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Photographs by Robert P. Emrick. Courtesy of the Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts

Florence Memorial Day Parade to mark 150th year in 2018

FLORENCE —The village of Florence is planning a large commemoration next Memorial Day in honor of the 150th anniversary of what is the oldest continuously run Memorial Day parade in the United States.

The first parade was held in Northampton in 1868, just after the Civil War, and included the decoration of the graves of deceased service members in the Park Street Cemetery in Florence, a tradition that has continued every year since, regardless of weather.

Every year, the names of all the veterans who died in the past year in Northampton are also read. Local Girl Scouts bring flowers to put on graves in the cemetery.

The parade has been described by local officials as a quintessential New England small-town “Americana” event, with local fire departments, youth groups, and high school marching bands participating.

In previous parades, more than 500 people have participated and thousands gather to watch along Route 9. This year, a planning committee is anticipating widespread attention due to the 150th anniversary and is planning for even more parade participants and community attendance.

“To celebrate this milestone, our goal is to create a significant parade experience that invokes patriotism and respect for our fallen service members from our community,” said Brad LeVay,

president of the Veterans Council of Northampton. “Our planning committee will therefore be sponsoring numerous activities leading up to the 2018 parade to educate the public about the sacrifice of the service members from our region who have died while fighting for our freedom. Our vision is that all citizens in the Pioneer Valley, especially youth, will never forget the sacrifices that were made by American Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen throughout our history.”

Committee members are looking for parade participants to reserve their spot early this year to allow proper planning and also needs community sponsors to help underwrite the many expenses associated with the 2018 parade.

Members of the public interested in participating or supporting the 2018 parade can call the office of Central Hampshire Veterans’ Services at [\(413\) 587-1299](tel:4135871299) or can send an email to vetadmin@northamptonma.gov.

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