

# **History of America's Holidays**

## **A Resource for Teachers**

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## History of Armed Forces Day

On August 31, 1949, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson announced the creation of an Armed Forces Day to replace separate Army, Navy and Air Force Days. The single-day celebration stemmed from the unification of the Armed Forces under one department -- the Department of Defense. Each of the military leagues and orders was asked to drop sponsorship of its specific service day in order to celebrate the newly announced Armed Forces Day. The Army, Navy and Air Force leagues adopted the newly formed day. The Marine Corps League declined to drop support for Marine Corps Day but supports Armed Forces Day, too.

In a speech announcing the formation of the day, President Truman "praised the work of the military services at home and across the seas" and said, "it is vital to the security of the nation and to the establishment of a desirable peace." In an excerpt from the Presidential Proclamation of Feb. 27, 1950, Mr. Truman stated:

*Armed Forces Day, Saturday, May 20, 1950, marks the first combined demonstration by America's defense team of its progress, under the National Security Act, towards the goal of readiness for any eventuality. It is the first parade of preparedness by the unified forces of our land, sea, and air defense.*

The theme of the first Armed Forces Day was "Teamed for Defense." It was chosen as a means of expressing the unification of all the military forces under a single department of the government. Although this was the theme for the day, there were several other purposes for holding Armed Forces Day. It was a type of "educational program for civilians," one in which there would be an increased awareness of the Armed Forces. It was designed to expand public understanding of what type of job is performed and the role of the military in civilian life. It was a day for the military to show "state-of-the-art" equipment to the civilian population they were protecting. And it was a day to honor and acknowledge the people of the Armed Forces of the United States.

According to a *New York Times* article published on May 17, 1952: "This is the day on which we have the welcome opportunity to pay special tribute to the men and women of the Armed Forces ... to all the individuals who are in the service of their country all over the world. Armed Forces Day won't be a matter of parades and receptions for a good many of them. They will all be in line of duty and some of them may give their lives in that duty."

The first Armed Forces Day was celebrated by parades, open houses, receptions, and air shows. In Washington D.C., 10,000 troops of all branches of the military, cadets, and veterans marched past the President and his party. In Berlin, 1,000 U.S. troops paraded for the German citizens at Tempelhof Airfield. In New York City, an estimated 33,000 participants initiated Armed Forces Day "under an air cover of 250 military planes of all types." In the harbors across the country were the famed mothballed "battleships" of World War II, the *Missouri*, the *New Jersey*, the *North Carolina*, and the *Iowa*, all open for public inspection. Precision flying teams dominated the skies as tracking radar were exhibited on the ground. All across the country, the American people joined together to honor the Armed Forces.

Again, from the May 17, 1952, *New York Times* article: "It is our most earnest hope that those who are in positions of peril, that those who have made exceptional sacrifices, yes, and those who are afflicted with plain drudgery and boredom, may somehow know that we hold them in exceptional esteem. Perhaps if we are a little more conscious of our debt of honored affection they may be a little more aware of how much we think of them."

Armed Forces Day is celebrated annually on the third Saturday of May. Armed Forces Week begins on the second Saturday of May and ends on the third Sunday of May, the day after Armed Forces Day. Because of

their unique training schedules, National Guard and Reserve units may celebrate Armed Forces Day/Week over any period in May.

Taken from [www.defense.gov](http://www.defense.gov)

## History of Christmas

Christmas is based on the story of Jesus' birth as described in the Gospel of Matthew (1:18-2:12) and the Gospel of Luke (1:26-56). Historians are unsure exactly when Christians first began celebrating the Nativity of Christ. However, most scholars believe that Christmas originated in the 4<sup>th</sup> century as a Christian substitution for pagan celebrations of the winter solstice. Before the introduction of Christmas, the Romans honored Saturn, the ancient god of agriculture, in a festival called Saturnalia beginning on December 17<sup>th</sup>. This festival lasted for seven days and included the winter solstice, which usually occurred around December 25<sup>th</sup> on the ancient Julian calendar. During Saturnalia the Romans feasted, postponed all business and warfare, exchanged gifts, and temporarily freed their slaves. Although the Gospels describe Jesus' birth in detail, they never mention the date, so historians are not certain of His actual date of birth. The Roman Catholic Church chose December 25<sup>th</sup> as the day for the Feast of the Nativity in order to give Christian meaning to existing pagan rituals. Roman Catholics first celebrated the Feast of the Nativity as early as 336 AD. Over the next 1000 years, the observance of Christmas followed the expansion of Christianity into the rest of Europe and into Egypt. Along the way, Christian beliefs combined with existing pagan feasts and winter rituals to create many long standing traditions of Christmas celebrations. The word *Christmas* first entered the English language sometime around 1050 as the Old English phrase *Christes maesse*, meaning "festival of Christ." During the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Protestants challenged the authority of the Catholic Church, including its toleration of surviving pagan traditions during Christmas festivities. For a brief time during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Puritans banned Christmas from England and in some English colonies in North America because they felt it had become a season best known for gambling, flamboyant public behavior, and overindulgence in food and drink. Colonists from England, France, Holland, Spain and other countries gradually modified their Christmas ceremonies as they encountered new cultures and traditions in the New World. In the United States and Canada, many elements of modern Christmas celebrations did not emerge until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The rapidly expanding economy of the 1800's not only flooded the market with new goods for sale, but also helped establish a new middle class, one that placed a special value on home and family life. Christmas gained increased prominence largely because many people believed it could draw families together and honor children. Giving gifts to children and loved ones eventually replaced the raucous public celebrations of the past, and Christmas became primarily a domestic holiday. The new custom of Christmas gift giving allowed the marketplace to exert an unprecedented influence on holiday celebrations. Seasonal retail sales helped fuel the economy, causing merchants and advertisers to become some of the season's most ardent promoters. Many holiday celebrants regretted these changes, however, and began voicing the now common lament that Christmas had become too commercial. Christmas also gained new importance among urban residents. Cities became crowded with immigrants, who introduced a wide variety of religious and cultural practices to North American life. Celebrating Christmas emerged as a way for people from different parts of the world to create a sense of community in the city. The holiday forged a broad, nondenominational sense of Christian spirit while promoting and idealized sense of communal good will.

The Bible provides no guidelines that explain how Christmas should be observed, nor does it even suggest that it should be considered a religious holiday. Because of the lack of biblical instructions, Christmas rituals have been shaped by the religious and popular traditions of each culture that celebrates the holiday. Traditionally, the sacred Christmas season starts with Advent, which begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continues to Christmas Day. The sacred season ends on Epiphany, January 6. During Advent, Christians make preparations for the commemoration of Jesus' birth on December 25, and also look forward to the Second Coming of Christ. Each of the four weeks symbolizes a different way in which believers perceive Christ: through the flesh, the Holy Spirit, death, and Christ's judgment of the dead. The Advent wreath, which consists of four candles anchored in a circle of evergreen branches, originated with German Lutherans; the tradition has been adopted by many churches and families. At the beginning of each of the four weeks preceding Christmas, Christians light an Advent candle as they say a prayer. On Christmas Eve, churches around the world hold evening services. At midnight, most Catholic and many Protestant churches hold special candlelight services. The Catholic midnight Mass was first introduced by the Roman Catholic Church in the 5th century. Christmas Masses are sometimes solemn and sometimes buoyant, depending on the particular culture that conducts them. Among some congregations, worshipers enter the church in communal processions. Church services often feature candlelight and organ music. Some also include a dramatization of the biblical story of Jesus' birth, a practice begun by Saint Francis of Assisi in the 13th century. Christmas observances have also assimilated remnants of ancient midwinter rituals that celebrate the returning light of the sun following the winter solstice. For example, many cultures continue the pre-Christian custom of burning Yule logs during the midwinter season; the Yule log symbolizes the victory of light over the darkness of winter. The tradition of lighting the Yule log is still observed, especially by Europeans. Families light the log on Christmas Eve and keep it burning until Epiphany. Some families save the remains of the Yule log to help kindle the fire the following year. According to ancient tradition, the ashes provide protection against bad luck during the year. Christians traditionally exchange gifts as a reminder of God's gift of a savior to humankind. Gift giving also recalls an ancient Roman custom of exchanging gifts to bring good fortune for the new year. In most cultures that celebrate Christmas, a mythical figure delivers gifts to children. Many of these legendary gift givers bear a passing resemblance to pre-Christian elves and pranksters, who would distribute gifts while also making mischief in the community. As cultures adapted to Christianity, however, the gift givers often required that children behave well in order to receive their treats. This good behavior usually entailed obedience to parents and recitation of verses from the Bible. If the children misbehaved, they might receive a lump of coal or a switch rather than sweets and toys. Since the 19th century, Santa Claus and other mythical gift givers have become increasingly gentle, generous, and forgiving.

Taken from MSN Encarta

### History of Columbus Day

The holiday (originally October 12; since 1971 the second Monday in October) to commemorate the landing of Christopher Columbus on October 12, 1492, in the New World. Although his explorations were financed by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, Columbus was a native of Genoa, Italy, and over the years Italian Americans took up the cause of honouring his achievement. The 300th anniversary of his landing was celebrated in New York City in 1792 by the Society of St. Tammany, or Columbian Order, and the 400th anniversary, in 1892, by presidential proclamation nationwide. During the latter half of the 19th century, the day began to be celebrated in cities with large numbers of Italian Americans, and in 1937 it became a national holiday by presidential proclamation. The day came to be marked by parades, often including floats depicting the ships of Columbus, and by public ceremonies and festivities. By the quincentennial in 1992, the holiday was an occasion for discussing the European conquest of American Indians, and some people objected to celebrating the event and proposed alternatives, among them Indigenous Peoples Day.

The landing of Columbus also came to be commemorated in Spain and Italy. In many of the Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas, the landing is observed as Día de la Raza ("Day of the Race" or "Day of the People"). Rather than celebrating Columbus's arrival in the New World, many observers of Día de la Raza celebrate the indigenous peoples of Latin America and the culture that developed over the centuries as their heritage melded with that of the Spanish explorers who followed Columbus. In some countries religious ceremonies are an important part of the observances.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

## History of Easter

Easter, which celebrates Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, is Christianity's most important holiday. It has been called a moveable feast because it doesn't fall on a set date every year, as most holidays do. Instead, Christian churches in the West celebrate Easter on the first Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox on March 21. Therefore, Easter is observed anywhere between March 22 and April 25 every year. Orthodox Christians use the Julian calendar to calculate when Easter will occur and typically celebrate the holiday a week or two after the Western churches, which follow the Gregorian calendar. The exact origins of this religious feast day's name are unknown. Some sources claim the word Easter is derived from Eostre, a Teutonic goddess of spring and fertility. Other accounts trace Easter to the Latin term hebdomada alba, or white week, an ancient reference to Easter week and the white clothing donned by people who were baptized during that time. Through a translation error, the term later appeared as esostarum in Old High German, which eventually became Easter in English. In Spanish, Easter is known as Pascua; in French, Paques. These words are derived from the Greek and Latin Pascha or Pasch, for Passover. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection occurred after he went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (or Pesach in Hebrew), the Jewish festival commemorating the ancient Israelites' exodus from slavery in Egypt. Pascha eventually came to mean Easter.

