



## Celebrate! Holidays In The U.S.A.

# Abraham Lincoln's Birthday

*(February 12)*

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Until 1971, both February 12 and February 22 were observed as federal public holidays to honor the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln (February 12) and [George Washington](#) (February 22).

In 1971, President Richard Nixon proclaimed one single federal public holiday, the [Presidents' Day](#), to be observed on the third Monday of February, honoring all past presidents of the United States of America.

Of all the presidents in the history of the United State, Abraham Lincoln is probably the one that Americans remember the best and with deepest affection. His childhood in the frontier of Indiana set the course for his character and motivation later in life. He brought a new honesty and integrity to the White House. He would always be remembered as "honest Abe." Most of all, he is associated with the final abolition of slavery. Lincoln became a virtual symbol of the American dream whereby an ordinary person from humble beginnings could reach the pinnacle of society as president of the country.

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in Kentucky, and spent the first seven years of his life there. They were difficult years in which Thomas Lincoln, Abe's father tried to make a living as a carpenter and farmer. The Lincolns moved from farm to farm around Kentucky, until 1816, when the family left to settle in Indiana. The United States was still young, and the midwest was a wild, unsettled frontier. They stopped in the middle of a forest in Spencer County, Indiana. Neighbors were few and far away, and the family lived in a three-sided shelter until Abe's father cleared enough land and built a log cabin.

Abe and his sister helped with the heavy daily tasks that came with farming. He cleared the woods for farmland with his father, and became so skilled at splitting logs that neighbors settling into the Indiana territory paid him to split logs. At the time, he confessed that he did not really like manual labor. He wrote later that although he was very young, an axe was put into his hand, and he "was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument."

In his entire life, Abe was only able to go to school for a total of one year. This lack of education only made him hungry for more knowledge. His mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, influenced him in his quest for learning. Although she was completely uneducated and could not read or write, she encouraged her children to study by themselves. His beloved mother died when he was nine years old, The family was greatly saddened, and for a while lived almost in squalor. Two years later, however, Thomas Lincoln remarried. Abe's stepmother was also instrumental in encouraging him to read. He even travelled to neighboring farms and counties to borrow books. He was often found reading next to a pile of logs that he should have been splitting.

When he was older, Abe noticed that people loved to listen to stories. He began telling tall tales in the general store where he worked. Customers came and stayed when they knew he was there, just to hear him talk. The family moved once again, this time to Illinois. He began working in a store in the new capital of Springfield. His powers of speech soon helped him enter a new arena, that of politics and law. In 1834 he was elected into the House of Representatives and began studying to become a lawyer.

In 1839, he met his future wife Mary Todd. Coincidentally, she had been born in Kentucky, and her family had recently moved to Illinois. They had a long and unstable courtship, because Abe was indecisive about marrying. They finally exchanged their vows in Mary's home in November 1842. Abraham Lincoln began a long road to become the sixteenth president of the United States. He practiced law all across the state for the next few years, traveling far on horseback to different counties. In 1847 he was elected into Congress, but his opinions did not ensure him a long stay there. He was vehemently against slavery and took stands on other controversial issues. He was not elected for a second term, so he returned to his law practice.

A few years later, slavery became a stronger issue, and more people were willing to abolish it. Lincoln joined the

Republicans, a new political party that was opposed to slavery. The Republicans nominated him for the U.S. Senate in 1858, and in his acceptance speech, he stated:

*"A house divided against itself cannot stand... This government cannot endure, permanently half-slave and half-free... I do not expect the Union to be dissolved. I do not expect the house to fall but I do expect it will cease to be divided. "*

Abraham Lincoln's oratorical powers brought him to the attention of the nation. He challenged the Democratic nominee to the Senate to a series of debates. Using the simple language that he used to communicate with people all his life, he defeated Douglas in the debates but lost to him in the election.

Nominated by the Republican Party in 1860 as its candidate for the Presidency of the United States, Lincoln won by a small margin. But with his election, the country began the process of "dividing against itself." South Carolina had seceded from the Union before he was even inaugurated. Other states followed to form the Confederate States of America. The North and South were divided, and the Civil War began. The war was not only over the abolition of slavery, but also the rights of individual states to make their own choices on other issues.

The bloody Battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania was the largest battle ever fought on American soil. On November 19, 1863, at a ceremony to establish Gettysburg as a national monument, Lincoln delivered what was to become one of the finest orations in American history, the Gettysburg Address. Yet just after he delivered it, there was polite applause, and reactions varied from indifference to disappointment. Edward Everett, ex-governor of Massachusetts, was the main speaker, and his speech had lasted for almost two hours. On his trip back to Washington, Lincoln himself said of his speech: "It was a flat failure. I am distressed about it. I ought to have prepared it with more care." But Edward Everett assured Lincoln saying: "I would be glad if I could flatter myself that I came near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

## **The Gettysburg Address**

*November 19, 1863*

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

*Now we are engaged in a great civil war testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation may live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*

*But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people by the people for the people shall not perish from the earth.*

Lincoln was elected to a second term in 1864. The South surrendered, and the Civil War ended on April 9, 1865. The difficult task of national reconstruction and reconciliation lay ahead, but Lincoln would not be the person to lead the country through this difficult period.

