

Washington's Birthday



Long before it became a fixture on our modern calendars, the celebration of George Washington's birthday began as a heartfelt tribute in the midst of war.

The first recorded observances date back to the American Revolutionary War, when admiration for Washington was already firmly established. One of the earliest and most notable celebrations took place in 1778 at Valley Forge, where Continental Army troops endured a harsh winter. Amid the challenges, soldiers marked their commander's birthday with music, artillery salutes, and renewed expressions of loyalty. By 1779-1780, organized "Birthnight Balls" had become fashionable, offering citizens an opportunity to honor Washington with formal gatherings, dancing, and patriotic toasts.

Early Celebrations (1770s-1780s)

In the late 18th century, Americans observed Washington's birthday on February 11 (Old Style calendar) or February 22 (New Style calendar), depending on which dating system they followed. These celebrations reflected Washington's growing status as a unifying national figure. Military bands performed, communities hosted elegant balls, and

attendees offered spirited toasts celebrating leadership, liberty, and the promise of a new nation.

Official Recognition (1879)

Nearly a century later, Washington's birthday became an official federal holiday. In January 1879, President Rutherford B. Hayes signed legislation designating February 22 as a holiday for federal employees in the District of Columbia, effective in 1880. At first, the recognition applied specifically to government workers in the nation's capital, but it marked a significant step toward national commemoration.

National Expansion (1885)

In 1885, Congress expanded the observance to include all federal employees nationwide. Washington's Birthday thus became one of the earliest federal holidays established to honor an individual American. The move solidified Washington's legacy not only as a Revolutionary War hero but also as a foundational symbol of the republic.

Modern Observance (1971)

The way Americans observe the holiday changed again in the 20th century. The Uniform Monday Holiday Act shifted several federal holidays to Mondays to create long weekends. Beginning in 1971, Washington's Birthday was officially observed on the third Monday in February. Over time, the holiday came to be popularly known as "Presidents' Day," reflecting a broader celebration of U.S. presidents.

Yet despite the common nickname, the federal government continues to recognize the day by its original title: "Washington's Birthday." From its origins in the camps of the Continental Army to its place as a modern federal holiday, the observance remains a lasting tribute to the leadership and legacy of America's first president.