Easter is really an entire season of the Christian church year, as opposed to a single-day observance. Lent, the 40-day period leading up to Easter Sunday, is a time of reflection and penance and represents the 40 days that Jesus spent alone in the wilderness before starting his ministry, a time in which Christians believe he survived various temptations by the devil. The day before Lent, known as Fat Tuesday, is a last hurrah of food and fun before the fasting begins. The week preceding Easter is called Holy Week and includes Maundy Thursday, which commemorates Jesus' last supper with his disciples; Good Friday, which honors the day of his crucifixion; and Holy Saturday, which focuses on the transition between the crucifixion and resurrection. The 50-day period following Easter Sunday is called Eastertide and includes a celebration of Jesus' ascension into heaven.

In addition to Easter's religious significance, it also has a commercial side, as evidenced by the mounds of jelly beans and marshmallow chicks that appear in stores each spring. As with Christmas, over the centuries various folk customs and pagan traditions, including Easter eggs, bunnies, baskets and candy, have become a standard part of this holy holiday.

You won't find them in the Bible, but many cherished Easter traditions—from the Easter bunny to decorating and hunting for eggs—have been around for centuries. Where did these prevalent holiday symbols come from?

### **Easter Bunny**

The Bible makes no mention of a long-eared, short-tailed creature who delivers decorated eggs to well-behaved children on Easter Sunday; nevertheless, the Easter bunny has become a prominent symbol of Christianity's most important holiday. The exact origins of this mythical mammal are unclear, but rabbits,

known to be prolific procreators, are an ancient symbol of fertility and new life. According to some sources, the Easter bunny first arrived in America in the 1700s with German immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania and transported their tradition of an egg-laying hare called "Osterhase" or "Oschter Haws." Their children made nests in which this creature could lay its colored eggs. Eventually, the custom spread across the U.S. and the fabled rabbit's Easter morning deliveries expanded to include chocolate and other types of candy and gifts, while decorated baskets replaced nests. Additionally, children often left out carrots for the bunny in case he got hungry from all his hopping.

## **Easter Eggs**

Easter is a religious holiday, but some of its customs, such as Easter eggs, are likely linked to pagan traditions. The egg, an ancient symbol of new life, has been associated with pagan festivals celebrating spring. From a Christian perspective, Easter eggs are said to represent Jesus' emergence from the tomb and resurrection. Decorating eggs for Easter is a tradition that dates back to at least the 13th century, according to some sources. One explanation for this custom is that eggs were formerly a forbidden food during the Lenten season, so people would paint and decorate them to mark the end of the period of penance and fasting, then eat them on Easter as a celebration.

Easter egg hunts and egg rolling are two popular egg-related traditions. In the U.S., the White House Easter Egg Roll, a race in which children push decorated, hard-boiled eggs across the White House lawn, is an annual event held the Monday after Easter. The first official White House egg roll occurred in 1878, when Rutherford B. Hayes was president. The event has no religious significance, although some people have considered egg rolling symbolic of the stone blocking Jesus' tomb being rolled away, leading to his resurrection.

## **Easter Candy**

Easter is the second best-selling candy holiday in America, after Halloween. Among the most popular sweet treats associated with this day are chocolate eggs, which date back to early 19th century Europe. Eggs have long been associated with Easter as a symbol of new life and Jesus' resurrection. Another egg-shaped candy, the jelly bean, became associated with Easter in the 1930s (although the jelly bean's origins reportedly date all the way back to a Biblical-era concoction called a Turkish Delight). According to the National Confectioners Association, over 16 billion jelly beans are made in the U.S. each year for Easter, enough to fill a giant egg measuring 89 feet high and 60 feet wide. For the past decade, the top-selling non-chocolate Easter candy has been the marshmallow Peep, a sugary, pastel-colored confection. Bethlehem, Pennsylvania-based candy manufacturer Just Born (founded by Russian immigrant Sam Born in 1923) began selling Peeps in the 1950s. The original Peeps were handmade, marshmallow-flavored yellow chicks, but other shapes and flavors were later introduced, including chocolate mousse bunnies.



## Easter Parade

In New York City, the Easter Parade tradition dates back to the mid-1800s, when the upper crust of society would attend Easter services at various Fifth Avenue churches then stroll outside afterward, showing off their new spring outfits and hats. Average citizens started showing up along Fifth Avenue to check out the action. The tradition reached its peak by the mid-20th century, and in 1948, the popular film *Easter Parade* was released, starring Fred Astaire and Judy Garland and featuring the music of Irving Berlin. The title song includes the lyrics: "In your Easter bonnet, with all the frills upon it/You'll be the grandest lady in the Easter parade."

The Easter Parade tradition lives on in Manhattan, with Fifth Avenue from 49th Street to 57th Street being shut down during the day to traffic. Participants often sport elaborately decorated bonnets and hats. The event has no religious significance, but sources note that Easter processions have been a part of Christianity since its earliest days. Today, other cities across America also have their own parades.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

### History of Flag Day

On June 14, 1917, as the soldiers of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) travel to join the Allies on the battlefields of World War I in France, United States President Woodrow Wilson addresses the nation's public on the annual celebration of Flag Day.

Just the year before, on May 30, 1916, Wilson had officially proclaimed June 14 "Flag Day" as a commemoration of the "Stars and Stripes" adopted as the national flag on June 14, 1777, when the design featured just 13 stars representing the original 13 states.

In his Flag Day address on June 14, 1917, barely two months after the American entry into World War I, Wilson spoke strongly of the need to confront an enemy, Germany, that had, as he had said in his April 2 war message to Congress, violated the principles of international democracy and led the world into "the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance." In the June 14 speech, after repeating the distinction he had made in earlier speeches between the German people and their leaders, Wilson absolved the former of guilt and listed the numerous transgressions of the latter, U-boat warfare, espionage, the attempt to build an alliance with Mexico against the U.S. that had provoked the U.S. into declaring war.

The "military masters of Germany," Wilson declared, were a "sinister power that has at last stretched its ugly talons out and drawn blood from us." He also asserted that Germany, at the head of the Central Powers, had started the war to create "a broad belt of power across the very center of Europe and beyond the Mediterranean into the heart of Asia." Most disturbingly for pacifist listeners and critics of the speech, Wilson dismissed all previous peace proposals, given the fact that they had all been based on terms favorable to Germany. As journalist Philip Snowden wrote in the *Labour Leader*, "Six months ago President Wilson was the greatest hope for peace. Today he is probably the greatest obstacle to it."

On a less rhetorical and more practical note, Wilson also declared in his Flag Day speech that the initial transport of AEF troops would be followed, as quickly as possible, by the departure of more soldiers for Europe. In fact, the first U.S. troops arrived in France just 12 days later, on June 26. Though it would be more than a year before they could be trained and organized enough to play a significant role on the battlefields alongside the French and British soldiers, the eventual impact of the American entrance into World War I, both in terms of manpower, resources and economic assistance to the Allies would be significant.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

### History of Groundhog Day

On February 2, 1887, Groundhog Day, featuring a rodent meteorologist, is celebrated for the first time at Gobbler's Knob in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. According to tradition, if a groundhog comes out of its hole on this day and sees its shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter weather; no shadow means an early spring.

Groundhog Day has its roots in the ancient Christian tradition of Candlemas Day, when clergy would bless and distribute candles needed for winter. The candles represented how long and cold the winter would be. Germans expanded on this concept by selecting an animal--the hedgehog--as a means of predicting weather. Once they came to America, German settlers in Pennsylvania continued the tradition, although they switched from hedgehogs to groundhogs, which were plentiful in the Keystone State.

Groundhogs, also called woodchucks and whose scientific name is *Marmota monax*, typically weigh 12 to 15 pounds and live six to eight years. They eat vegetables and fruits, whistle when they're frightened or looking for a mate and can climb trees and swim. They go into hibernation in the late fall; during this time, their body temperatures drop significantly, their heartbeats slow from 80 to five beats per minute and they can lose 30 percent of their body fat. In February, male groundhogs emerge from their burrows to look for a mate (not to predict the weather) before going underground again. They come out of hibernation for good in March.

In 1887, a newspaper editor belonging to a group of groundhog hunters from Punxsutawney called the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club declared that Phil, the Punxsutawney groundhog, was America's only true weather-forecasting groundhog. The line of groundhogs that have since been known as Phil might be America's most famous groundhogs, but other towns across North America now have their own weather-predicting rodents, from Birmingham Bill to Staten Island Chuck to Shubenacadie Sam in Canada.

In 1993, the movie *Groundhog Day* starring Bill Murray popularized the usage of "groundhog day" to mean something that is repeated over and over. Today, tens of thousands of people converge on Gobbler's Knob in Punxsutawney each February 2 to witness Phil's prediction. The Punxsutawney Groundhog Club hosts a three-day celebration featuring entertainment and activities.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

## History of Halloween

### **Ancient Origins**

Halloween's origins date back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced sow-in).

The Celts, who lived 2,000 years ago in the area that is now Ireland, the United Kingdom, and northern France, celebrated their new year on November 1. This day marked the end of summer and the harvest and the beginning of the dark, cold winter, a time of year that was often associated with human death. Celts believed that on the night before the new year, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred. On the night of October 31, they celebrated Samhain, when it was believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to earth. In addition to causing trouble and damaging crops, Celts thought that the presence of the otherworldly spirits made it easier for the Druids, or Celtic priests, to make predictions about the future. For a people entirely dependent on the volatile natural world, these prophecies were an important source of comfort and direction during the long, dark winter.

To commemorate the event, Druids built huge sacred bonfires, where the people gathered to burn crops and animals as sacrifices to the Celtic deities.

