

# Grand Army of the Republic

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The **Grand Army of the Republic** (**GAR**) was a fraternal organization composed of veterans of the Union Army who had served in the American Civil War. The GAR was among the first organized interest groups in American politics. It was succeeded by the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW).

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The members of Charles W. Carroll Post 144 pose on the steps of the Norfolk County Courthouse in Dedham, Massachusetts on Dedham's 250th anniversary.

## History

After the end of American Civil War, organizations were formed for veterans to network and maintain connections with each other. Many of the veterans wished to keep in contact with each other, using their shared experiences as a basis for fellowship. Groups of men began joining together, first for camaraderie and later for political power. Emerging most powerful among the various organizations was the Grand Army of the Republic, founded on the principles of "Fraternity, Charity and Loyalty", in Decatur, Illinois on April 6, 1866 by Benjamin F. Stephenson.

The league promoted voting rights for black veterans by extolling their demonstrated patriotism. Black veterans, who enthusiastically embraced the message of equality, shunned black veterans' organizations in preference for racially inclusive groups. The GAR initially grew and prospered as a de facto political arm of the Republican Party during the heated political contests of the Reconstruction. The commemoration of Union veterans, black and white, immediately became entwined with partisan politics. But when the Republican Party's commitment to reform in the South gradually decreased, the GAR's mission became ill-defined and the organization floundered. The GAR almost disappeared in the early 1870s, and many departments cease to exist.

Only in the 1880s did the organization revive under new leadership that provided the platform for renewed growth by advocating federal pensions for veterans. As the organization reestablished itself in the South, black veterans there, for the first time, joined in significant numbers and organized local posts.

The GAR was organized into "Departments" at the state level and "Posts" at the community level, and military-style uniforms were worn by its members. There were posts in every state in the U.S., and several posts overseas.

The expansion of the GAR consequently posed the question of whether black veterans would be gathered in integrated or segregated posts within departments and in turn whether Southern departments would be segregated within the national organization. Blacks constituted three-quarters of the potential GAR members, and on the state level they outnumbered white Union veterans by as many as three to one in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana. In these states wherever black veterans predominated, integrated GAR posts presumably would have been governed by black members. Many white veterans in the South complained of the certain banishment they would endure if they joined biracial groups and endorsed the segregation of black veterans into separate posts.

Some white veterans refused to remain members of departments in which black posts outnumbered the white posts. Moreover, according to the white veterans, blacks were too incompetent to organize and run posts. Prompted by these prejudices, white officers of the Louisiana and Mississippi Departments during the early 1890s refused to recognize black posts, thereby precipitating a contentious debate within the national organization over the merits of segregation.

Whether motivated by pragmatism or separatist leanings, some black posts accepted the proposal for segregated departments, but many more flatly rejected it. The debate over segregation within the GAR during the early 1890s attracted national attention because it was symptomatic of an ongoing revision of the meaning attached to the Civil War and to the role off the blacks in their own liberation. More and more white GAR members embraced the ascendant culture of sectional reconciliation.

In 1867, Commander-in-Chief General John A. Logan established May 30 as Memorial Day, which was originally intended to commemorate the dead of the Civil War, but some white veterans used this occasion to lambaste blacks for their alleged intellectual and moral shortcomings and to urge their emigration to a black homeland or Africa. Ceremonies were held separately for whites and blacks, where white veterans used Memorial Day exercises in the South as a pretext to repudiate Reconstruction measures and to endorse the enduring superiority of the Anglo-Saxons, Northern and Southern.

Many white veterans seemed impatient to forget that emancipation was one of the war's legacies and that blacks had a hand in Union victory. Confederate Veterans strained to celebrate blacks who "served" in the Confederacy. Therefore they formed an organization called United Confederate Veterans (UCV) to honor aged blacks who had purportedly worn Confederate grey and had adopted the Southern cause as their own.

The GAR's political power grew during the latter part of the Nineteenth Century and it helped elect several United States Presidents beginning with Ulysses S. Grant and ending with William McKinley. 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 bloc.

