A Brief History of Mother’s Day

Some of the earliest tributes to mothers can be traced to festivals of the Greek mother-goddess Rhea and the Roman Cybele. Ancient Christians celebrated a festival during Lent in honor of Mary, mother of Christ. In England a descendant of the holiday was expanded to include all mothers and was called “Mothering Sunday.”

In the mid-19th Century, Anna Jarvis, an Appalachian homemaker, organized a day to raise awareness of poor health conditions in her community, a cause she believed would be best advocated by mothers. She called it “Mother’s Work Day.”

Some decades later, Julia Ward Howe, a Boston poet, pacifist, and suffragist, organized a day encouraging mothers to rally for peace, saying that the loss of human life was most harsh for them. Howe had gained fame during the U.S. Civil War as the lyricist for the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” but was reportedly horrified by the carnage of the Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War. In 1870, she presented a manifesto for peace at international peace conferences in London and Paris. Two years later, she began promoting the idea of a “Mother’s Day for Peace” to be celebrated on June 2. The next year, women in 18 U.S. cities held a Mother’s Day for Peace gathering. The gatherings continued in various places until around 1900.

In 1905, when Anna Jarvis died, her daughter Anna lobbied businessmen and presidents to create a special day to honor mothers. Three years later, she distributed white carnations, her mother’s favorite flower, at a Mother’s Day service in her church. Five years after that, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted a resolution calling for officials to wear white carnations on Mother’s Day. In 1914, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson signed a bill recognizing Mother’s Day as a national holiday.

Although the younger Anna Jarvis became disillusioned with the materialism surrounding Mother’s Day, and went to some length to stop the celebration altogether, it continues as one of the most popular holidays around the world.

—from Holiday.Net, Jone Johnson Lewis, and About, Inc. (New York Times Company), personal interviews