Ann_Williams)



Mrs. Williams' letter from the *Columbus Daily Enquirer*, March 11, 1866, from microfilm at the Columbus Public Library.



Early 1900's postcards highlighting the reconciliation aspect of Memorial Day (sometimes called Decoration Day).

THE SOUTHERN DEAD.

We take great pleasure in copying the following beautiful tribute to the Southern Dead from the *Columbus Sun and Times*. Its suggestions are worthy of our heroic women and the loved ones they propose to commemorate. It would be "gilding refined gold" to add a single word to this touching appeal, and if we dare say ought further, it is that the ladies of Columbus may not be alone in this holy undertaking. Let the ladies of Augusta, and of the South at large, emulate a grand duty so worthy inaugurated:

COLUMBUS, GA., March 10, 1866.

Messrs. Editors: The ladies are now, and have been for several days, engaged in the sad but pleasant duty of ornamenting and improving that portion of the city cemetery sacred to the memory of our gallant Confederate dead, but we feel it an unfinished work unless a day be set apart annually for its especial attention. We cannot raise monumental shafts, and inscribe thereon their many deeds of heroism, but we can keep alive the memory of the debt we owe them, by at least dedicating one day in each year to embellishing their humble graves

One of the first to reprint Mrs. Williams' letter was the *Augusta Tri-Weekly Constitutionalist*, March 14, 1866, <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/>.

[For the Enquirer.]

Our Confederate Dead.

I hope every Southern heart will respond to a suggestion in an article published in your Sunday paper, advocating that a special day be set apart in each year to do appropriate honors to our heroic dead with suitable public eulogies, and, whenever practicable, to adorn their graves with Southern flowers.

I would suggest as a proper day for this annual offering, the 26th day of April—the day of Gen. Johnston's surrender. I believe the proposition will meet the approval of the Southern ladies as it will by every

The suggestion to observe April 26 as the annual holiday. Signed "Citizen," it was probably by Lizzie Rutherford, *Columbus Daily Enquirer*, March 13, 1866, from microfilm at the Columbus Public Library.

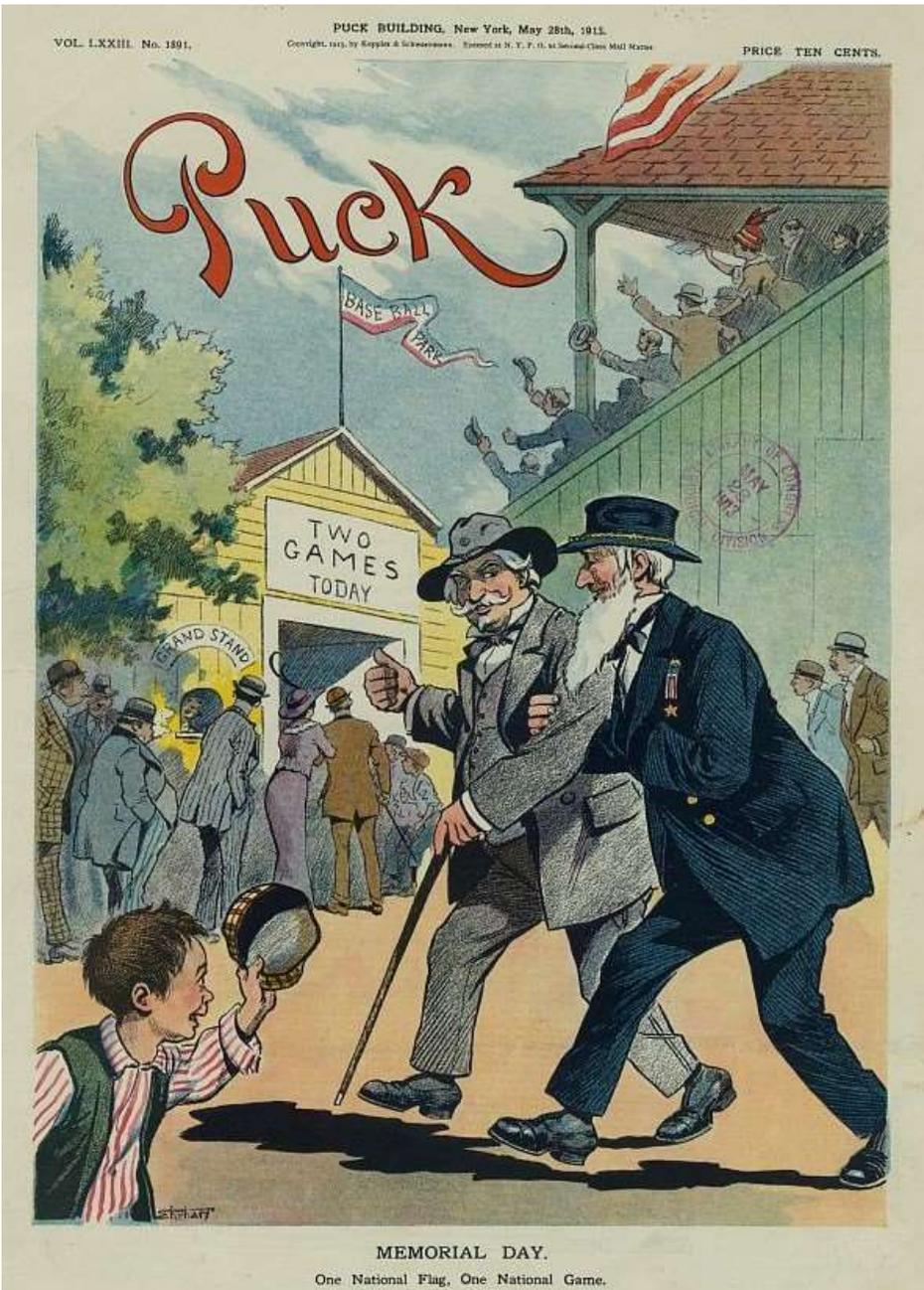
A Touching Tribute.

