



Irish American Women, Faith and Remembrance Memorial Day Tribute

by Marilyn Madigan

In 1868, General John A. Logan called for a national day to remember those who lost their lives during the Civil War. Communities gathered to decorate the graves of fallen soldiers with flowers. This was the beginning of what became known as Declaration Day and now known as Memorial Day. Today Memorial Day honors all those who have given their lives in Military service to our Country.

In addition to decoration of the graves of the Fallen, Irish American communities have observed Memorial Day through faith-centered practices of Masses and prayers to honor and remember those who have given the ultimate sacrifice. This year let us remember, the many Irish American women have served from the Revolutionary War to the present global military operations. Their contributions were often informal and unrecognized. These women supported the Patriot cause as camp followers, caregivers, spies and soldiers. Only a few are known by name; Mary Corbin, Sybil Ludington and Deborah Sampson.

Irish American women have played a vital role in every major conflict in United States history especially during the Civil War. Twelve Religious Communities provided Sisters to serve as Nurses on both sides of the conflict. Many were Irish-born or heritage. Mother Mary Angela Gillespie of the Sisters of the Holy Cross and Sr Anthony O'Connell of the Daughters of Charity sent many of their Religious community to serve as nurses. The Sisters of the Holy Cross served on the Red Rover on the Mississippi and can be considered the first Navy Nurses. The Mother House of the Daughters of Charity in Emmitsburg Maryland was only 15 miles from Gettysburg and prior to the battle both Union and Confederate armies spent time on the property. These Sisters could hear the Battle and were the first to provide aid and are remembered in a Stain Glass Window in the Catholic Church in town. All of these Nursing Sisters served courageously on the battlefields and in wartime hospitals providing medical care and spiritual comfort, often at great personal risk. Their contributions reflect faith, resilience, and devotion to both heritage and country. To learn more about these remarkable women, read the Angels of the Battlefield by George Barton, the Nuns of the Battlefield by Ellen Ryan Jolly, Courage and Compassion Sisters of Mercy in the American Civil War by Paula Diann Marlin and the Balm of Hope by Betty Ann McNeil D.C. In 1914, the Ladies Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians dedicated the Nuns of the Battlefield Monument to

honor these remarkable women and in 2024 a Wayside Marker was dedicated to tell the Story of the Monument and the Religious Communities depicted on the Monument.

Irish American Women also played a role during the Civil War in preparing the ammunition needed for the Union. Many Irish Women worked at the Washington Arsenal preparing ammunition for the Union troops. On June 17, 1864, many of these women lost their lives at the Arsenal Fire where over one hundred women were working at the time. Twenty-one of those women mostly Irish immigrants lost their lives. President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton attended the Funeral Service held at the Arsenal and the Procession to the Congressional Cemetery where these women were buried. At the Congressional Cemetery there is a Monument to mark the Graves of the Arsenal Fire Victims. The names of the Victims on the Monument are difficult to read. The Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians commissioned a new marker listing all the names of the Victims.

In Washington D.C., there are three Monuments dedicated to Women who served our country in Wartime; the Arsenal Fire Monument in Congressional Cemetery, the Nuns of the Battlefield Monument and the Vietnam Nurses Monument. Most visitors to our Nation's Capital visit the usual tourist attractions but these three Monuments should be visited. In addition to visiting these Monuments, visit Arlington Cemetery to honor all those who lay in this hallowed ground. At the entrance to Arlington is the Military Women's Memorial. American Women have served our country with a quiet strength and unwavering devotion and their legacy is one of sacrifice and leadership.

Irish American Women have served in both World Wars, Korea, Vietnam and continue to serve today. From the Camp follows of the American Revolution to the present, Irish American Women have answered the call to serve their country and many have paid the ultimate sacrifice. As we celebrate Irish America 250, we are inspired by their legacy of the lives saved, freedoms defended and the values preserved. This Memorial Day let us remember and honor them as women of courage, conviction and enduring faith.