During the celebration, the Celts wore costumes, typically consisting of animal heads and skins, and attempted to tell each other's fortunes. When the celebration was over, they re-lit their hearth fires, which they had extinguished earlier that evening, from the sacred bonfire to help protect them during the coming winter.

By A.D. 43, Romans had conquered the majority of Celtic territory. In the course of the four hundred years that they ruled the Celtic lands, two festivals of Roman origin were combined with the traditional Celtic celebration of Samhain.

The first was Feralia, a day in late October when the Romans traditionally commemorated the passing of the dead. The second was a day to honor Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees. The symbol of Pomona is the apple and the incorporation of this celebration into Samhain probably explains the tradition of "bobbing" for apples that is practiced today on Halloween.

By the 800s, the influence of Christianity had spread into Celtic lands. In the seventh century, Pope Boniface IV designated November 1 All Saints' Day, a time to honor saints and martyrs. It is widely believed today that the pope was attempting to replace the Celtic festival of the dead with a related, but church-sanctioned holiday. The celebration was also called All-hallows or All-hallowmas (from Middle English Alholowmesse meaning All Saints' Day) and the night before it, the night of Samhain, began to be called All-hallows Eve and, eventually, Halloween. Even later, in A.D. 1000, the church would make November 2 All Souls' Day, a day to honor the dead. It was celebrated similarly to Samhain, with big bonfires, parades, and dressing up in costumes as saints, angels, and devils. Together, the three celebrations, the eve of All Saints', All Saints', and All Souls', were called Hallowmas.

## Halloween Comes to America

As European immigrants came to America, they brought their varied Halloween customs with them. Because of the rigid Protestant belief systems that characterized early New England, celebration of Halloween in colonial times was extremely limited there.

It was much more common in Maryland and the southern colonies. As the beliefs and customs of different European ethnic groups, as well as the American Indians, meshed, a distinctly American version of Halloween began to emerge. The first celebrations included "play parties," public events held to celebrate the harvest, where neighbors would share stories of the dead, tell each other's fortunes, dance, and sing. Colonial Halloween festivities also featured the telling of ghost stories and mischief-making of all kinds. By the middle of the nineteenth century, annual autumn festivities were common, but Halloween was not yet celebrated everywhere in the country.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, America was flooded with new immigrants. These new immigrants, especially the millions of Irish fleeing Ireland's potato famine of 1846, helped to popularize the celebration of Halloween nationally. Taking from Irish and English traditions, Americans began to dress up in costumes and go house to house asking for food or money, a practice that eventually became today's "trick-or-treat" tradition. Young women believed that, on Halloween, they could divine the name or appearance of their future husband by doing tricks with yarn, apple parings, or mirrors.

In the late 1800s, there was a move in America to mold Halloween into a holiday more about community and neighborly get-togethers, than about ghosts, pranks, and witchcraft.

At the turn of the century, Halloween parties for both children and adults became the most common way to celebrate the day. Parties focused on games, foods of the season, and festive costumes. Parents were encouraged by newspapers and community leaders to take anything "frightening" or "grotesque" out of Halloween celebrations. Because of their efforts, Halloween lost most of its superstitious and religious overtones by the beginning of the twentieth century.

By the 1920s and 1930s, Halloween had become a secular, but community-centered holiday, with parades and town-wide parties as the featured entertainment. Despite the best efforts of many schools and communities, vandalism began to plague Halloween celebrations in many communities during this time. By the 1950s, town leaders had successfully limited vandalism and Halloween had evolved into a holiday directed mainly at the young. Due to the high numbers of young children during the fifties baby boom, parties moved from town civic centers into the classroom or home, where they could be more easily accommodated. Between 1920 and 1950, the centuries-old practice of trick-or-treating was also revived. Trick-or-treating was a relatively inexpensive way for an entire community to share the Halloween celebration. In theory, families could also prevent tricks being played on them by providing the neighborhood children with small treats. A new American tradition was born, and it has continued to grow. Today, Americans spend an estimated \$6.9 billion annually on Halloween, making it the country's second largest commercial holiday.

## Today's Traditions

The American tradition of "trick-or-treating" probably dates back to the early All Souls' Day parades in England. During the festivities, poor citizens would beg for food and families would give them pastries called "soul cakes" in return for their promise to pray for the family's dead relatives.

The distribution of soul cakes was encouraged by the church as a way to replace the ancient practice of leaving food and wine for roaming spirits. The practice, which was referred to as "going a-souling" was eventually taken up by children who would visit the houses in their neighborhood and be given ale, food, and money.

The tradition of dressing in costume for Halloween has both European and Celtic roots. Hundreds of years ago, winter was an uncertain and frightening time. Food supplies often ran low and, for the many people afraid of the dark, the short days of winter were full of constant worry. On Halloween, when it was believed that ghosts came back to the earthly world, people thought that they would encounter ghosts if they left their homes. To avoid being recognized by these ghosts, people would wear masks when they left their homes after dark so that the ghosts would mistake them for fellow spirits. On Halloween, to keep ghosts away from their houses, people would place bowls of food outside their homes to appease the ghosts and prevent them from attempting to enter.

## Superstitions

Halloween has always been a holiday filled with mystery, magic and superstition. It began as a Celtic end-of-summer festival during which people felt especially close to deceased relatives and friends. For these friendly spirits, they set places at the dinner table, left treats on doorsteps and along the side of the road and lit candles to help loved ones find their way back to the spirit world.

Today's Halloween ghosts are often depicted as more fearsome and malevolent, and our customs and superstitions are scarier too. We avoid crossing paths with black cats, afraid that they might bring us bad luck. This idea has its roots in the Middle Ages, when many people believed that witches avoided detection by turning themselves into cats. We try not to walk under ladders for the same reason. This superstition may have come from the ancient Egyptians, who believed that triangles were sacred; it also may have something to do with the fact that walking under a leaning ladder tends to be fairly unsafe. And around Halloween, especially, we try to avoid breaking mirrors, stepping on cracks in the road or spilling salt.

But what about the Halloween traditions and beliefs that today's trick-or-treaters have forgotten all about? Many of these obsolete rituals focused on the future instead of the past and the living instead of the dead. In particular, many had to do with helping young women identify their future husbands and reassuring them that they would someday--with luck, by next Halloween!--be married.

In 18th-century Ireland, a matchmaking cook might bury a ring in her mashed potatoes on Halloween night, hoping to bring true love to the diner who found it. In Scotland, fortune-tellers recommended that an eligible young woman name a hazelnut for each of her suitors and then toss the nuts into the fireplace. The nut that burned to ashes rather than popping or exploding, the story went, represented the girl's future husband. (In some versions of this legend, confusingly, the opposite was true: The nut that burned away symbolized a love that would not last.) Another tale had it that if a young woman ate a sugary concoction made out of walnuts, hazelnuts and nutmeg before bed on Halloween night, she would dream about her future husband. Young women tossed apple-peels over their shoulders, hoping that the peels would fall on the floor in the shape of their future husbands' initials; tried to learn about their futures by peering at egg yolks floating in a bowl of water; and stood in front of mirrors in darkened rooms, holding candles and looking over their shoulders for their husbands' faces.

Other rituals were more competitive. At some Halloween parties, the first guest to find a burr on a chestnut-hunt would be the first to marry; at others, the first successful apple-bobber would be the first down the aisle.

Of course, whether we're asking for romantic advice or trying to avoid seven years of bad luck, each one of these Halloween superstitions relies on the good will of the very same "spirits" whose presence the early Celts felt so keenly. Ours is not such a different holiday after all

### **Jack O' Lanterns**

Pumpkin carving is a popular part of modern America's Halloween celebration. Come October, pumpkins can be found everywhere in the country from doorsteps to dinner tables. Despite the widespread carving that goes on in this country every autumn, few Americans really know why or when the jack o'lantern tradition began. Or, for that matter, whether the pumpkin is a fruit or a vegetable. Read on to find out!

People have been making jack o'lanterns at Halloween for centuries. The practice originated from an Irish myth about a man nicknamed "Stingy Jack." According to the story, Stingy Jack invited the Devil to have a drink with him. True to his name, Stingy Jack didn't want to pay for his drink, so he convinced the Devil to turn himself into a coin that Jack could use to buy their drinks. Once the Devil did so, Jack decided to keep the money and put it into his pocket next to a silver cross, which prevented the Devil from changing back into his original form. Jack eventually freed the Devil, under the condition that he would not bother Jack for one year and that, should Jack die, he would not claim his soul. The next year, Jack again tricked the Devil into climbing into a tree to pick a piece of fruit. While he was up in the tree, Jack carved a sign of the cross into the tree's bark so that the Devil could not come down until the Devil promised Jack not to bother him for ten more years.

Soon after, Jack died. As the legend goes, God would not allow such an unsavory figure into heaven. The Devil, upset by the trick Jack had played on him and keeping his word not to claim his soul, would not allow Jack into hell. He sent Jack off into the dark night with only a burning coal to light his way. Jack put the coal into a

carved-out turnip and has been roaming the Earth with ever since. The Irish began to refer to this ghostly figure as "Jack of the Lantern," and then, simply "Jack O'Lantern."

In Ireland and Scotland, people began to make their own versions of Jack's lanterns by carving scary faces into turnips or potatoes and placing them into windows or near doors to frighten away Stingy Jack and other wandering evil spirits. In England, large beets are used. Immigrants from these countries brought the jack o'lantern tradition with them when they came to the United States. They soon found that pumpkins, a fruit native to America, make perfect jack o'lanterns.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)



## History of Independence Day

Independence Day is more than a chance for family and friends throughout the country to gather for barbecues and fireworks displays, it is an annual celebration to commemorate the courage and faith of our founding fathers in their pursuit of liberty.

### **Background**

The annual celebration of nationhood. It commemorates the passage of the Declaration of Independence by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776.

The Congress had voted in favour of independence from Great Britain on July 2 but did not actually complete the process of revising the Declaration of Independence, originally drafted by Thomas Jefferson in consultation with fellow committee members John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and William Livingston, until two days later. The celebration was initially modeled on that of the king's birthday, which had been marked annually by bell ringing, bonfires, solemn processions, and oratory. Such festivals had long played a significant role in the Anglo-American political tradition. Especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, when dynastic and religious controversies racked the British Empire (and much of the rest of Europe), the choice of which anniversaries of historic events were celebrated and which were lamented had clear political meanings. The ritual of toasting the king and other patriot-heroes—or of criticizing them—became an informal kind of political speech, further formalized in mid-18th century when the toasts given at taverns and banquets began to be reprinted in newspapers.

