Q127 – What is Memorial Day?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:
Memorial Day is the holiday to honor soldiers who died in service of our country. We observe it each year on the last Monday in May.

The tradition began after the Civil War – the bloodiest war in our history. So many men perished, they had to be buried on the battlefield. Thus began our first national cemeteries – from Shiloh, Tennessee to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.
The most famous is Arlington National Cemetery – built on the former estate of Confederate general Robert E. Lee – right across the river from Washington, D.C.
Memorial Day began as Decoration Day. Shops would close so citizens could place flowers and flags on the graves of the fallen. On May 5, 1868, General John Logan – a veteran of the Civil War – urged Americans to set aside the 30th of May to honor the dead, “whose bodies” he said, “now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land.”
After that first Decoration Day, the tradition continued. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was a state holiday throughout the North. After World War I, Decoration Day evolved to honor the dead of all American wars.
In 1971, an act of Congress made the last Monday in May a federal holiday – and Decoration Day became Memorial Day. Memorial Day weekend has become the unofficial start of summer. But, before you fire up the grill or head to the beach, please pause to honor the soldiers who died in service to our nation.