History of Holidays in America

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NEW YEAR’S DAY
JANUARY 1

New Year’s Day is the first day of the year, January 1st by the Gregorian calendar. All of 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 14th of January and some Eastern Orthodox churches still celebrate New Year’s Day on the 14th.

January 1st has become an occasion for fireworks and other celebrations during the hours before midnight on December 31st, 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 15th on the old Roman calendar until changed by two Roman consuls in 153 B.C. They moved it to January 1st 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 1st 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 first, 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 that 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 1/2 hours to travel the 5 1/2-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 next year’s Tournament of Roses 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
MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY
THIRD MONDAY IN JANUARY

Martin Luther King Day honors the life and legacy of one of the visionary leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and recipient of the 1964 Nobel Prize for Peace.

At a young age Martin Luther King, Jr. showed strong promise, skipping the 9th and 12th grades and entering Morehouse College at the age of 15. His beliefs in equality and brotherly love developed early as he listened to the sermons of his father and grandfather, both ministers.

In late 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr. received his doctorate degree in theology, and moved to Montgomery, Alabama, with his wife, Coretta Scott King, to preach at a Baptist church.

There, as in many southern states, he witnessed the indignities suffered by African Americans as a result of racism, discrimination, and unjust laws. One law required all black passengers to ride in the back of public buses and to give up their seats to white passengers when the front of the bus was full. Dr. King knew that this law violated the rights of every African-American.

On December 1, 1955, a courageous black passenger, Rosa Parks, was arrested and jailed for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. In response to the arrest, black leaders organized a boycott of the public buses in the city of Montgomery. Dr. King was asked to lead the protest. Thousands of people, black and white, refused to ride the bus; instead they formed carpools and they walked. Dr. King urged people to demonstrate peacefully and not resort to violence. Nonetheless, the demonstrators and their supporters were constantly threatened and attacked by those who did not want the system of inequality to change. Many of the demonstrators were arrested and jailed. Dr. King’s home was bombed, but fortunately, his wife and children were not injured.

Despite the violence, the boycott continued, and the bus company suffered great financial loss. Finally after 381 days the boycott of the Montgomery bus system was successful. The Supreme Court declared the state of Alabama’s segregation law unconstitutional. Rosa Parks, the woman whose small act of protest inspired the bus boycott, was later named the “Mother of the Civil Rights Movement.”

The segregation of buses was just one of the many forms of injustice to African Americans. Schools were also segregated throughout the south, and black citizens were denied equal housing, equal pay, job opportunities, and fair voting rights. Service in many hotels and restaurants was also denied.

The bus boycott brought international attention to these inequities and to the leadership of Dr. King. The continuing struggle for justice ultimately led to the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King was at the forefront of this movement and became seen worldwide as a symbol and voice for the cause of African Americans.

In 1957, Dr. King and other ministers founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to advance the non-violent struggle against racism. In the years that followed, Dr. King led many non-violent demonstrations. Some black leaders and other citizens vehemently disagreed with this philosophy. But King continued to remind his followers that their fight would be victorious if they did not resort to bloodshed. During the tumultuous years of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King
was jailed many times. From a jail in Birmingham, Alabama, he wrote the famous words, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

One of the key events of the Civil Rights Movement was the March on Washington on August 23, 1963. A crowd of more than 250,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C. and, led by Dr. King they marched to the Capitol Building to support the passing of laws that guaranteed equal civil rights to every American citizen. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that day, Dr. King delivered one of his most powerful and eloquent speeches, entitled “I Have a Dream.” The March on Washington was one of the largest gatherings of people that the nation’s capital had ever seen . . . and no violence occurred. The following year, in 1964, Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for leading non-violent demonstrations.

(The following is an excerpt from the speech entitled “I Have a Dream,” delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 23, 1963.)

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character...

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama . . . will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together knowing that we will be free one day.
This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning “My country ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim’s pride from every mountainside, let freedom ring.”

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!

Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!

Let freedom ring from every hill and mole-hill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!”

That same year the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, calling for equal opportunity in employment and education. Martin Luther King, Jr. and thousands of others now knew that they had not struggled in vain. Yet there was still much work ahead to ensure that new laws were enforced, and other inequities abolished.

In the years that followed, Dr. King helped champion many legislative reforms, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which guaranteed black citizens the right to safely register and vote. That year a record number of black voters went to the polls.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated while supporting a workers’ strike in Memphis, Tennessee. He was just 39 years old. All people who had worked so hard for peace and civil rights were shocked and angry. The world grieved the loss of this great man of peace. Martin Luther King’s death did not slow the Civil Rights Movement. In 1969 Coretta Scott King founded the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change. She passed away in January of 2006, after working throughout her life to keep her husband’s dream alive. Today people continue to work for social justice.

The Making of a Holiday

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was introduced as a holiday by labor unions when they promoted the holiday in contract negotiations. Representative John Conyers introduced a bill in Congress to make Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday a national holiday. He put significant notice on King’s activism on behalf of the trade unionists. In 1979, the bill first came up for a vote in the U.S. House of Representatives. It failed by five votes in Congress for two reasons. One, that it would be
too expensive to have as a paid federal holiday and, two, it went against a longstanding tradition that only those who held a public office at some point in their lives could have a private holiday if what they had done in life warranted it.

Throughout the 1980s, controversy surrounded the idea of a Martin Luther King Day. Dr. King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, along with congressional leaders and citizens had petitioned the President to make January 15, Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, a legal holiday. Many states were already observing the day. However, some people did not want to have any holiday recognizing Dr. King. Others wanted the holiday on the day he was assassinated. Finally, in 1986, President Ronald Reagan declared the third Monday in January a federal holiday in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On Monday, January 20, 1986, people across the country celebrated the first official Martin Luther King Day, the only federal holiday to commemorate an African-American.

Some states resisted observing the holiday as a day in remembrance of Martin Luther King, Jr. and instead combined it with other holidays or changed the name. It was not officially observed in all 50 states until the year 2000. This day is one of only four United States federal holidays to commemorate an individual person.

Now, every year, there are quiet memorial services, as well as elaborate ceremonies and public forums to honor Dr. King and his dream, and to discuss issues of social justice. Schools at all levels offer courses and events to teach about racism, equality, and peace. Religious leaders give special sermons extolling Dr. King’s lifelong work for peace. Radio and television broadcasts feature songs, speeches, and special programs that tell the history of the Civil Rights Movement and give highlights of Dr. King’s life and times.

**Martin Luther King, Jr. Copywork**

**Glossary**

recipient: *n.* person who receives a gift, award, or honor

doctorate: *n.* the highest academic degree

theology: *n.* study of religion

witness(ed): *v.* to observe a situation or event

indignity(ies): *n.* acts of disrespect and humiliation

racism: *n.* hatred and prejudice based on racial or ethnic background

discrimination: *n.* unfair treatment because of race, color, age, etc.

violate(d): *v.* to act against a right, law, or contract

boycott: *n.* act of protest by refusing to use a product or service

resort: *v.* to turn to an extreme action

unconstitutional: *adj.* not legal according to the Constitution of the United States

Civil Rights Movement: *n.* political activities during the 1950s and ‘60s to end discrimination and unfair laws

segregation: *n.* separation by race, color, age, or other characteristic

found(ed): *v.* to establish; to set up; to start

vehemently: *adv.* strongly, with anger

bloodshed: *n.* violence resulting in injury or death

tumultuous: *adj.* turbulent; troubled

in vain: *adv.* phrase. without the result hoped for

enforce(d): *v.* to make people obey laws or rules

abolish(ed): *v.* to end or terminate by law or decree