At the old cemetery in Macon, on Thursday, we learn that the ladies universally decorated the graves of the deceased Federal prisoners, as they did those of the Confederates. Under the chastening influence of sorrow, all resentments vanished from the pure hearts of the Macon fair, and they adorned, indiscriminately, the graves of the dead of both sections as the victims of a common calamity. Rev. Mr. Warren, of the Baptist Church, delivered a most eloquent and touching address upon the occasion, and with feeling alluded to this affecting incident.

Will they Notice this Touching Tribute?

With particular pains every utterance of a Southern journalist, speaker or lady, that can be distorted to the prejudice of the Southern people, is retailed by Republican journalists. Will they be as quick to lay the fact before their readers that on the 26th of April the ladies of Macon, Georgia, decorated the graves of the deceased Federal and Confederate soldiers that were buried at the old cemetery in Macon? The graves were adorned by them indiscriminately.

Story about Macon's tribute from the Macon *Georgia Journal and Messenger*, May 2, 1866, <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/> and a reference to it from the *Daily Ohio Statesman*, May 4, 1866 ([loc.gov](https://www.loc.gov/)).



MEMORIAL DAY.

One National Flag, One National Game.

Cover of *Puck* magazine May 28, 1913 showing Union and Confederate veterans attending a double-header on Memorial Day, from the Library of Congress (loc.gov).

Southern Women Decorating the Graves of the Southern Dead.

It seems that Macon, Georgia, is not the only Southern town where the ladies, when strewing flowers on the graves of their own fallen braves, paid the same touching tribute to the tombs of the dead heroes from the other portion of the Union.— The *Memphis Post*, edited by Northern men who supported Mr. Lincoln, referring to a similar occurrence in Mississippi, says :

“Like an oasis in the desert was that pleasing incident which is recorded in the *Columbus (Miss.) Index*, as having taken place in that city, on the 26th of April, on the occasion of decorating the graves of Confederate dead with flowers, when the same ladies decorated the graves of the Federal dead who had fallen so far from home among a hostile people.— This tender, kindly, Christian set cannot fail to touch the heart of every one at the North, who has a friend or relative buried on the battlefields of the South.— It kindles a spark of hope that we may at some future time become, in heart, one people. We have one God, one language, one Government; and may we not hope that we shall eventually become indeed one people? Such expressions of gentle piety and charity are very grateful and pleasant to hear of. May God bless the kind-hearted ladies of Columbus, who forget not, in paying tribute to the memory of their own loved and lost, that loving mothers, and sisters, and daughters in the North mourn also for *their* loved ones who are lying in lonely graves far away among strangers

Story about Southern women decorating Union graves from the *Ashland (Ohio) Union* July 4, 1866, (loc.gov)