### **Early Years**

In the early stages of the revolutionary movement in the colonies during the 1760s and early 1770s, patriots used such celebrations to proclaim their resistance to Parliament's legislation while lauding the king as the real defender of English liberties. However, the marking of the first days of independence during the summer of 1776 actually took the form in many towns of a mock funeral for the king, whose "death" symbolized the end of monarchy and tyranny and the rebirth of liberty.

During the early years of the republic, Independence Day was commemorated with parades, oratory, and toasting, in ceremonies that celebrated the existence of the new nation. These rites played an equally important role in the evolving federal political system. With the rise of informal political parties, they provided venues for leaders and constituents to tie local and national contests to independence and the issues facing the national polity. By the mid-1790s, the two nascent political parties held separate, partisan Independence Day festivals in most larger towns. Perhaps for this reason, Independence Day became the model for a series of (often short-lived) celebrations that sometimes contained more explicit political resonance, such as Washington's birthday and the anniversary of Jefferson's inauguration while he served as president (1801–09).

## **19th Century Celebrations**

The bombastic torrent of words that characterized Independence Day during the 19th century made it both a serious occasion and one sometimes open to ridicule—like the increasingly popular and democratic political process itself in that period. With the growth and diversification of American society, the Fourth of July commemoration became a patriotic tradition which many groups—not just political parties—sought to claim. Abolitionists, women's rights advocates, the temperance movement, and opponents of immigration (nativists) all seized the day and its observance, in the process often declaring that they could not celebrate with the entire community while an un-American perversion of their rights prevailed.

## **A Modern Holiday**

With the rise of leisure, the Fourth also emerged as a major midsummer holiday. The prevalence of heavy drinking and the many injuries caused by setting off fireworks prompted reformers of the late 19th and the early 20th century to mount a Safe and Sane Fourth of July movement. During the later 20th century, although it remained a national holiday marked by parades, concerts of patriotic music, and fireworks displays, Independence Day declined in importance as a venue for politics. It remains a potent symbol of national power and of specifically American qualities—even the freedom to stay at home and barbecue.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

## History of Labor Day

### Labor Day: How it Came About; What it Means

Labor Day, the first Monday in September, is a creation of the labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country.

### Founder of Labor Day

More than 100 years after the first Labor Day observance, there is still some doubt as to who first proposed the holiday for workers.

Some records show that Peter J. McGuire, general secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and a cofounder of the American Federation of Labor, was first in suggesting a day to honor those "who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold."

But Peter McGuire's place in Labor Day history has not gone unchallenged. Many believe that Matthew Maguire, a machinist, not Peter McGuire, founded the holiday. Recent research seems to support the contention that Matthew Maguire, later the secretary of Local 344 of the International Association of Machinists in Paterson, N.J., proposed the holiday in 1882 while serving as secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York. What is clear is that the Central Labor Union adopted a Labor Day proposal and appointed a committee to plan a demonstration and picnic.

### The First Labor Day

The first Labor Day holiday was celebrated on Tuesday, September 5, 1882, in New York City, in accordance with the plans of the Central Labor Union. The Central Labor Union held its second Labor Day holiday just a year later, on September 5, 1883.

In 1884 the first Monday in September was selected as the holiday, as originally proposed, and the Central Labor Union urged similar organizations in other cities to follow the example of New York and celebrate a "workingmen's holiday" on that date. The idea spread with the growth of labor organizations, and in 1885 Labor Day was celebrated in many industrial centers of the country.

### Labor Day Legislation

Through the years the nation gave increasing emphasis to Labor Day. The first governmental recognition came through municipal ordinances passed during 1885 and 1886. From them developed the movement to secure state legislation. The first state bill was introduced into the New York legislature, but the first to become law was passed by Oregon on February 21, 1887. During the year four more states — Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York — created the Labor Day holiday by legislative enactment. By the end of the decade Connecticut, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania had followed suit. By 1894, 23 other states had adopted the holiday in honor of workers, and on June 28 of that year, Congress passed an act making the first Monday in September of each year a legal holiday in the District of Columbia and the territories.

## A Nationwide Holiday

The form that the observance and celebration of Labor Day should take were outlined in the first proposal of the holiday — a street parade to exhibit to the public "the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations" of the community, followed by a festival for the recreation and amusement of the workers and their families. This became the pattern for the celebrations of Labor Day. Speeches by prominent men and women were introduced later, as more emphasis was placed upon the economic and civic significance of the holiday. Still later, by a resolution of the American Federation of Labor convention of 1909, the Sunday preceding Labor Day was adopted as Labor Sunday and dedicated to the spiritual and educational aspects of the labor movement.

The character of the Labor Day celebration has undergone a change in recent years, especially in large industrial centers where mass displays and huge parades have proved a problem. This change, however, is more a shift in emphasis and medium of expression. Labor Day addresses by leading union officials, industrialists, educators, clerics and government officials are given wide coverage in newspapers, radio, and television.

The vital force of labor added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy. It is appropriate, therefore, that the nation pay tribute on Labor Day to the creator of so much of the nation's strength, freedom, and leadership — the American worker.

Taken from the US Department of Labor

### History of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

President Ronald Reagan signs a bill in the White House Rose Garden designating a federal holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., to be observed on the third Monday of January.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born in Atlanta in 1929, the son of a Baptist minister. He received a doctorate degree in theology and in 1955 organized the first major protest of the civil rights movement: the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott. Influenced by Mohandas Gandhi, he advocated nonviolent civil disobedience to racial segregation. The peaceful protests he led throughout the American South were often met with violence, but King and his followers persisted, and the movement gained momentum.

A powerful orator, he appealed to Christian and American ideals and won growing support from the federal government and Northern whites. In 1963, he led his massive March on Washington, in which he delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" address. In 1964, the civil rights movement achieved two of its greatest successes: the ratification of the 24th Amendment, which abolished the poll tax, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited racial discrimination in employment and education and outlawed racial segregation in public facilities. In October of that year, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He donated the prize money, valued at \$54,600, to the civil rights movement.

In the late 1960s, King openly criticized U.S. involvement in Vietnam and turned his efforts to winning economic equality for poorer Americans. By that time, the civil rights movement had begun to fracture, with activists such as Stokely Carmichael rejecting King's vision of nonviolent integration in favor of African American self-reliance and self-defense. In 1968, King intended to revive his movement through an interracial "Poor People's March" on Washington, but on April 4 escaped white convict James Earl Ray assassinated him in Memphis, Tennessee.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

## History of May Day

The origin of the May Day as a day for celebration dates back to the days, even before the birth of Christ. And like many ancient festivals it too has a Pagan connection. For the Druids of the British Isles, May 1 was the second most important holiday of the year. Because, it was when the festival of Beltane held. It was thought that the day divides the year into half. The other half was to be ended with the Samhain on November 1. Those days the May Day custom was the setting of new fire. It was one of those ancient New Year rites performed throughout the world. And the fire itself was thought to lend life to the burgeoning springtime sun. Cattle were driven through the fire to purify them. Men, with their sweethearts, passed through the smoke for seeing good luck.

Then the Romans came to occupy the British Isles. The beginning of May was a very popular feast time for the Romans. It was devoted primarily to the worship of Flora, the goddess of flowers. It was in her honor a five day celebration, called the Floralia, was held. The five day festival would start from April 28 and end on May 2. The Romans brought in the rituals of the Floralia festival in the British Isles. And gradually the rituals of the Floralia were added to those of the Beltane. And many of today's customs on the May Day bear a stark similarity with those combined traditions.

May day observance was discouraged during the Puritans. Though, it was revived when the Puritans lost power in England, it didn't have the same robust force. Gradually, it came to be regarded more as a day of joy and merriment for the kids, rather than a day of observing the ancient fertility rights.

By the Middle Ages every English village had its Maypole. The bringing in of the Maypole from the woods was a great occasion and was accompanied by much rejoicing and merrymaking. The Maypoles were of all sizes. And one village would vie with another to show who could produce the tallest Maypole. Maypoles were usually set up for the day in small towns, but in London and the larger towns they were erected permanently.

The Maypole tradition suffered a setback for about a couple of decades since the Puritan Long Parliament stopped it in 1644. However, with the return of the Stuarts, the Maypole reappeared and the festivities of May Day were again enjoyed. The changes brought about by the Reformation included attempts to do away with practices that were obviously of pagan origin. But the Maypole, or, May tree, was not issued in practice at the behest of the second Stuart.

Although they succeeded in doing this, Maypole with most of the other traditions, many still survived. And Maypole is one of them. In France it merely changed its name. In Perigord and elsewhere, the May Tree became the "Tree of Liberty" and was the symbol of the French Revolution. Despite the new nomenclature, the peasants treated the tree in the same traditional spirit. And they would dance around it the same way as their forefathers had always done.

Trees have been linked to a part of celebration, perhaps, to the days ancient New Year rites. The association of trees to this celebration has come riding on the back of the spring festival in ancient Europe. Trees have always been the symbol of the great vitality and fertility of nature and were often used at the spring festivals

of antiquity. The anthropologist E. O. James finds a strong relationship between the ancient tree related traditions of the British and the Romans. According to James' description, as a part of the May Day celebration, the youths in old Europe cut down a tree, lopped off the branches leaving a few at the top. They then wrapped it round with violets like the figure of the Attis, the ancient Roman god. At sunrise, they used to take it back to their villages by blowing horns and flutes. In a similar manner, the sacred pine tree representing the god Attis was carried in procession to the temple of Cybele on Rome's Palatine Hill during the Spring Festival of March 22.

The Puritans frowned on May Day, so the day has never been celebrated with as much enthusiasm in the United States as in Great Britain. But the tradition of celebrating May Day by dancing and singing around a maypole, tied with colorful streamers or ribbons, survived as a part of the English tradition. The kids celebrating the day by moving back and forth around the pole with the the streamers, choosing of May queen, and hanging of May baskets on the doorknobs of folks -- are all the leftovers of the old European traditions.

May Day is a time to celebrate the onset of May, the month that sees the Earth reaching itself ready to burgeon to its maximum capacity. Since the ancient days in England there prevailed a custom of "bringing in the May" on May Day. This was why people would go to the woods in the early dawn. There they picked flowers and lopped off tender branches to bring them in and decorate the houses.

#### May Day and flowers:

It has always been strongly associated with flowers. Partly may be because of their availability in abundance. But that is not all. There are other reasons as well. For instance, the May Garland and beggar girls.

