

American Holidays

A mixture of cultures in the United States ensures that there is a holiday every month of the year. These holidays are either religious holidays or legal holidays. Holidays such as Christmas and Easter are well known religious holidays. In the United States, other religious holidays such as Hanukkah and Yom Kippur were brought to the United States by immigrants.

Legal holidays are holidays which were created by the government. In the United States there are nine legal holidays: New Year's Day, Independence Day, Veterans' Day, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday, President's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, and Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is always the last Thursday of November. All of the other legal holidays are celebrated on Mondays so that federal employees can have a three day weekend.

We have all learned that holidays are special days that help cultures remember and honor their history. In this article, we will examine the history of Thanksgiving, President's Day and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday. As you read through this article, think about the various holidays in your country. How many holidays are there? What is the history of the various holidays in your country? How do people celebrate or observe holidays in your country?

Thanksgiving

A feast to celebrate the harvest has been a part of man's history throughout recorded time. The Chinese were said to have celebrated such a feast thousands of years ago. The Feast of the Tabernacles (Sukkot) a Jewish celebration, also a harvest rite and lasts eight days. It is so named because the celebrants build booths and tents during the festival in memory of the years when the Jews didn't have homeland.

The ancient Greek harvest festival was called Thesmophora and celebrated Demeter, the founder of agriculture and the goddess of the harvest. It was celebrated in Athens in November, by married women only. The symbols of Demeter were poppies and ears of corn, a basket of fruit and a young pig. The Cerelia was a festival which occurred each year on October 4. Named after the Roman goddess of the harvest, Ceres, this feast was celebrated by fasting and offering a cow and the first cuttings of the harvest as a sacrifice to the gods.

In England, the autumnal feast was called the Harvest Home and was derived from the Druidical harvest feast. This festival began with a special service in the village church, which had been decorated with fruit and flowers for the occasion, was followed by a large communal dinner.

In the United States, the first Thanksgiving Day was celebrated in the year 1621. The Pilgrims, who had come to the New World from England landed at Plymouth Rock, in what is

now Massachusetts, on December 26, 1620, after being at sea for almost a year.

When the Pilgrims settled in the new world they discovered that the grain they brought from England wouldn't grow in the soil of their new home. The first winter was very hard for the early settlers, and many people died from sickness or starvation. The native Indians came to the aid of the Pilgrims and taught them how to plant crops of corn. They also taught the Pilgrims how to hunt and fish.

As a result of the help that the Indians gave to the settlers, the crops planted in 1621 did well and there was a great harvest in the fall. The Pilgrims decided to have a feast, as a way of giving thanks. The Pilgrims invited their friends, the Indians, to share this first Thanksgiving feast which lasted three days.

Thanksgiving was proclaimed a national holiday by Congress in 1941.

President's Day

On the third Monday of February, the United States honors all of its presidents; but, originally President's Day was set aside as a day to celebrate the birthdays of two great American presidents, Abraham Lincoln and George Washington.

George Washington, who was born on February 22, 1732, was the first elected president of the United States. As the "Father of His Country" Washington helped shape the United States in several very important ways. First, he served as the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army that fought for independence from Great Britain for the 13 original colonies in the Revolutionary War. Secondly, Washington served as president of the Constitutional Convention which wrote the Constitution of the United States.

Washington is the only president in the history of the U.S. to be elected president by unanimous vote. He served two terms and declined a third. George Washington died on December 14, 1799, at the age of 67. One popular legend about Washington says, that as a boy he chopped down his father's cherry tree. When his father questioned him about it, he admitted to the wrongdoing and said "I cannot tell a lie."

Lincoln was the 16th President of the United States and is credited with keeping the U.S. together as one country. Lincoln was president during the difficult time in America's history known as the Civil War. Just before Lincoln began his term as president, seven southern states broke away from the United States and established their own country. This new country was known as the Confederate States of America. President Lincoln was able to end the conflict and reunite the country.

Lincoln is also responsible for ending slavery in the United States. In his famous speech, *The Gettysburg Address*, Lincoln expressed his views about equality and his belief that all men should be free. On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which freed all slaves in America. Two years later the 13th Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery in all parts of the United States.

President Lincoln was assassinated on April 19th, 1865, while watching a play in Ford's Theater in Washington D.C.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Birthday

Martin Luther King Jr. is recognized for his work in the civil rights movement in America. Martin Luther King Jr. believed that everyone should be treated equally regardless of their race or skin color. He fought against racial discrimination and prejudice saying that people should be judged according to their character and not according to the color of their skin.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born a minister's son on January 15, 1929. He entered college when he was only 15 years old. While in college he studied black history, religion and theology. He received his PhD. in philosophy from Boston University. After college he became a minister and married Coretta Scott. King became the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where he preached against the segregation of black people.

King's most famous speech, "I Have a Dream," was given in 1963 in front of the Lincoln Memorial, in Washington, D.C. 250,000 people gathered to hear him speak that day.

Even though King believed in non-violent methods to achieve his goal of desegregation, his life ended very violently. King was killed by an assassin at the age of 39 in Memphis, Tennessee. We now honor the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. every year on his birthday.

There are many other holidays in America. Some are celebrated with festivities such as parades and parties. Others are solemn affairs and are observed in quiet remembrance of what others have done to help make life better for those living today. Regardless of the reason for the holiday, they are all important to understanding our history and our culture.

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