

Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War
Brief History
of the
Grand Army of the Republic



In early 1866 the United States of America--now securely one nation again--was waking to the reality of recovery from war, and this had been a much different war. In previous conflicts the care of the veteran warrior was the province of the family or the community. Soldiers then were friends, relatives and neighbors who went off to fight--until the next planting or harvest. It was a community adventure and their fighting unit had a community flavor.

By the end of the Civil War, units had become less homogeneous, men from different communities and even different states were forced together by the exigencies of battle where new friendships and lasting trust was forged. With the advances in the care and movement of the wounded, many who would have surely died in earlier wars returned home to be cared for by a community structure weary from a protracted war and now also faced with the needs of widows and orphans. Veterans needed jobs, including a whole new group of veterans--the colored soldier and his entire, newly freed, family. It was often more than the fragile fabric of communities could bear.

State and federal leaders from President Lincoln down had promised to care for "those who have borne the burden, his widows and orphans," but they had little knowledge of how to accomplish the task. There was also little political pressure to see that the promises were kept.

But probably the most profound emotion was emptiness. Men who had lived together, fought together, foraged together and survived, had developed a unique bond that could not be broken. As time went by the memories of the filthy and vile environment of camp life began to be remembered less harshly and eventually fondly. The horror and gore of battle lifted with the smoke and smell of burnt black powder and was replaced with the personal rain of tears for the departed comrades. Friendships forged in battle survived the separation and the warriors missed the warmth of trusting companionship that had asked only total and absolute commitment.

With that as background, groups of men began joining together--first for camaraderie and then for political power. Emerging most powerful among the various organizations would be the **Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)**, which by 1890 would number 409,489 veterans of the "War of the Rebellion."

Founded in Decatur, Illinois on April 6, 1866 by Benjamin F. Stephenson, membership was limited to honorably discharged veterans of the Union Army, Navy, Marine Corps or the Revenue Cutter Service who had served between April 12, 1861 and April 9, 1865. The community level organization was called a "Post" and each was numbered consecutively within each department. Most Posts also had a name and the rules for naming Posts included the requirement that the honored person be deceased and that no two Posts within the same Department could have the same name. The Departments generally consisted of the Posts within a state and, at the national level, the organization was operated by the elected "Commandery-in-Chief."

Post Commanders were elected as were the Junior and Senior Vice Commanders and the members of Council. Each member was voted into membership using the Masonic system of casting black or white balls (except that more than one black ball was required to reject a candidate for membership). When a candidate was rejected, that rejection was reported to the Department which listed the rejection in general orders and those rejections were maintained in a "Black Book" at each Post meeting place. The meeting rituals and induction of members were similar to the Masonic rituals and have been handed down to the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War.

The official body of the Department was the annual Encampment, which was presided over by the elected Department Commander, Senior and Junior Vice Commanders and the Council. Encampments were elaborate multi-day events which often included camping out, formal dinners and memorial events. In later years the Department Encampments were often held in conjunction with the Encampments of the Allied Orders, including Camps of the Sons of Veterans Reserve, which at the time were quasi-military in nature, often listed as a unit of the state militia or national guard.

National Encampments of the Grand Army of the Republic were presided over by a Commander-in-Chief who was elected in political events which rivaled national political party conventions. The Senior and Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief as well as the National Council of Administration were also elected.

The GAR founded soldiers' homes, was active in relief work and in pension legislation. Five members were elected President of the United States and, for a time, it was impossible to be nominated on the Republican ticket without the endorsement of the GAR voting block.

In 1868, Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan issued General Order No. 11 calling for all Departments and Posts to set aside the 30th of May as a day for remembering the sacrifices of fallen comrades, thereby beginning the celebration of Memorial Day.

With membership limited strictly to "veterans of the late unpleasantness," the GAR encouraged the formation of Allied Orders to aid them in its various works. Numerous male organizations jostled for the backing of the GAR and the political battles became quite severe until the GAR finally endorsed the Sons of Veterans of the United States of America (later to become the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War) as its heir. A similar, but less protracted, battle took place between the Womans' Relief Corps (WRC) and the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic (LGAR) for the title "official auxiliary to the GAR." That battle was won by the WRC, which is the only Allied Order open to women who do not have an hereditary ancestor who would have been eligible for the GAR. But in this case the LGAR retained its strength and was made one of the Allied Orders.

Coming along a bit later, the Daughters of Union Veterans of the Civil War, similar to the SUVCW but for women, also earned the designation as an Allied Order of the GAR. Rounding out the list of Allied Orders is the Auxiliary to the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, which is open to women with hereditary ties to a veteran or who is the spouse, sister or daughter of a member of the SUVCW.

The final Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic was held in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1949 and the last member, Albert Woolson died in 1956 at the age of 109 years.

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Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War