

Byline: Jalyn Henderson, NBCLX

Dozens of U.S. cities claim to be the "first" to commemorate the lives lost during the Civil War.

Waterloo, New York; Columbus, Georgia; and Carbondale, Illinois are just a few. But [one city often left out of the conversations is Charleston, South Carolina](#) — even though its commemoration happened an entire year before every other city's.

In May of 1865, thousands of newly freed Black Charlestonians exhumed a mass grave of dead Union soldiers, reburied their bodies and commemorated their lives with a parade.

The holiday we know as Memorial Day was first called Decoration Day. Over the years, that name changed to Dedication Day.

It wasn't until the 1960s when Memorial Day became the official name. Regardless of what you call it, the first observance of Memorial Day can be traced back to an old Charleston race course.

And we know about this important history because of David Blight, an African American studies professor at Yale University and author of "Race and Reunion."

LX News storyteller Jalyn Henderson caught up with Blight to learn more about this historic event.

Jalyn: This ceremony happened hundreds of years ago. There are very few photos or even documentation of it happening. How and when did you learn about it?

David: "In the 1990's, I was at Harvard University on a fellowship. I was in the library, and I was working in a collection of Union veterans' papers that were not very organized. [The library] turned these boxes over to me and in one of the boxes in a file labeled 'The First Decoration Day,' I found this story. It was written on a large piece of cardboard, probably by an old veteran. And it was recording the story, or part of it, from a newspaper article that had appeared in the New York Tribune in May of 1865. He wrote this extraordinary tale about this parade that occurred on a horse track, a race course in Charleston, South Carolina, led by African American former slaves in early May 1865. And when I first read it, I

really could hardly believe it. I thought, 'This is some old veteran making up something.'"

Jalyn: What exactly happened on that day?

David: "According to the press, about 10,000 people were on this old race course, led by Black children and by women and men. They were followed by Union soldiers singing hymns, [singing 'John Brown's Body'](#) as they marched, commemorating the nearly 260 Union dead soldiers who had been buried in that gravesite without names. There were other eyewitnesses. Preachers preached. Then they all broke up and went back into the infield of the race track and did what most of us do today. They held picnics, they had speeches, children ran races and so on and so forth. So it was their way of dedicating not only the graves of the dead, but it was also their way of declaring the meaning of the Civil War and declaring a federal Union victory."

Jalyn: This sounds like a big event that had a lot of community involvement. Why haven't we heard about it before?

David: "I think it's a classic case of how public collective memory works. This was not a story white Charlestonians wanted to remember. And as we now know, it never died in the kind of community, public memory of Black Charlestonians, but [the 'Lost Cause' story took over Southern memory by the end of Reconstruction](#) and through the latter part of the 19th century. The 'Lost Cause' story became so prevalent that this story had no chance of being remembered publicly. It just didn't belong in the same story as all this honoring of the Confederate dead and the honoring of Southern soldiers and the honoring of soldierly value as they conceived it. It's extraordinary, though, to think of how many people actually witnessed it."

Jalyn: Why is it important that we preserve this history?

David: "As a historian, you probably can expect my answer. Everything's worth recording and preserving and keeping because we don't know what it's going to mean 100 years later. We don't know what it's going to mean to subsequent generations. We don't know how the story's going to be shaped and reshaped by new evidence. This first Memorial Day is just a microcosm. You know, it's a classic small example of a sort of remarkable event — let's face it, that just got almost completely lost."