

# History of Holidays in America

## Table of Contents

### Introduction

### Federal Holidays

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

### Celebrations

- Groundhog Day (February 2)
- Valentine's Day (February 14)
- Palm Sunday, Passover, Good Friday, and Easter (Late March-Late April)
- Arbor Day and Earth Day (April)
- Cinco de Mayo (May 5)
- Mother's Day and Father's Day (May and June)
- Flag Day (June 14)

### Recognition Months

- Black History Month (February)
- Women's History Month (March)
- Asian Pacific Heritage Month (May)
- Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15-October 15)

### Acknowledgements

# INTRODUCTION

*History of Holidays in America* is an introductory survey of the historical and social background of American holidays. It introduces American legal holidays as well as other holidays, celebrations, and commemorations. In a short course such as this, it is impossible to include all holidays that Americans celebrate, and it is equally impossible to describe all the various ways holidays are celebrated. Only some of the major holidays and some of the ways that holidays are celebrated with family and friends have been included here.

Each chapter includes vocabulary words related to that holiday (shown in bold in the text and defined at the end of the chapter), the background of the holiday or celebration, and information about how people honor the day. When relevant, a speech, song, or poem pertaining to the holiday is also included. Links to coloring pages for younger students and copywork are also included.

You can use this course in a number of ways. You may want to study the sections as they relate to upcoming holidays (for example, learn about Veterans Day and Thanksgiving in November, etc.). You may want to focus on social studies and study all the holidays together, focusing on the *how* and *why* each holiday is celebrated. You may want to use this course as part of a history class and dig into the time periods discussed or create a timeline of when holidays were first celebrated and formally adopted as holidays. However you choose to use *History of Holidays in America*, we hope you have fun!

This course incorporates portions of The Old Schoolhouse's *Celebrate the Holidays Thematic Unit* and *Celebrate! Holidays in the U.S.A.*, published by the United States Information Agency, both used with permission. Please see the final page for full acknowledgements.

# FEDERAL HOLIDAYS

In the strict sense, there are no national holidays in the United States. Each of the 50 states has jurisdiction over its holidays. In practice, however, the states tend to **observe** the ten **federal** (“legal”) public holidays that the president and Congress have **designated**.

The ten holidays that are **proclaimed** by the federal government are as follows: New Year’s Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Washington’s Birthday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

By law, the states can decide when to celebrate a federal legal holiday, and even whether or not to celebrate it at all. However, the majority of the states (and the cities and towns within them) usually choose the date or day celebrated by the rest of the nation.

In 1971, the dates of many federal holidays were officially moved to the nearest Monday by then-President Richard Nixon. The purpose for observing the holidays on a Monday was to allow a long holiday weekend, and to help reduce the high rate of employee and student **absenteeism** around holidays. When holidays like New Year’s Day, Independence Day, or Christmas fall on a weekend, the closest weekday, Friday or Monday (or both), is also a holiday.

Federal government offices, including the post office, are always closed on all federal legal holidays. State, county, and city government offices are generally closed also. Schools and most businesses close on major holidays like Independence Day and Christmas, but may not be closed, for example, on George Washington’s birthday or Veterans Day. Most retail stores hold their largest sales on holidays, hoping to attract shoppers who are free from work. Almost all stores are closed on Christmas Day and New Year’s Day.

## Glossary

**observe:** *v.* to remember and celebrate a special day

**federal:** *adj.* of or relating to the national government

**designate(d):** *v.* to name; assign to

**proclaim(ed):** *v.* to declare officially

**absenteeism:** *n.* the incidence of missed workdays by employees because of illness or other reasons

# NEW YEAR'S DAY

## JANUARY 1

New Year's Day is the first day of the year, January 1 by the Gregorian calendar. All the countries using the Gregorian calendar celebrate New Year's Day as a public holiday, except for Israel. On the Julian calendar, New Year's Day falls on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, and some Eastern Orthodox churches still celebrate New Year's Day on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

January 1 has become an occasion for fireworks and other celebrations during the hours before midnight on December 31, New Year's Eve. Some countries do not allow fireworks to be burned, but that ban is sometimes lifted on this day in celebration of a new year. Many people also use this day to start a resolution or a goal, which they hope to accomplish by the end of the year. Some of these could include stopping smoking, losing weight, getting physically fit, or even running a marathon.

New Year's Day was originally observed on March 15 on the old Roman calendar until changed by two Roman consuls in 153 BC. They moved it to January 1 for military reasons. New Year's Day was sometimes still celebrated in March, alongside other Christian holidays, even though the calendars ran from January to December in the Roman design. Many of the countries in Western Europe officially adopted January 1 as New Year's Day even before they adopted the Gregorian calendar.

In the United States, people begin **celebrating** the new year on December 31, New Year's Eve. Many people have parties, and sometimes **masquerade balls**, where guests dress up in costume and cover their faces with masks to hide their identity. According to an old tradition, guests unmask, or remove their masks, at midnight.

Many people enjoy the tradition of watching the New Year's festivities in Times Square in the heart of New York City. This celebration is telecast live on news channels across the nation. Traditionally, at one minute before midnight, a lighted ball begins to drop slowly from the top of a pole that is attached to a building. As the ball drops, all the people in Times Square—and many television viewers as well—count down the final minute of the year. At the stroke of midnight, the ball reaches the bottom of the pole, and a huge “Happy New Year” sign lights up. Then Times Square is filled with cheers and noisemakers. Confetti is dropped from windows above, and revelers hug, kiss, and wish each other a “Happy New Year!”

