

Honoring war dead traced to Civil War times

Minnesotans were fighting two wars in 1862

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Memorial Day has only been a federal holiday since 1971, but solemn observances to honor war dead had been observed for decades in the nation.

The United States 150 years ago first announced a day would set aside as a remembrance for fallen Civil War soldiers. A symposium in Mankato earlier this year marked the sesquicentennial of Decoration Day, the informal name for Memorial Day.

Monday many Americans will continue the practice of remembering deceased military veterans by placing flags and flowers near their headstones.

Among the graves to be decorated throughout the region are those of Civil War veterans. Minnesota lost about 2,500 soldiers during the war which began in April 1861 and lasted well into 1865.

Our state's connection to the Civil War was unique, Minnesota State University history professor Kathleen Gorman said in an April 9, 2015, Free Press article.

"It was Minnesota's moment of glory. We sacrificed everything to save the Union. But there were two wars going on. There was the U.S.-Dakota War and what happened as a result," Gorman said.

At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Minnesota with a population of about 180,000 was the first state to volunteer troops in its defense. Minnesota would send 11 Infantry regiments, four cavalry regiments, three batteries of light artillery, one

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regiment of heavy artillery and two companies of sharpshooters.

The state contributed disproportionately to the war through the commitments of its residents and the valor of its soldiers. More than 24,000 of its soldiers fought in the Civil War, including 100 free black men, scores of American Indians and at least one woman.

A statue honoring Civil War veterans from Blue Earth County was unveiled in 2015 in Mankato's historic Lincoln Park. The Boy in Blue monument is a replica of a torn-down statue dedicated in 1893.

The graves of many people who lived in the region during the 18th century, including several veterans, are in Fort Ridgely State Cemetery. Standing tall among the headstones is an obelisk engraved with the names of about two dozen Civil War-era soldiers.

The Capt. John S. Marsh State Monument honors soldiers who were killed in the first battle of the 1862 war between the U.S. military and the Dakota. The Redwood Ferry battle site is in rural Morton, about 10 miles from the cemetery.

Civil War historian Matthew W. Hutchinson provided information about Marsh and his regiment for Minnesota Historical Society's MNopedia site:

The Fifth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment's Civil War service included participation in 13 campaigns, five sieges and 34 battles, including duty on Minnesota's frontier during the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862.

Mustering into service at Fort Snelling in spring 1862, seven of the 10 companies departed for the South in



Photo courtesy of the Blue Earth County Historical Society
Memorials honoring war dead may be found in city parks throughout the country. This photo of the original Boy in Blue fountain shows water flowing down from the pedestal and shooting into the air.

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Meanwhile, Companies B, C, and D had been kept in Minnesota and sent to various posts nearby. Company B was stationed at Fort Ridgely. On Aug. 18 a 46-man detachment under Capt. John S. Marsh departed the fort for the Lower Sioux Agency in response to the conflict there. They were ambushed at Redwood Ferry on the Minnesota River.

Marsh drowned in the confusion of the retreat, and his detachment suffered 23 killed and five wounded. Those remaining made it back to Fort Ridgely and were soon joined

by 50 men from Company C. This combined force, along with 50 Renville Rangers and a few cannons, defeated the Dakota attacks against the fort on Aug. 20 and 22.

Marsh was reburied by his family at a gravesite outside of Minnesota, said Curtis Dahlin, an author who writes about the 1862 war. The remains of most of the men who died with Marsh were exhumed and moved to another soldiers memorial site.

The soldiers were serving at Fort Ridgely, a frontier post with a history longer than its role in tragic events over six weeks in 1862.



Memorial Day services throughout the nation will take place Monday near soldiers' graves and memorials. Sculptor Alan Gibson talks with monument-maker Tom Miller in 2015 after the unveiling of the recreated Boy in Blue statue depicting a young private.

File photo

The fort was built in 1855, decommissioned in 1867 and officially abandoned in 1871. Several fort building foundations are visible to tourists who stop at the site, which is now a state park.

Fort Ridgely State Park site manager Amber Bentler

said the fort was in use for about 14 years. "We were the western frontier back then," she said.

During the Civil War, the fort's primary purpose was to train young Union soldiers for battles against the Confederate Army.