

“Of men who died the Republic to save and free the slaves:”

Memorial Day’s Interracial Legacy in Brooklyn, New York, 1878-1897

by

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Twenty-first-century Americans are familiar with the sights and sounds of Memorial Day. Parades, wreath-layings, music, and flags inundate people's patriotic senses in towns and cities from sea to shining sea. While Memorial Day shares some similarities with its postbellum, nineteenth-century origins, it also diverges in clear ways from a tumultuous time when veterans and the public would pilgrimage to local cemeteries to pay homage to those who had died during and after the war. In light of racial and social dynamics at play in the volatile, post-Civil War United States (1865-1898), historians debate Memorial Day's interracial significance, among Black and white Union veterans particularly, and its potential effect on American patriotic notions. Focusing on the Grand Army of the Republic's integrated mission, African American agency, and white acceptance of emancipation's centrality, this thesis argues that a sense of interracial solidarity embodied Memorial Day's postbellum legacy in Brooklyn, New York from 1878 to 1897, weathering racial divides and championing patriotism over southern sympathies.