

Holidays and Special Events in America

The USA has ten official holidays, and many more that are enjoyed by families across the country.

Official Holidays:

New Year's Day (January 1)
Martin Luther King Jr. Day (Third Monday in January)
Presidents' Day (Third Monday in February)
Memorial Day (Last Monday in May)
Independence Day (July 4)
Labor Day (First Monday in September)
Columbus Day (October 12)
Veterans' Day (November 11)
Thanksgiving (Fourth Thursday in November)
Christmas (December 25)

Labor Day

The first Monday of September is a public holiday dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. The first Labor Day holiday was celebrated on Tuesday, September 5, 1882 in New York City.

Columbus Day

Columbus Day has been celebrated on October 12, or the second Monday of October, since 1792. Christopher Columbus reached the Caribbean in 1492 and claimed the land for Spain. The first pledge of allegiance to the American flag was made on Columbus Day in 1892.

Halloween

Halloween is celebrated on October 31. In elementary school, children wear costumes to school and may participate in parades. Families decorate their homes with jack-o'-lanterns (carved pumpkins lit with candles) and give out candy when children say "trick or treat." Halloween began as Samhain, the Celtic New Year. On this night, bonfires were lit to scare away ghosts and witches. Now, on November 1, Christians remember the dead. This is All Saints' Day or All Hallows. Hallows means "holy." Halloween, the evening before All Hallows, is a time of fun.

Veterans' Day

Veterans' Day is celebrated on November 11, because the First World War ended in 1918 on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. It used to be called Armistice Day, because Armistice means a truce or agreement to stop fighting. There are parades and services at war memorials and wreaths are laid to honor soldiers who died in war. Veterans' Day is intended to thank and honor all those who served honorably in the military, in wartime or peacetime.

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving has been a national holiday since 1863 and is celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November. The tradition began in 1621 when the Pilgrims and the local Native Americans shared the first Thanksgiving meal. The Native Americans helped the settlers survive that first winter by teaching them how to catch wild turkeys and grow sweet corn, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, and cranberries. These dishes are still eaten on Thanksgiving Day when families and friends share a meal and give thanks for all they have and enjoy in life.

Chanukah or Hanukkah

Hanukkah, also known as the Festival of Lights, is a Jewish festival celebrated in December. This celebration began in 165 B.C. when Jewish people returned to their temple (place of worship) and found only enough oil to burn their lamps for one day, but miraculously, it lasted for eight. During Hanukkah, one candle is lit each night for eight days to remember this miracle. The candles are put in a candlestick called a “menorah.” During Hanukkah, Jews sing songs and children play games with spinning tops called “dreidels.”

Christmas

Christmas became an official federal holiday in 1870. Christians remember Christmas Day, December 25, as the birth of Jesus. Families prepare for the holiday by decorating their homes with fir trees, wreaths, and lights, sending Christmas cards, buying gifts for friends and family, and singing Christmas carols. Sometimes groups of carol singers entertain their neighbors and friends by singing outside their homes. On Christmas Eve, many Christians attend church services and parties. Christmas Day is a day of feasting, exchanging gifts, and spending time with family and friends. Santa Claus is said to fill stockings and leave gifts while children sleep on Christmas Eve. This tradition reminds Christians that baby Jesus received three gifts from the wise men.

Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa, which means “first fruits,” is an African-American holiday celebrated between December 26 and January 1. This holiday was established in 1966 to help African-Americans celebrate their heritage. A candle is lit each day on a candlestick called a “kinara,” families decorate their homes with traditional African crafts, and gifts are given on the last day. Each of the seven days is dedicated to one of “The Seven Principles of Kwanzaa” which represent values such as unity and creativity.

New Year's Day

New Year's Eve, December 31, is spent counting down the time until New Year's Day on January 1. Television stations follow parties across the country and perhaps the most famous is that in Times Square, New York. At 11:59, a huge shining ball of light is lowered from a flagpole on top of the Times Building to ring in the new year. People use poppers, streamers, and horns to make a great deal of noise, cheer, and toast the new year. It is traditional to make new year's resolutions, or promises, to start off the new year with good habits and intentions. On New Year's Day, many people watch parades like the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, or football games like the Cotton Bowl in Texas.

Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year lasts for 15 days, from the first day of a new moon to the full moon on the day of the Lantern Festival. It is a special time of feasting with family, fireworks, and gift-giving. The dates of Chinese New Year change each year because the Chinese calendar is based on the lunar year and follows a 12-year cycle with each year named after an animal. One story explains that Buddha (or the Jade Emperor) invited all the animals to join him for a New Year celebration, but only 12 showed up, so he named a year after each of them in the order they arrived: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat (or Sheep), Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig. It is believed that you share the character traits with the animal of the year in which you were born.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is celebrated on the third Monday in January, the Monday closest to his birthday. Martin Luther King Jr. was an American clergyman who spent his life campaigning peacefully for equal rights for everyone in America. In 1963 he gave a famous speech called "I Have a Dream" and talked about people being judged by the "content of their character" and not the color of their skin. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, and was shot and killed in 1968.

Groundhog Day

On February 2, Groundhog Day, people try to forecast the weather. A popular legend says if it is a sunny day and a groundhog comes out of his underground home and sees his shadow, he will be scared by the shadow and will return to his home to sleep for another six weeks. This means that winter will stay for another six weeks. If it is a cloudy day, and he does not see his shadow, he will stay outside, meaning that spring has come.

Valentine's Day

St. Valentine's Day is on February 14. In elementary school, children have fun by giving "Valentine's cards" to their friends and teachers. Red, pink, and white are the colors associated with Valentine's Day as well as symbols like cupids and hearts. The custom of exchanging love tokens has nothing to do with the Christian holy man, St. Valentine, although it happens on his feast day.

Presidents' Day

Presidents' Day is a federal holiday celebrated on the third Monday of February in honor of George Washington, the first president of the United States (born February 22) and Abraham Lincoln (born February 12), the sixteenth president who is known for ending the Civil War and slavery.

St. Patrick's Day

On March 17, elementary students wear green to school to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. Patrick is Ireland's patron saint and they honor him on this day. The first official celebration of St. Patrick's Day in the United States occurred in Morristown, New Jersey in 1780 which was authorized by George Washington. Today St. Patrick's Day is celebrated by the Irish as well as many Americans with parades, parties, wearing of green, Irish songs, and jigs. People wear green on this day to represent the lushness of Ireland - The Emerald Isle.

Easter

Easter Sunday is always the Sunday nearest to the first full moon after March 21. The date varies each year. It is named after Eostre, a pagan goddess of spring. Easter is a happy day because Christians believe it is when Jesus rose from the dead. Many Christians attend church services and are reminded of the Easter story of Jesus coming alive again, which marks the beginning of Christianity. Children hunt for chocolate Easter eggs, left by the Easter Bunny, because the egg is a symbol of new life.

Earth Day

Earth Day was established in 1970 and is celebrated on April 22. It is a day to think about the environment and what we can do to protect our planet. People are encouraged to save water and energy, reduce pollution, recycle, and protect animals, trees, and plants.

Mother's Day

Mother's Day is the second Sunday in May. It is the day when children give their mothers cards and gifts to thank them for all their love and care.

Memorial Day

On the last Monday in May people hold processions and listen to speeches in memory of those in the armed services who died for their country (Navy, Army, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard). The first ceremony, in 1868, was in memory of those who died in the Civil War (1861-1865). After World War I the federal holiday has honored all fallen military personnel in any war.

Father's Day

Father's Day is the third Sunday in June. It is the day when children give their fathers cards and gifts to thank them for all their love and care.

Independence Day

After many years of conflict between colonists and their British rulers, the Americans started to rebel. On July 4, 1776, the colonists signed the Declaration of Independence, which started a seven-year war that eventually led to breaking free from Britain. July 4 is now a national holiday that celebrates the birth of America as a sovereign nation. Americans across the country wear red, white, and blue, and enjoy parades, fireworks, and parties.