



# Presidents' Day

THIRD MONDAY IN FEBRUARY

**T**HIS UNIT COMBINES two birthdays: George Washington's and Abraham Lincoln's. The federal holiday is formally called "Washington's Birthday" and is celebrated on the third Monday in February. However, we have titled this unit "Presidents' Day" since a common practice is to celebrate the birthdays of both presidents on this day. Some people, in fact, think the day celebrates all the American presidents.

The birthday of George Washington has been a legal federal holiday since 1885, and was originally celebrated on February 22. There was no federal holiday for Abraham Lincoln, but many individual states celebrated Lincoln's birthday on February 12. In some states, both February 12 and February 22 were declared holidays to commemorate the two presidents.

In 1968 Congress passed the Uniform Holidays Act that fixed Monday as the official day to observe legal federal holidays, including Washington's Birthday. At this time, since many people assumed that the new date was meant to combine the two presidents' birthdays, media sources and advertisers began calling the day "Presidents' Day." Now, printed calendars and date books indicate the day as "Presidents' Day," and retail stores hold huge "Presidents' Day Sales."

Despite the confusion surrounding the holiday, the third Monday

in February is the day on which Americans are reminded of the influence of both George Washington and Abraham Lincoln on the growth and history of the nation. As a legal holiday, federal and many state and local government offices are closed.

The two following sections discuss the lives and legacies of George Washington, the first president of the United States, and Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States.

## George Washington's Birthday

George Washington, the first president of the United States of America, is often referred to as the "Father of Our Country." Born February 22, 1732, in Virginia, he grew to be a natural leader—instrumental in winning American independence from Britain in the Revolutionary War and creating a united nation out of a conglomeration of

struggling colonies and territories.

As a boy, George helped manage his parents' plantation in Ferry Farm, Virginia. He observed the plantation's black slaves at work, and learned about planting and crops. George attended school for only 7 or 8 years, and was especially interested in math. His father wanted to send him to England for more education, but when George was eleven, his father died, and George was unable to continue his studies.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Mt. Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota features the colossal portraits of four presidents carved from granite: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln.  
ABOVE: The White House has been the official home of American presidents since the year 1800.

His interest in military life began early. At fourteen he longed to join the British Royal Navy, but his mother would not give him permission. He then became interested in **surveying**, a profession in which he could apply his math skills and explore the **frontier** as he mapped out new **settlements**. Over the next five years he became a master surveyor, laying the plans for many new towns and farms. By 1750 he had also acquired over 1,000 acres of land for himself.

Shortly after his twentieth birthday, Washington began serving in the army of King George III of England, who ruled over the thirteen colonies and much of the surrounding territories. By twenty-two Washington was a lieutenant colonel and was put in command of a troop of soldiers who fought against the French in the French and Indian War.

While serving under the King, Washington grew resentful of the unfair treatment of colonial soldiers and officers, who received lower pay and poorer supplies and training than regular British troops. When the King lowered the **ranks** of all colonial officers, Washington **resigned** in anger. Later he rejoined to learn military **tactics** from a **renowned** general.

At the end of the French and Indian War, Washington returned to Virginia and spent many years as a farmer, businessman, and Virginia legislator. In 1759 he married Martha Dandridge Custis, a **widow** with two children.

By the late 1760s, many colonists began to want their freedom, and to live under their own rule, not under the rule of a faraway king and a British militia. They felt that the taxes, laws, and punishments that the King **imposed** on them were unfair. In 1773, a **local rebellion** against high taxes, called the Boston Tea Party, helped to **spark** the American Revolution. In this rebellion, colonists **raided** British ships in Boston Harbor and tossed the cargo of tea into the water. When the British closed Boston Harbor as punishment, Washington spoke out **vehemently**.

In 1774, Washington attended the first Continental Congress where he and other representatives approved a trade **boycott** of all British goods. Britain tightened its control over the colonies, and in 1775 the Revolutionary War began. Washington was elected Commander in Chief of

the Continental Army. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence, claiming America's freedom from British rule, but it would be seven more years before that independence was won.