With membership strictly limited 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 Union Veterans of the Civil War as their heir.

The GAR reached its largest enrollment in 1890, with 490,000 members. It held an annual "National Encampment" every year from 1866 to 1949. At that final encampment in Indianapolis, Indiana, the few surviving members voted to retain the existing officers in place until the organization's dissolution; Theodore Penland of Oregon, the GAR's Commander at the time, was therefore its last. In 1956, after the death of the last member, Albert Woolson, the GAR was formally dissolved.

## Memorials

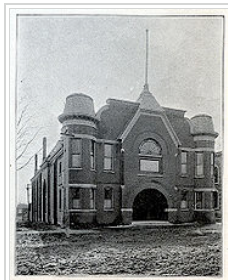
- There is a GAR cemetery in Portland, Oregon. Salmon Brown, son of the famous abolitionist John Brown (of the song "John Brown's Body") is buried there.
- Another GAR cemetery is on Seattle, Washington's Capitol Hill, just north of Lake View Cemetery. Established in 1895, it was turned over to the Parks Department in 1922.<sup>[1]</sup>
- A Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Museum is located at 629 South 7th Street in downtown Springfield Illinois. It is owned and maintained by the Woman's Relief Corps Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic. The museum is full of Civil War memorabilia including artifacts, documents, and historically significant items that have been donated by veterans' relatives. The museum can be reached at 217-522-4823
- A monumental memorial honoring Benjamin F. Stephenson, M.D., stands near the National Archives building and the Navy Memorial in Washington, D.C. (38.893565°N 77.021558°W<sup>[2]</sup><sup>[3]</sup>) The GAR Memorial Foundation erected the monument using funds that the U.S. Congress had appropriated in 1907. The memorial was dedicated in 1909.<sup>[4]</sup>
- U.S. Highway 6 is known as the Grand Army of the Republic Highway for its entire length.<sup>[5]</sup>
- Vermont Route 15 is known as the Grand Army of the Republic Highway.
- Cornelius S. Chase Post 50 was in Titusville, Pennsylvania and its original charter and some documents, including its handwritten by-laws are on display at the Cleo J. Ross Post 368 American Legion in Titusville.
- There is a Grand Army of the Republic Conference Room at the Wisconsin State Capital in Madison, Wisconsin.
- There is a Grand Army theatre in Valparaiso, Indiana underneath the title Memorial Opera House.
- G.A.R. Memorial Junior Senior High School is in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.
- A GAR memorial and several gravesites are in Union Ridge Cemetery Norwood\_Park, Chicago.
- A GAR memorial is in Greenwood Cemetery in Bemidji, Minnesota.
- The New England Civil War Museum is maintained by Alden Skinner Camp 45 Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. The museum is within Memorial Hall, which was dedicated to the GAR veterans by the former city of Rockville.
- A cemetery with the graves of several GAR members who were former slaves originally from Tennessee is southwest of Murphysboro, Illinois.
- There is a GAR memorial, and many gravesites, in the Evergreen Cemetery, Red Oak, Iowa.
- There is a GAR cemetery in San Jose, California's Oak Hill Cemetery.
- There is a GAR monument in Minier, IL
- There is a GAR memorial, and many gravesites, in the pioneer Hickory Grove Cemetery, in SE Iowa at Hwy 281 & 185th St.
- There is a GAR museum and library in Philadelphia. It is maintained by the Philadelphia Camp Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. The archive holds numerous GAR post records and the museum has a variety of civil war artifacts.
- Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Omaha, NE holds a GAR memorial and many gravesites.
- There is a GAR Hall/Museum located in Grand Meadow, MN. Booth Post No. 130 was once a meeting hall for members of the Grand Army of the Republic. The hall is apparently one of only two remaining in Minnesota and is located on West side of South Main Street between First Avenue SW and Second Avenue SW. The building is on the National Register of Historic Places because of its architectural and social significance.
- At the final encampment a commemorative postage stamp, was issued. Two years later a virtually identical one was printed for the final reunion of the UCV.



Stephenson GAR Memorial, Washington, D.C.