Making garland is one of those ancient May Day customs that has survived still today. May garlands, is meant for the coming of summer. May garlands were also used while begging by the kids from door to door. At other times of the year begging would have been an offence. But if it was done at May time with a garland. This is why groups of small girls, crowned with leaves and flowers, went from door to door singing and begging.

#### Maypole dance:

On the first day of May, English villagers woke up at daybreak to roam the countryside gathering blossoming flowers and branches. A towering maypole was set up on the village green. This pole, usually made of the trunk of a tall birch tree, was decorated with bright field flowers. The villagers then danced and sang around the maypole, accompanied by a piper.

#### May Queen:

Also part of the celebration was the crowning of a May Queen. When the sun rose, the maypole was decked with leaves, flowers and ribbons while dancing and singing went on around it. The Queen was chosen from the pretty girls of the village to reign over the May Day festivities. Crowned on a flower-covered throne, she was drawn in a decorated cart by young men or her maids of honor to the village green. She would be crowned there right on the green spot. She was set in an arbor of flowers and often the dancing was performed around her, rather than around the Maypole.

#### Morris Dance:

Another colorful feature of the this celebration was the energetic Morris dance. Groups of men dance together in costumes of traditional characters, often animal-men, in ceremonial folk dances. The central figure of the dances, usually an animal-man, varies considerably in importance. The name Morris is also associated with the horn dance held each year at Abbots Bromley, Staffordshire, England. This dance-procession includes

six animal-men bearing deer antlers, three white and three black sets; a man-woman, or Maid Marian, and a fool. These dances are still performed in England. And also survive in various parts of Europe, Asia, and, America. One such comparable surviving animal custom is the May Day procession of a man-horse, notably at Padstow, Cornwall. There, the central figure, "Oss Oss," is a witch doctor disguised as a horse and wearing a medicine mask. The dancers are attendants who sing the May Day song, beat drums, and in turn act the horse or dance in attendance. The name Morris is also associated with groups of mummers who act, rather than dance, the death-and-survival rite at the turn of the year.

Throughout history, the Morris seems to have been common. It was imported from village festivities into popular entertainment after the invention of the court masque by Henry VIII. The word Morris apparently derived from "morisco," meaning "Moorish." Cecil Sharp, whose collecting of Morris dances preserved many from extinction, suggested that it might have arisen from the dancers' blacking their faces as part of the necessary ritual disguise. The name Morris dance is sometimes loosely applied to sword dances in which a group of men weave their swords into intricate patterns.

Facewashing in May Dew:

Washing the face with May dew was yet another custom. There was a belief among the women in Great Britain and other parts of Europe those days that May Day dew has the power to restore beauty. This why in the Ozark Mountains, a cradle of American folklore, girls used to nurture a belief that having their faces washed with the early dawn dews on the May Day would help to be married to the man of her choice.

Taken from [www.theholidayspot.com](http://www.theholidayspot.com)



## History of Memorial Day

Memorial Day was originally known as Decoration Day because it was a time set aside to honor the nation's Civil War dead by decorating their graves. It was first widely observed on May 30, 1868, to commemorate the sacrifices of Civil War soldiers, by proclamation of General John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of former sailors and soldiers. On May 5, 1868, Logan declared in General Order No. 11 that:

*The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land. In this observance no form of ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit.*

During the first celebration of Decoration Day, General James Garfield made a speech at Arlington National Cemetery, after which 5,000 participants helped to decorate the graves of the more than 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried in the cemetery.

This 1868 celebration was inspired by local observances of the day in several towns throughout America that had taken place in the three years since the Civil War. In fact, several Northern and Southern cities claim to be the birthplace of Memorial Day, including Columbus, Miss.; Macon, Ga.; Richmond, Va.; Boalsburg, Pa.; and Carbondale, Ill.

In 1966, the federal government, under the direction of President Lyndon Johnson, declared Waterloo, N.Y., the official birthplace of Memorial Day. They chose Waterloo—which had first celebrated the day on May 5, 1866—because the town had made Memorial Day an annual, community-wide event during which businesses closed and residents decorated the graves of soldiers with flowers and flags.

By the late 1800s, many communities across the country had begun to celebrate Memorial Day and, after World War I, observances also began to honor those who had died in all of America's wars. In 1971, Congress declared Memorial Day a national holiday to be celebrated the last Monday in May. (Veterans Day, a day set aside to honor all veterans, living and dead, is celebrated each year on November 11.)

Today, Memorial Day is celebrated at Arlington National Cemetery with a ceremony in which a small American flag is placed on each grave. Also, it is customary for the president or vice-president to give a speech honoring the contributions of the dead and lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. About 5,000 people attend the ceremony annually.

Several Southern states continue to set aside a special day for honoring the Confederate dead, which is usually called Confederate Memorial Day.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

## History of the National Day of Prayer

"Fasting and prayer are religious exercises; the enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has a right to determine for itself the time for these exercises, and the objects proper for them, according to their own particular tenets; and right can never be safer than in their hands, where the Constitution has deposited it." Thomas Jefferson, 1808

Because of the faith of many of our founding fathers, public prayer and national days of prayer have a long-standing and significant history in American tradition. The Supreme Court affirmed the right of state legislatures to open their sessions with prayer in *Marsh vs. Chambers* (1983).

The National Day of Prayer is a vital part of our heritage. Since the first call to prayer in 1775, when the Continental Congress asked the colonies to pray for wisdom in forming a nation, the call to prayer has continued through our history, including President Lincoln's proclamation of a day of "humiliation, fasting, and prayer" in 1863. In 1952, a joint resolution by Congress, signed by President Truman, declared an annual, national day of prayer. In 1988, the law was amended and signed by President Reagan, permanently setting the day as the first Thursday of every May. Each year, the president signs a proclamation, encouraging all Americans to pray on this day. Last year, all 50 state governors plus the governors of several U.S. territories signed similar proclamations.

1952 Harry S. Truman declares a National Day of Prayer and signs into law an annual observance thereof – United States Congress passed Joint Resolution 382 on April 17, 1952/ President Truman signs Public Law 82-324 (Public Law 82-324; 66 Stat. 64—April 17, 1952).

1988 Ronald Reagan signs into law the designation of the first Thursday in May as the annual observance for the National Day of Prayer – President Reagan signs Public Law 100-307 January 25, 1988, in the Second Session of the One Hundredth Congress (Public Law 100-307—May 5, 1988).

1998 Pub. L. 105-225, August 12, 1998, 112 Stat. 1258: The President shall issue each year a proclamation designating the first Thursday in May as a National Day of Prayer on which the people of the United States may turn to God in prayer and meditation at churches, in groups, and as individuals.

[View the Historical Time Line>>](#)

### **The National Day of Prayer is Significant**

The National Day of Prayer has great significance for us as a nation. It enables us to recall and to teach the way in which our founding fathers sought the wisdom of God when faced with critical decisions. It stands as a call to us to humbly come before God, seeking His guidance for our leaders and His grace upon us as a people. The unanimous passage of the bill establishing the National Day of Prayer as an annual event, signifies that prayer is as important to our nation today as it was in the beginning.

Like Thanksgiving or Christmas, this day has become a national observance placed on all Hallmark calendars and observed annually across the nation and in Washington, D.C. Last year, local, state and federal observances were held from sunrise in Maine to sunset in Hawaii, uniting Americans from all socio-economic, political and ethnic backgrounds in prayer for our nation. It is estimated that more than two million people attended more than 30,000 observances organized by approximately 40,000 volunteers. At state capitols, county court houses, on the steps of city halls, and in schools, businesses, churches and homes, people stopped their activities and gathered for prayer.

## **The National Day of Prayer is Ours**

The National Day of Prayer belongs to all Americans. It is a day that transcends differences, bringing together citizens from all backgrounds. Mrs. Shirley Dobson, NDP chairman, reminds us: "We have lost many of our freedoms in America because we have been asleep. I feel if we do not become involved and support the annual National Day of Prayer, we could end up forfeiting this freedom, too."

### **History Summary**

**1775** – The first Continental Congress called for a National Day of Prayer

**1863** – Abraham Lincoln called for such a day.

**1952** – Congress established NDP as an annual event by a joint resolution, signed into law by President Truman (82-324)

**1988** – The law was amended and signed by President Reagan, designating the NDP as the first Thursday in May (100-307).

Taken from [www.nationaldayofprayer.org](http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org)

## History of New Year's Day

Social, cultural, and religious observances worldwide that celebrate the beginning of the new year. Such festivals are among the oldest and the most universally observed.

The earliest-known record of a New Year festival dates from about 2000 BC in Mesopotamia, where in Babylonia the new year (Akitu) began with the new moon after the spring equinox (mid March) and in Assyria with the new moon nearest the autumn equinox (mid September). For the Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Persians the year began with the autumn equinox (September 21), and for the early Greeks it began with the winter solstice (December 21). On the Roman republican calendar the year began on March 1, but after 153 BC the official date was January 1, which was continued in the Julian calendar of 46 BC.

In early medieval times most of Christian Europe regarded March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation, as the beginning of the new year, although New Year's Day was observed on December 25 in Anglo-Saxon England. William the Conqueror decreed that the year begin on January 1, but England later joined the rest of Christendom and adopted March 25. The Gregorian calendar, adopted in 1582 by the Roman Catholic church, restored January 1 as New Year's Day, and most European countries gradually followed suit: Scotland, in 1660; Germany and Denmark, about 1700; England, in 1752; and Russia, in 1918.

Those religions and cultures using a lunar calendar have continued to observe the beginning of the year on days other than January 1. In the Jewish religious calendar, for example, the year begins on Rosh Hashana, the first day of the month of Tishri, which falls between September 6 and October 5. The Muslim calendar normally has 354 days in each year, with the new year beginning with the month of Muharram. The Chinese New Year is celebrated officially for a month beginning in late January or early February. Other Asian cultures celebrate the day at various times of the year. In southern India the Tamil celebrate the new year at the winter solstice; Tibetans observe the day in February; and in Thailand the day is celebrated in March or April. The Japanese have a three-day celebration January 1–3.

Many of the customs of New Year festivals note the passing of time with both regret and anticipation. The baby as a symbol of the new year dates to the ancient Greeks, with an old man representing the year that has passed. The Romans derived the name for the month of January from their god Janus, who had two faces, one looking backward and the other forward. The practice of making resolutions to rid oneself of bad habits and to adopt better ones also dates to ancient times. In the West, particularly in English-speaking countries, the nostalgic Scottish ballad "Auld Lang Syne," revised by the poet Robert Burns, is often sung on New Year's Eve.