On April 14, Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln attended a play at the Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. A few minutes past ten o'clock, an actor who disagreed with Lincoln's political opinions stepped into the Presidential box and shot the President. He died the following morning.

American poet Walt Whitman, along with the rest of the country, mourned the death of Abraham Lincoln. He wrote this poem in his honor.

# Captain! my Captain!

*O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;  
But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.*

*O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up--for you the flag is flung--for you the bugle trills,  
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths--for you the shores a-crowding,  
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;  
Here Captain! dear father!  
This arm beneath your head!  
It is some dream that on the deck, You've fallen cold and dead.*

*My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,  
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;  
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!  
But I with mournful tread, Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.*

## Quotations from Lincoln

"...As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy"

Letter, August 1858

"If we do not make common cause to save the good old ship of the Union on this voyage, nobody will have a chance to pilot her on another voyage. "

Speech, Cleveland, Ohio,

February 15, 1861

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Embassy of the United States of America



## Celebrate! Holidays In The U.S.A.

# Presidents Day

*(Third Monday in February)*

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[Abraham Lincoln's Birthday](#) (February 12)

[George Washington's Birthday](#) (February 22)

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## Celebrate! Holidays In The U.S.A.

# George Washington's Birthday

*(February 22)*

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George Washington, born February 22, 1732 in Virginia, was a natural leader, instrumental in creating a united nation out of a conglomeration of struggling colonies and territories. The first president of the United States of America is affectionately honored as "the father of his country."

Shortly after his twenty-second birthday, Washington served in the army of King George III of England and was put in command of a troop of soldiers. The French were settling on British soil and turning the local Indians against the British colonists. Later, in the war against the French and Indians, Washington commanded large troops of soldiers and showed courage that inspired all his soldiers.

At this time, King George III of England dominated the thirteen colonies along the east coast and much of the surrounding territories. Colonists began to want their freedom, and live with a set of rules based on democracy, not under the rule of a faraway king. The Boston Tea Party of 1773, a colonial rebellion against taxes, helped to spark the American Revolution. Washington led and encouraged his inexperienced armies against the British forces for eight years until the colonies won their independence.

Laws for the new country were written into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The laws called for a President, and here again George Washington was considered the natural choice. He agreed to serve his country as the first President. George Washington moved from Mount Vernon, his family home south of Alexandria, Virginia, to New York City, then the capital of the United States. The trip took a week by horse and carriage. All along the way, people waited eagerly to glimpse the Revolutionary War general and their first President.

Washington was a reluctant leader. As he inspired his soldiers through two wars, he saw himself serving his country, not leading it. When he accepted two terms as president, he saw himself serving God and his country in peacetime. He turned down a third term as president, wishing only to retire to his beautiful family home, Mount Vernon.

Americans celebrated Washington's birthday while he was still alive. They were grateful for a strong leader who had proven that democracy was a feasible way to govern the growing country. And, while he was alive, legends grew up about him. The most famous one says that he was so strong, he threw a silver dollar across the Potomac River. Some Americans argue that this is a true story. Parts of the Potomac River, they say, were extremely narrow a few hundred years ago! Another story which has never been proven, but Americans pass down to their children as a lesson:

When George Washington was young, his father gave him a hatchet. He tried to cut down a cherry tree with it. His father noticed the cuts on the tree, and asked his son how they got there. "I cannot tell a lie," George said, "I did it with my hatchet." Perhaps George Washington had no hatchet, and perhaps there were no cherry trees where he grew up. However, George Washington today represents honesty, and cherry pies have become a favorite food associated with his birthday.

Various communities observe the holiday by staging pageants and reenactments of important milestones in Washington's life. Also, the holiday has taken on another side, much more commercial in nature. Many shopping malls and stores run Presidents' Day sales to attract shoppers who have the day off from work or school.

## **The White House**

While in office, George Washington held a contest for the best architectural design of a "President's Palace." Among the competitors was Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and an architect.

His design was entered anonymously, signed only with the initials "A. Z." It didn't win. An Irish architect named James Hoban won \$500, a piece of land, and of course the honor of having his plans used in the final design.

Americans called it the "President's House" because the word "palace" reminded them of the monarchy that they recently broke away from. The official name was the "Executive Mansion" from 1818-1902. Today it is called simply "The White House." Some historians say that people began calling it the White House because it was painted white after being restored after it had been burned by the British in 1812. Another legend is that George Washington named it after his wife's house in the state of Virginia.

The first president never had the chance to stay there. Washington died on December 14, 1799, one year before the White House was completed during the Presidency of John Adams. In 1806, Thomas Jefferson had another chance at designing the White House when he moved in as third President. Much of the house and Jefferson's additions were destroyed in the War of 1812. When it was rebuilt, however, James Hoban supervised the work. The White House was redecorated in 1881 and again in 1902 by the current presidents, and each change reflected the style of the times. It was completely renovated in 1949 when Harry S. Truman was President.

In 1960 when John Kennedy became President, his wife Jacqueline redecorated the White House to display the beauty of American furnishings and art. The gardens outside were beautified and enlarged. Since then the presidents' wives have continued to maintain their home in a tasteful style.

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