A G.A.R. marker at Brush Creek Cemetery, outside of Irwin, Pennsylvania



Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Opera House, Valparaiso, Indiana. Photograph courtesy of the Steven R. Shook collection.

## In popular culture

John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* features several references to the Grand Army of the Republic. Despite having very little actual battle experience during his brief military career, cut short by the loss of his leg, Adam Trask's father Cyrus joins the GAR and assumes the stature of "a great man" through his involvement with the organization. At the height of the GAR's influence in Washington, he brags to his son:

“ I wonder if you know how much influence I really have. I can throw the Grand Army at any candidate like a sock. Even the President likes to know what I think about public matters. I can get senators defeated and I can pick appointments like apples. I can make men and I can destroy men. Do you know that? ”

Later in the book, references are made to the graves of GAR members in California in order to emphasize the passage of time.

Another Nobel Prize winning author, Sinclair Lewis, makes references to the GAR in his acclaimed novel *Main Street*.

The GAR is briefly mentioned in William Faulkner's novel, *The Sound and the Fury*.

The GAR is also mentioned in the seldom sung introduction to the patriotic song "You're a Grand Old Flag."

The GAR is referenced in Charles Ives's song "He Is There"

In *Star Wars*, the Clone Wars are fought between the Grand Army of the Republic and the Confederacy of Independent Systems, an apparent reference to the Civil War.

## See also

- American Legion
- Congressional charter
- Grand Army of the Republic Hall (disambiguation)
- G. A. R. Memorial Junior Senior High School, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania
- Hamilton County Memorial Building, (Cincinnati, Ohio)
- Joel Minnick Longenecker
- Russell A. Alger
- Military Order of the Stars and Bars
- Sons of Confederate Veterans
- Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War
- U.S. Route 6 (Grand Army of the Republic Highway)



The USS Kearsarge was on display at the 1893 GAR National Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana

## External links

- GAR page at Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/gar/>)
- SUVCW official website (<http://www.suvcw.org/>)
- ASUVCW official website (<http://www.asuvcw.org/>)
- DUVCW official website (<http://www.duvcw.org/>)
- Grand Army Museum, Lynn, MA at Essex National Heritage website ([http://www.essexheritage.org/sites/grand\\_army\\_museum.shtml](http://www.essexheritage.org/sites/grand_army_museum.shtml))
- Theodore Penland grave site (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=21227580>)
- The GAR medal looks similar to the Medal of Honor in photos or on gravestones, see comparison ([http://www.homeofheroes.com/moh/corrections/purge\\_army.html](http://www.homeofheroes.com/moh/corrections/purge_army.html))
- Photographs of Members of the Stevens Post, Seattle, Washington (<http://content.lib.washington.edu/garweb/>)
- Grand Army of the Republic Museum and Library, Philadelphia, PA (<http://garmuslib.org/>)

## References

- ↑ GAR Cemetery Park, Seattle, Washington, from The Friends of the Grand Army of the Republic Cemetery Park (<http://www.fgar.org>) , accessed May 4, 2007
- ↑ Hybrid satellite image/street map of Stephenson GAR Memorial in Washington, D.C., from WikiMapia (<http://wikimapia.org/#y=38893565&x=-77021558&z=17&l=0&m=h&v=2>)
- ↑ Stephenson GAR Memorial in Washington, D.C., from dcMemorials.com ([http://www.dcmemorials.com/index\\_indiv0000550.htm](http://www.dcmemorials.com/index_indiv0000550.htm)) , accessed May 4, 2007
- ↑ Stephenson GAR Memorial in Washington, D.C., from Smithsonian Institution Research Information System, Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Art Inventories Catalog (<http://siris-artinventories.si.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=G1198048Q3397.39158&menu=search&aspect=Keyword&npp=50&ipp=20&spp=20&profile=arial&ri=&term=&index=.GW&aspect=Keyword&term=&index=.AW&term=&index=.TW&term=&index=.SW&term=>) , accessed May 4, 2007
- ↑ Richard F. Weingroff, U.S. 6 - The Grand Army of the Republic Highway (<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/us6.htm>)

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