Symbolic foods are often part of the festivities. Many Europeans, for example, eat cabbage or other greens to ensure prosperity in the coming year, while people in the U.S. South favour black-eyed peas for good luck. Throughout Asia special foods such as dumplings, noodles, and rice cakes are eaten, and elaborate dishes feature ingredients whose names or appearance symbolize long life, happiness, wealth, and good fortune.

Because of the belief that what a person does on the first day of the year foretells what he will do for the remainder of the year, gatherings of friends and relatives have long been significant. The first guest to cross the threshold, or "first foot," is significant and may bring good luck if of the right physical type, which varies with location. Public gatherings, as in Times Square in New York City or in Trafalgar Square in London, draw large crowds, and the countdown to the dropping of an electronic ball in Times Square to signify the exact moment at which the new year begins is televised worldwide. The first Rose Bowl Game was played in Pasadena, California, on January 1, 1902, and college football games have come to dominate American television on New Year's Day. The Tournament of Roses parade, featuring floats constructed of live flowers, and the Mummers' Parade in Philadelphia are popular New Year's Day events.

Many people mark the new year with religious observances, as, for example, on Rosh Hashana. Buddhist monks are presented with gifts on the day, and Hindus make oblations to the gods. In Japan visits are sometimes made to Shinto shrines of tutelary deities or to Buddhist temples. Chinese make offerings to gods of the hearth and wealth and to ancestors.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

### **History of Patriot Day**

Holiday observed in the United States on September 11 to commemorate the lives of those who died in the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Virginia and those who perished when the hijacked United Airlines Flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania. The holiday also recognizes those who died attempting to rescue people trapped by the attacks.

By a joint resolution of the U.S. Congress on Dec. 18, 2001, September 11 was designated as Patriot Day. The resolution calls for the president of the United States to issue a yearly proclamation requesting that all U.S. flags be flown at half-staff. Further, Americans are asked to honour the dead with a moment of silence beginning at 8:46 AM, Eastern Standard Time, the time that the first airplane struck the World Trade Center, and to respect the ceremonies of remembrance when they are conducted. Prior to passage of the resolution, several other names had been proposed for the day, such as the National Day of Remembrance and the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

## History of Presidents' Day

The observance of Presidents' Day in the United States is reminiscent of the Indian fable of the blind men and the elephant in the sense that the holiday seems to mean something different to everybody. In looking through the local newspaper, one could easily conclude that the modern holiday was created by merchants, just so they could hold their annual Presidents' Day sales. Depending on your perspective or what part of the country you're from, Presidents' Day is intended to honor George Washington, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, or all the American presidents. And for many of us who don't get the day off from work, the holiday seems to pass almost unnoticed. So what is Presidents' Day and how did it come about?

### **Background**

According to the Gregorian or "New Style" calendar that is in use today, George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, but according to the Julian or "Old Style" calendar that was in effect in England and her colonies until 1752, his birth date was February 11th. (This is because the new calendar added eleven days to the old date to bring the calendar year into step with the astronomical year.) So back in the 1790s, while Washington was still alive, some Americans celebrated his birthday on February 11th and some on February 22nd.

Along came Abraham Lincoln, another famous US president, who was also deserving of a special day of recognition. The only problem was that he was born on February 12th, and so now we found ourselves with two presidential birthdays that fell within a short time of one another. Prior to 1968, this fact didn't seem to bother anyone and things were running along pretty smoothly in the birthday celebration department -- February 22nd was observed as a federal public holiday to honor the birthday of George Washington and February 12th was observed as a public holiday (in most states) to honor the birthday of Abraham Lincoln.

Then things changed. In 1968, the 90th Congress was determined to create a uniform system of federal Monday holidays, so they voted to shift three existing holidays (including Washington's Birthday) to Mondays. The law took effect in 1971. As a result, Washington's Birthday holiday was changed from its fixed February 22 date to the third Monday in February. This change was not without controversy. There was some concern that Washington's identity would be lost (since the third Monday in February would never fall on his birth date of February 22nd). There was also an attempt to rename the public holiday "Presidents' Day", but this stalled in committee. "It was the collective judgment of the Committee on the Judiciary," stated Mr. William Moore McCulloch (R-Ohio) "that this [naming the day "President's Day"] would be unwise. Certainly, not all Presidents are held in the same high esteem as the Father of our Country. There are many who are not inclined to pay their respects to certain Presidents. Moreover, it is probable that the members of one political party would not relish honoring a President from the other political party whether he was in office, no matter how outstanding history may find his leadership."

The single holiday observance meant that the traditional 10-day separation between Washington's Birthday (February 22) and Lincoln's Birthday (February 12) had essentially been eliminated. However, while Congress had created a uniform federal holiday law, there was not a uniform holiday title agreement among the individual states. Even though most states with individual holidays honoring Washington and Lincoln shifted their state recognition date of Washington's Birthday to correspond to the third Monday in February, some states, including California, Idaho, Tennessee, Texas and others, chose not to retain the federal holiday title and renamed their state holiday "President's Day."

From that point forward, the growing use of the term Presidents' Day was largely a marketing phenomenon, as advertisers sought a catchall phrase to capitalize on the opportunity for three-day or weeklong sales. Gradually, the phrase "Presidents' Day" took hold and today has become part of the everyday vernacular. Interestingly, in 1999, bills were introduced in both the U.S. House (HR-1363) and Senate (S-978) to specify that the legal public holiday once referred to as Washington's Birthday be "officially" called by that name once again. Both bills died in committees.

If you are a traditionalist, you'll be happy to know that even though Washington's Birthday and Lincoln's Birthday have been replaced on the federal holiday register with a single day, many communities continue to observe the original holidays by staging pageants and reenactments of important milestones in the lives of Washington and Lincoln. The National Park Service features a number of historic sites and memorials to honor the lives of these two presidents, and therefore it is not surprising to find that many of the birthday observance activities and events are held at many of these locations.

The George Washington Birthplace National Monument in Westmoreland County, VA, holds an annual birthday celebration on President's Day and on the actual birthday, with special colonial activities held throughout the day. Mount Vernon also honors George Washington with a birthday celebration weekend and an annual free day (on the third Monday of February), which usually draws between 10,000 and 18,000 visitors on that day alone.

Annual activities to commemorate Abraham Lincoln's birthday include: a February 12th wreath laying ceremony at Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site in Hodgenville, KY; Lincoln Day, held each year on the Sunday nearest February 12th at Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial in Lincoln City, IN, with a special program in the Abraham Lincoln Hall, followed by a wreath laying ceremony at Lincoln's mother's grave site; and special birthday programs at the Lincoln Home National Historic Site in Springfield, IL.

If you're a non-traditionalist, and believe that Presidents' Day should, in fact, be used to honor all American presidents, then you'll be happy to know that the National Park Service also maintains a number of sites that commemorate other past presidents, including John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses Grant, James Garfield, Teddy Roosevelt, William Taft, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Jimmy Carter.

Taken from [www.about.com](http://www.about.com)



## History of St. Patrick's Day

St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is one of Christianity's most widely known figures. But for all his celebrity, his life remains somewhat of a mystery. Many of the stories traditionally associated with St. Patrick, including the famous account of his banishing all the snakes from Ireland, are false, the products of hundreds of years of exaggerated storytelling.

### **Taken Prisoner By Irish Raiders**

It is known that St. Patrick was born in Britain to wealthy parents near the end of the fourth century. He is believed to have died on March 17, around 460 A.D. Although his father was a Christian deacon, it has been suggested that he probably took on the role because of tax incentives and there is no evidence that Patrick came from a particularly religious family. At the age of sixteen, Patrick was taken prisoner by a group of Irish raiders who were attacking his family's estate. They transported him to Ireland where he spent six years in captivity. (There is some dispute over where this captivity took place. Although many believe he was taken to live in Mount Slemish in County Antrim, it is more likely that he was held in County Mayo near Killala.) During this time, he worked as a shepherd, outdoors and away from people. Lonely and afraid, he turned to his religion for solace, becoming a devout Christian. (It is also believed that Patrick first began to dream of converting the Irish people to Christianity during his captivity.)

### **Guided By Visions**

After more than six years as a prisoner, Patrick escaped. According to his writing, a voice-which he believed to be God's-spoke to him in a dream, telling him it was time to leave Ireland.

To do so, Patrick walked nearly 200 miles from County Mayo, where it is believed he was held, to the Irish coast. After escaping to Britain, Patrick reported that he experienced a second revelation-an angel in a dream tells him to return to Ireland as a missionary. Soon after, Patrick began religious training, a course of study that lasted more than fifteen years. After his ordination as a priest, he was sent to Ireland with a dual mission-to minister to Christians already living in Ireland and to begin to convert the Irish. (Interestingly, this mission contradicts the widely held notion that Patrick introduced Christianity to Ireland.)

### **Bonfires and Crosses**

Familiar with the Irish language and culture, Patrick chose to incorporate traditional ritual into his lessons of Christianity instead of attempting to eradicate native Irish beliefs. For instance, he used bonfires to celebrate Easter since the Irish were used to honoring their gods with fire. He also superimposed a sun, a powerful Irish symbol, onto the Christian cross to create what is now called a Celtic cross, so that veneration of the symbol would seem more natural to the Irish. (Although there were a small number of Christians on the island when Patrick arrived, most Irish practiced a nature-based pagan religion. The Irish culture centered around a rich tradition of oral legend and myth. When this is considered, it is no surprise that the story of Patrick's life

became exaggerated over the centuries-spinning exciting tales to remember history has always been a part of the Irish way of life.

St. Patrick's Day is celebrated on March 17, his religious feast day and the anniversary of his death in the fifth century. The Irish have observed this day as a religious holiday for over a thousand years. On St. Patrick's Day, which falls during the Christian season of Lent, Irish families would traditionally attend church in the morning and celebrate in the afternoon. Lenten prohibitions against the consumption of meat were waived and people would dance, drink and feast—on the traditional meal of Irish bacon and cabbage.

### **The First Parade**

The first St. Patrick's Day parade took place not in Ireland but in the United States. Irish soldiers serving in the English military marched through New York City on March 17, 1762. Along with their music, the parade helped the soldiers reconnect with their Irish roots, as well as fellow Irishmen serving in the English army.

Over the next 35 years, Irish patriotism among American immigrants flourished, prompting the rise of so-called "Irish Aid" societies like the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick and the Hibernian Society. Each group would hold annual parades featuring bagpipes (which actually first became popular in the Scottish and British armies) and drums.