The tradition of counting down the last minute or final seconds of the year is a highlight of New Year's Eve, not only in Times Square, but at parties and **get-togethers** throughout the nation. The excitement grows as **partygoers** watch the clock and count 10! 9! 8! 7! 6! . . . and shout “Happy New Year!” at exactly midnight, **heralding** in the new year.

Some towns and cities host a “First Night” celebration, a large community **street party** featuring food, music, and other entertainment. First Night parties provide a safe and, often, **alcohol-free** environment for people of all ages to socialize, celebrate, and “**ring in the New Year**” together.

At New Year’s Eve parties, people often sing a traditional Scottish song, “Auld Lang Syne,” just after the clock strikes midnight and the cheers of “Happy New Year” subside. “Auld Lang Syne” was written in the 18th century by the Scottish poet Robert Burns and may be based on an earlier poem by another Scottish poet. The expression “auld lang syne” means “the old days gone by.”

## **New Year’s Day**

On January 1, Americans may relax at home or visit friends, relatives, and neighbors. New Year’s Day get-togethers are often informal, but generally there is plenty to eat and drink as loved ones and friends wish each other the best for the year ahead.

Many families and friends watch television together, enjoying the **Tournament of Roses Parade**, which precedes the **Rose Bowl** football game—both held in Pasadena, California.

The parade was started in 1890, when Professor Charles F. Holder suggested to the Pasadena Valley Hunt Club they **sponsor** a parade to **showcase** the winter beauty and sunshine of the area. The parade was to be “an artistic celebration of the ripening of the oranges” at the beginning of the year. The first parade consisted of decorated, horse-drawn carriages. Motorized **floats** were added a few years later, and prizes were given for the most beautiful floats.

The event grew, and in 1895, the Tournament of Roses Association was formed to **oversee** the festivities. Soon, athletic competitions became part of the day’s events, along with an ostrich race and, once, a race between a camel and an elephant, in which the elephant won!

To **enhance** the event and increase public interest, a **collegiate** football game was added in 1902, with Stanford University playing against the University of Michigan. Today, the New Year’s Day Rose Bowl game, featuring the two top college football teams in the nation is, for many Americans, the highlight of New Year’s Day.

From year to year, the parade of floats grew longer, and now the procession takes over 2 ½ hours to travel the 5 ½-mile parade route through the streets of Pasadena, California. The flower decorations also grew more **elaborate**. Today the floats include high-tech animation, and every inch of the float must be covered with flowers or other natural plant material.

The theme of the Tournament of Roses varies from year to year, and the parade now includes thousands of participants in marching bands, on horseback, and on the floats. City officials and **celebrities** ride in the cars pulling the floats, and a celebrity is chosen to be the grand marshal. The queen of the tournament, along with her court, rides on a special float, which is always the most elaborate, being made from more than 250,000 flowers. Prizes are still given for the best, most beautiful floats.

Thousands of **spectators** line the parade route, arriving early in the morning or **camping out** overnight in order to secure the best spot for viewing the parade, which begins at 8 a.m. Spectators and participants alike enjoy the **pageantry** associated with the occasion. Preparation for the following year's Tournament of Roses Parade begins on January 2.

Watching football games and parades is not the only tradition on New Year's Day. Americans, like people in many countries, also promise to better themselves in the new year. Some Americans even write down their New Year's resolutions—promises to themselves for improvement in the coming year.

### [New Year's Copywork](#)

### Glossary

**celebrate(ing):** *v.* to observe (recognize) a holiday or other special day with ceremonies, festivities, respect, or rejoicing

**masquerade ball:** *n.* a dance or social gathering of people who are wearing masks or coverings over their eyes or face so as not to be recognized

**festivity (ies):** *n.* a joyous celebration or party

**live:** *adj.* not pre-recorded; broadcast during the actual performance

**stroke of midnight:** *n.* 12:00 a.m. exactly; when the clock shows or chimes 12:00 a.m.

**confetti:** *n.* small bits of colored paper thrown into the air to mark a celebration

**reveler(s) :** *n.* a person who is celebrating at a party or other festivity

**get-together(s):** *n.* an informal party or meeting

**partygoer(s):** *n.* a person who attends a party

**herald (ing):** *v.* to welcome or announce, often with ceremony, respect, or celebration

**street party:** *n. phrase,* a celebration held in the street(s) by a neighborhood or community

**alcohol-free:** *adj.* an event in which no alcoholic beverages are sold or allowed

**ring in the new year:** *v.* an expression that means to celebrate and welcome the new year

**tournament:** *n.* a contest involving a number of competitors

**parade:** *n.* a public procession or display of people, animals, and/or things moving in a single line

**Rose Bowl:** *n. phrase.* a special tournament or final championship competition held each year in Pasadena, California, between competing American university football (American style) teams

**sponsor:** *v.* to provide financial or official support

**showcase:** *v.* to display prominently in order to show the positive features

**float(s):** *n.* a platform carrying a display, usually pulled by a vehicle in parades

**oversee:** *v.* to direct, supervise, or manage

**enhance:** *v.* to make greater, more beautiful, or to increase in value

**collegiate:** *adj.* referring to college or university

**elaborate:** *adj.* complex, detailed, carried out with care

**celebrity (ies):** *n.* a well-known or famous person

**spectator(s):** *n.* a person who watches an event but does not actively participate

**camp(ing) out:** *v.* to wait in line a very long time, even overnight, for an event or to buy a ticket; people bring sleeping bags, food, drinks, extra clothes, music, books, etc., to keep them comfortable while they wait in line

**pageantry:** *n.* formal parades and plays related to an event

SAMPLE