In 1848, several New York Irish Aid societies decided to unite their parades to form one New York City St. Patrick's Day Parade. Today, that parade is the world's oldest civilian parade and the largest in the United States, with over 150,000 participants.

Each year, nearly three million people line the 1.5-mile parade route to watch the procession, which takes more than five hours. Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and Savannah also celebrate the day with parades involving between 10,000 and 20,000 participants.

### **No Irish Need Apply**

Up until the mid-19th century, most Irish immigrants in America were members of the Protestant middle class. When the Great Potato Famine hit Ireland in 1845, close to a million poor and uneducated Irish Catholics began pouring into America to escape starvation. Despised for their religious beliefs and funny accents by the American Protestant majority, the immigrants had trouble finding even menial jobs. When Irish Americans in the country's cities took to the streets on St. Patrick's Day to celebrate their heritage, newspapers portrayed them in cartoons as drunk, violent monkeys.

However, the Irish soon began to realize that their great numbers endowed them with a political power that had yet to be exploited. They started to organize, and their voting block, known as the "green machine," became an important swing vote for political hopefuls. Suddenly, annual St. Patrick's Day parades became a show of strength for Irish Americans, as well as a must-attend event for a slew of political candidates. In 1948,

President Truman attended New York City 's St. Patrick's Day parade, a proud moment for the many Irish whose ancestors had to fight stereotypes and racial prejudice to find acceptance in America.

### **Wearing of the Green Goes Global**

Today, St. Patrick's Day is celebrated by people of all backgrounds in the United States, Canada and Australia. Although North America is home to the largest productions, St. Patrick's Day has been celebrated in other locations far from Ireland, including Japan, Singapore and Russia.

In modern-day Ireland, St. Patrick's Day has traditionally been a religious occasion. In fact, up until the 1970s, Irish laws mandated that pubs be closed on March 17. Beginning in 1995, however, the Irish government began a national campaign to use St. Patrick's Day as an opportunity to drive tourism and showcase Ireland to the rest of the world. Last year, close to one million people took part in Ireland 's St. Patrick's Festival in Dublin, a multi-day celebration featuring parades, concerts, outdoor theater productions and fireworks shows.

### **The Chicago River**

Chicago is famous for a somewhat peculiar annual event: dyeing the Chicago River green. The tradition started in 1962, when city pollution-control workers used dyes to trace illegal sewage discharges and realized that the green dye might provide a unique way to celebrate the holiday. That year, they released 100 pounds of green vegetable dye into the river—enough to keep it green for a week!

Today, in order to minimize environmental damage, only 40 pounds of dye are used, making the river green for only several hours. Although Chicago historians claim their city's idea for a river of green was original, some Savannah natives believe the idea originated in their town. They point out that, in 1961, Savannah mayor Tom Woolley had plans for a green river. Due to rough waters on March 17, the experiment failed, and Savannah never attempted to dye its river again.

### **The Shamrock**

The shamrock, which was also called the "seamroy" by the Celts, was a sacred plant in ancient Ireland because it symbolized the rebirth of spring. By the seventeenth century, the shamrock had become a symbol of emerging Irish nationalism. As the English began to seize Irish land and make laws against the use of the Irish language and the practice of Catholicism, many Irish began to wear the shamrock as a symbol of their pride in their heritage and their displeasure with English rule.

### **Irish Music**

Music is often associated with St. Patrick's Day—and Irish culture in general. From ancient days of the Celts, music has always been an important part of Irish life. The Celts had an oral culture, where religion, legend and history were passed from one generation to the next by way of stories and songs. After being conquered by

the English, and forbidden to speak their own language, the Irish, like other oppressed peoples, turned to music to help them remember important events and hold on to their heritage and history. As it often stirred emotion and helped to galvanize people, music was outlawed by the English. During her reign, Queen Elizabeth I even decreed that all artists and pipers were to be arrested and hanged on the spot.

Today, traditional Irish bands like The Chieftains, the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem are gaining worldwide popularity. Their music is produced with instruments that have been used for centuries, including the fiddle, the uilleann pipes (a sort of elaborate bagpipe), the tin whistle (a sort of flute that is actually made of nickel-silver, brass or aluminum) and the bodhran (an ancient type of framedrum that was traditionally used in warfare rather than music).

### **The Snake**

It has long been recounted that, during his mission in Ireland, St. Patrick once stood on a hilltop (which is now called Croagh Patrick), and with only a wooden staff by his side, banished all the snakes from Ireland.

In fact, the island nation was never home to any snakes. The "banishing of the snakes" was really a metaphor for the eradication of pagan ideology from Ireland and the triumph of Christianity. Within 200 years of Patrick's arrival, Ireland was completely Christianized.

### **Corned Beef**

Each year, thousands of Irish Americans gather with their loved ones on St. Patrick's Day to share a "traditional" meal of corned beef and cabbage.

Though cabbage has long been an Irish food, corned beef only began to be associated with St. Patrick's Day at the turn of the century.

Irish immigrants living on New York City's Lower East Side substituted corned beef for their traditional dish of Irish bacon to save money. They learned about the cheaper alternative from their Jewish neighbors.

### **The Leprechaun**

The original Irish name for these figures of folklore is "lobaircin," meaning "small-bodied fellow."

Belief in leprechauns probably stems from Celtic belief in fairies, tiny men and women who could use their magical powers to serve good or evil. In Celtic folktales, leprechauns were cranky souls, responsible for mending the shoes of the other fairies. Though only minor figures in Celtic folklore, leprechauns were known for their trickery, which they often used to protect their much-fabled treasure.

Leprechauns had nothing to do with St. Patrick or the celebration of St. Patrick's Day, a Catholic holy day. In 1959, Walt Disney released a film called *Darby O'Gill & the Little People*, which introduced America to a very

different sort of leprechaun than the cantankerous little man of Irish folklore. This cheerful, friendly leprechaun is a purely American invention, but has quickly evolved into an easily recognizable symbol of both St. Patrick's Day and Ireland in general

### **The Celebration**

- Corned beef and cabbage is a traditional St. Patrick's Day dish. In 2007, roughly 41.5 billion pounds of U.S. beef and 2.6 billion pounds of U.S. cabbage were sold. Many St. Patrick's Day celebrants enjoyed corned beef from Texas, which produced 6.8 billion pounds of beef, and cabbage from California and New York, which produced 581 and 580 million pounds, respectively.
- Irish soda bread gets its name and distinctive character from the use of baking soda rather than yeast as a leavening agent.
- Lime green chrysanthemums are often requested for St. Patrick's Day parades and celebrations.

### **The Parade**

- The first St. Patrick's Day parade took place in the United States on March 17, 1762, when Irish soldiers serving in the English military marched through New York City.
- More than 100 St. Patrick's Day parades are held across the United States. New York City and Boston are home to the largest celebrations.
- At the annual New York City St. Patrick's Day parade, participants march up 5th Avenue from 44th Street to 86th Street. More than 150,000 people take part in the event, which does not allow automobiles or floats.

### **Places to Spend the Day**

- There are four places in the United States named after the shamrock, the floral emblem of Ireland: Mount Gay-Shamrock, WV; Shamrock, TX; Shamrock Lakes, IN; and Shamrock, OK.
- Nine U.S. towns share the name of Ireland's capital, Dublin. With 39,328 residents in 2005, Dublin, CA, is the most populous, followed by Dublin, OH.

### **Population Distribution of Irish Americans**

- There are 36.5 million U.S. residents with Irish roots. This number is almost nine times the population of Ireland itself (more than four million).
- Irish is the nation's second most frequently reported ancestry, ranking behind German.
- Across the country, 12 percent of residents lay claim to Irish ancestry. That number doubles to 24 percent in the state of Massachusetts.
- Irish is the most common ancestry in 54 U.S. counties, of which 44 are in the Northeast. Middlesex County in Massachusetts tops the list with 348,978 Irish Americans, followed by Norfolk County, MA, which has 203,285.

- Irish ranks among the top five ancestries in every state except Hawaii and New Mexico. It is the leading ancestry group in Delaware, Massachusetts and New Hampshire.
- A total of 4.8 million immigrants from Ireland have been admitted to the United States for lawful permanent residence since 1820, the earliest year for which official records exist. Only Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and Mexico have accounted for more U.S. immigrants.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

## History of Thanksgiving

In September of 1620, a small group of Christian Pilgrims boarded the Mayflower and set sail for the New World. The conditions aboard the Mayflower were miserable: stale food, cramped quarters, seasick people, and little fresh air below deck. About halfway across the Atlantic, the Mayflower met a ferocious storm which raged for days. The Pilgrims prayed, sang Psalms, and trusted God to deliver them, and He did. On November 9<sup>th</sup>, after 65 days at sea, the Pilgrims finally caught a glimpse of their destination, the new land where God would be worshiped freely and, in time, where freedom would flourish. After a month of exploration, the Pilgrims landed at what was to become Plymouth and began construction of a meeting house and nineteen family dwellings. Their first winter in the New World was harsh. Although the Pilgrims were hard workers, they could not build their dwellings quickly enough. As the winter grew worse, many Pilgrims fell ill and began to die in alarming numbers. By the end of the first winter, nearly half of the Pilgrims had perished. In early March, the Pilgrims met an Indian named Samoset who was the chief of the Algonquins further up the coast. He told them that the Indians who had previously occupied their land had been wiped out by a mysterious plague about 4 years before their arrival, yet another example of God's amazing provision. Samoset introduced the Pilgrims to Squanto who the Pilgrims later described as a "special instrument sent of God for their good." Years earlier, Squanto had been captured by an English sea captain and was taken to Europe as a slave where he learned to speak English. Because Squanto's English was quite good, he was able to serve as the Pilgrims' translator when they met with Massasoit, chief of the Wampanoags. With Squanto's help, the Pilgrims were able to negotiate a peace that would last for fifty years. Squanto stayed on in Plymouth and "adopted" the Pilgrims as his own. Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to catch eels and fish to use as fertilizer for planting corn, how to plant pumpkins, how to tap maple trees for syrup, and how to trap beavers for their pelts. By October of 1621, the corn planted in the spring was ready for harvest. The fields yielded a bountiful crop that would keep them through the winter. The Pilgrims were full of gratitude for their renewed health, the abundant harvest, and their peace with the Indians. Governor William Bradford declared a day of thanksgiving and invited Chief Massasoit and his people to join them. The Pilgrims and the Indians feasted for three days on wild turkeys, venison, goose, lobster, eel, oysters, clam chowder, parsnips, turnips, cucumbers, onions, carrots, cabbage, beets, radishes, fruit pies, and cornbread. But before the feast began their spiritual leader, William Brewster, offered a prayer to God for His amazing blessing, protection, and provision. When the fun and feasting ended, both Indians and Pilgrims agreed they wanted to have a similar feast the following year. In November of 1621, a ship arrived with thirty-five more Pilgrims. The abundant harvest of corn they had so recently stored for that second winter was now not nearly enough. Legend has it that at one point the food stores were so low that everyone was forced to a daily ration of only five kernels of corn. Once again at the height of their need, God provided deliverance. A ship arrived with trading goods which allowed them to barter with the Indians for enough corn to see them through until spring. The harvest of 1622 was sparse which led to another winter of famine. By the spring of 1623, their needs were desperate. The Pilgrims realized that they had to plant double the previous year's crop to sustain them through the winter to come. Soon after the plantings, the weather turned terribly dry. As weeks of drought went by, the Pilgrims precious crops began to wither and slowly die. After twelve weeks the Pilgrims realized that they would face certain starvation if rain did not come soon. William Bradford called for a day of fasting and prayer to ask the Lord for rain. As the Pilgrims gathered for prayer, the weather became overcast and clouds moved in on all sides. By the next morning, moderate rain showers began which continued for fourteen days. The crops were saved and the harvest season was abundant. Another day of Thanksgiving was held in August or September with Chief Massasoit and his people to give glory, honor, praise, and thanks to God for His graciousness.

The Continental Congress declared the first national day of Thanksgiving in 1777. In 1789, the newly formed United States Congress passed a resolution requesting "a day of public Thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God." President George Washington signed that proclamation and declared Thursday, November 26, 1789 as the first national

Thanksgiving Day. As the years passed, the holiday was celebrated sporadically. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln set aside the last Thursday in November as "a day of national Thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens." Finally in 1941, the United States Congress established the fourth Thursday in November as our national Thanksgiving Day. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed it into law on November 26, 1941.

Taken from Thanksgiving: A Time to Remember by Barbara Rainey.



## History of Valentine's Day

Every February 14, across the United States and in other places around the world, candy, flowers and gifts are exchanged between loved ones, all in the name of St. Valentine. But who is this mysterious saint, and where did these traditions come from? Find out about the history of this centuries-old holiday, from ancient Roman rituals to the customs of Victorian England.

The history of Valentine's Day — and its patron saint — is shrouded in mystery. But we do know that February has long been a month of romance. St. Valentine's Day, as we know it today, contains vestiges of both Christian and ancient Roman tradition. So, who was Saint Valentine and how did he become associated with this ancient rite? Today, the Catholic Church recognizes at least three different saints named Valentine or Valentinus, all of whom were martyred.

One legend contends that Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome. When Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men — his crop of potential soldiers. Valentine, realizing the injustice of the decree, defied Claudius and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret. When Valentine's actions were discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death.

Other stories suggest that Valentine may have been killed for attempting to help Christians escape harsh Roman prisons where they were often beaten and tortured.

According to one legend, Valentine actually sent the first "valentine" greeting himself. While in prison, it is believed that Valentine fell in love with a young girl — who may have been his jailor's daughter — who visited him during his confinement. Before his death, it is alleged that he wrote her a letter, which he signed "From your Valentine," an expression that is still in use today. Although the truth behind the Valentine legends is murky, the stories certainly emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic, and, most importantly, romantic figure. It's no surprise that by the Middle Ages, Valentine was one of the most popular saints in England and France.

While some believe that Valentine's Day is celebrated in the middle of February to commemorate the anniversary of Valentine's death or burial — which probably occurred around 270 A.D — others claim that the Christian church may have decided to celebrate Valentine's feast day in the middle of February in an effort to "christianize" celebrations of the pagan Lupercalia festival. In ancient Rome, February was the official beginning of spring and was considered a time for purification. Houses were ritually cleansed by sweeping them out and then sprinkling salt and a type of wheat called spelt throughout their interiors. Lupercalia, which began at the ides of February, February 15, was a fertility festival dedicated to Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture, as well as to the Roman founders Romulus and Remus.

To begin the festival, members of the Luperci, an order of Roman priests, would gather at the sacred cave where the infants Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, were believed to have been cared for by a she-wolf or lupa. The priests would then sacrifice a goat, for fertility, and a dog, for purification.

The boys then sliced the goat's hide into strips, dipped them in the sacrificial blood and took to the streets, gently slapping both women and fields of crops with the goathide strips. Far from being fearful, Roman women welcomed being touched with the hides because it was believed the strips would make them more fertile in the coming year. Later in the day, according to legend, all the young women in the city would place their names in a big urn. The city's bachelors would then each choose a name out of the urn and become paired for the year with his chosen woman. These matches often ended in marriage. Pope Gelasius declared February 14 St. Valentine's Day around 498 A.D. The Roman "lottery" system for romantic pairing was deemed un-Christian and outlawed. Later, during the Middle Ages, it was commonly believed in France and England that February 14 was the beginning of birds' mating season, which added to the idea that the middle of February — Valentine's Day — should be a day for romance. The oldest known valentine still in existence today was a poem written by Charles, Duke of Orleans to his wife while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London following his capture at the Battle of Agincourt. The greeting, which was written in 1415, is part of the manuscript collection of the British Library in London, England. Several years later, it is believed that King Henry V hired a writer named John Lydgate to compose a valentine note to Catherine of Valois.

In Great Britain, Valentine's Day began to be popularly celebrated around the seventeenth century. By the middle of the eighteenth century, it was common for friends and lovers in all social classes to exchange small tokens of affection or handwritten notes. By the end of the century, printed cards began to replace written letters due to improvements in printing technology. Ready-made cards were an easy way for people to express their emotions in a time when direct expression of one's feelings was discouraged. Cheaper postage rates also contributed to an increase in the popularity of sending Valentine's Day greetings. Americans probably began exchanging hand-made valentines in the early 1700s. In the 1840s, Esther A. Howland began to sell the first mass-produced valentines in America.

According to the Greeting Card Association, an estimated one billion valentine cards are sent each year, making Valentine's Day the second largest card-sending holiday of the year. (An estimated 2.6 billion cards are sent for Christmas.) Approximately 85 percent of all valentines are purchased by women. In addition to the United States, Valentine's Day is celebrated in Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia.

Valentine greetings were popular as far back as the Middle Ages (written Valentine's didn't begin to appear until after 1400), and the oldest known Valentine card is on display at the British Museum. The first commercial Valentine's Day greeting cards produced in the U.S. were created in the 1840s by Esther A. Howland. Howland, known as the Mother of the Valentine, made elaborate creations with real lace, ribbons and colorful pictures known as "scrap."

## History of Veterans Day

On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, an armistice, or temporary cessation of hostilities, was declared between the Allied nations and Germany in the First World War, then known as "the Great War." Commemorated as Armistice Day beginning the following year, November 11th became a legal federal holiday in the United States in 1938. In the aftermath of World War II and the Korean War, Armistice Day became Veterans Day, a holiday dedicated to American veterans of all wars.

### **The Great War & Armistice Day**

Though the Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919, November 11 remained in the public imagination as the date that marked the end of the Great War. In November 1918, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed November 11 as the first commemoration of Armistice Day. The day's observation included parades and public gatherings, as well as a brief pause in business activities at 11 a.m. On November 11, 1921, an unidentified American soldier killed in the war was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.; the U.S. Congress had declared the day a legal federal holiday in honor of all those who participated in the war. On the same day, unidentified soldiers were laid to rest at Westminster Abbey in London and at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

On June 4, 1926, Congress passed a resolution that the "recurring anniversary of [November 11, 1918] should be commemorated with thanksgiving and prayer and exercises designed to perpetuate peace through good will and mutual understanding between nations" and that the president should issue an annual proclamation calling for the observance of Armistice Day. By that time, 27 state legislatures had made November 11 a legal holiday. An act approved May 13, 1938 made November 11 a legal Federal holiday, "dedicated to the cause of world peace and to be hereafter celebrated and known as 'Armistice Day.'" In actuality, there are no U.S. national holidays because the states retain the right to designate their own, and the government can only designate holidays for federal employees and for the District of Columbia. In practice, however, states almost always follow the federal lead.

### **From Armistice Day to Veterans Day**

The American effort during World War II (1941-1945) saw the greatest mobilization of the U.S. Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force in the nation's history (more than 16 million people); some 5.7 million more served in the Korean War (1950 to 1953). In 1954, after lobbying efforts by veterans' service organizations, the 83rd U.S. Congress amended the 1938 act that had made Armistice Day a holiday, striking the word "Armistice" in favor of "Veterans." President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the legislation on June 1, 1954. From then on, November 11 became a day to honor American veterans of all wars.

The next development in the story of Veterans Day unfolded in 1968, when Congress passed the Uniform Holidays Bill, which sought to ensure three-day weekends for federal employees--and encourage tourism and

travel--by celebrating four national holidays (Washington's Birthday, Memorial Day, Veterans Day and Columbus Day) on Mondays.

The observation of Veterans Day was set as the fourth Monday in October. The first Veterans Day under the new law was Monday, October 25, 1971; confusion ensued, as many states disapproved of this change, and continued to observe the holiday on its original date. In 1975, after it became evident that the actual date of Veterans Day carried historical and patriotic significance to many Americans, President Gerald R. Ford signed a new law returning the observation of Veterans Day to November 11th beginning in 1978. If November 11 falls on a Saturday or Sunday, the federal government observes the holiday on the previous Friday or following Monday, respectively.

### **Celebrating Veterans Day around the World**

Britain, France, Australia and Canada also commemorate the veterans of World Wars I and II on or near November 11th: Canada has Remembrance Day, while Britain has Remembrance Sunday (the second Sunday of November). In Europe, Britain and the Commonwealth countries it is common to observe two minutes of silence at 11 a.m. every November 11.

In the United States, an official wreath-laying ceremony is held each Veterans Day at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery, while parades and other celebrations are held in states around the country. Veterans Day is not to be confused with Memorial Day--a common misunderstanding, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Memorial Day (the fourth Monday in May) honors American service members who died in service to their country or as a result of injuries incurred during battle, while Veterans Day pays tribute to all American veterans--living or dead--but especially gives thanks to living veterans who served their country honorably during war or peacetime.

Taken from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)