Washington led the inexperienced troops of the Continental Army against the British forces during the harsh years of war, until the colonists **prevailed** and won their independence in 1783. History books recount the hardships of freezing winters, lack of food, discouragement, and **desertions** during those years of war. They describe Washington's strong leadership and determination that were instrumental in the eventual victory.

In 1789, Washington was elected president of the Constitutional Convention, a meeting of representatives from each state to draft a constitution for the new nation. Laws written into the Constitution called for a President, and George Washington was considered the natural choice. He was elected, and though Washington was **reluctant**, he agreed to serve his country as the first President of the United States. On April 30, 1789, at the age of 57, Washington was **sworn** into office. He moved from Mount Vernon in 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 accepted two terms as president, but turned down a third term wishing only to retire to his beautiful family home, Mount Vernon. By the time Washington left office, there were 16 states in the **Union**, and the U.S. Capitol building was being constructed in the newly established District of Columbia.

During his later years, Washington remained active in politics, and he died on December 14, 1799. His memory is evident in the **multitude** of places in the United States that bear his name, including the United States Capitol, Washington, D.C.

While Washington was alive, legends grew up about him. One legend says that he was so strong, that he could throw a silver dollar across the Potomac River.

Some Americans argue that this could be a true story, because parts of the Potomac River, they say, were extremely narrow a few hun-

*OPPOSITE PAGE:* George Washington, as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army in 1775, led the inexperienced troops against the British forces.



dred years ago! Another story tells of a time when George Washington was young, and his father gave him a **hatchet**. Presumably, George 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 **confessed**. “I did it with my hatchet.” This story has never been proven, but Americans pass it down to their children as a lesson in honesty. George Washington came to represent honesty, and cherry pies have become a favorite food associated with his birthday holiday.

Americans began celebrating Washington’s birthday from the time of the Revolutionary War. They were grateful for a strong leader who had proven that democracy was a **feasible** way to govern the growing country. Today, some communities observe the holiday by staging **pageants** and **reenactments** of important **milestones** in Washington’s life. Also, the holiday has taken on a commercial side. Many shopping malls and stores run Presidents’ Day sales to attract shoppers who have the day off from work or school.

### Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday

Of all the presidents in the history of the United States, Abraham Lincoln is probably the one that Americans remember with deepest **affection**. His childhood experiences set the course for his character and **motivation** later in life. He brought a new level of **honesty** and **integrity** to the White House, living up to his nickname, “Honest Abe.” Most of all, he is associated with the final **abolition** of slavery, with his **Emancipation Proclamation**. 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. Abe’s family, like many on the frontier, lived in a log cabin, and Abe’s father worked hard as a farmer and carpenter to support his family. Abe and his sister were often occupied with household **chores**, but when they were free they attended a **log schoolhouse**.

In 1816, the family left Kentucky for Indiana, a state in the Midwest. The United States at this time was still young, and the Midwest was a wild frontier. Indiana offered new opportunities and differed from Kentucky in many ways. One important difference for Abe’s father was that Indiana was a state that did not allow slavery. Abe’s father was opposed to slavery, and **instilled** the same beliefs in his children.

Abe and his family settled in a forest, in Spencer County, Indiana. Neighbors were few and far away. Eventually, Abe’s father cleared enough land to build a log cabin. He and Abe cleared the woods for farmland, and Abe became so skilled at **splitting logs** that

neighbors settling into the territory paid him to split their logs. Drawings and other depictions of Lincoln as a young man often show him splitting logs in a wooded setting.

During his life, Abe had less than one year of formal schooling. 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 uneducated and could not read or write, she encouraged her children to study by themselves. Later, after his mother died and his father remarried, Abe’s stepmother was also **instrumental** in encouraging him to read. Abe would



ABOVE: Young Abraham Lincoln became skilled at splitting logs, often used for houses, fences, and heating.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Lincoln is best known for his Emancipation Proclamation, issued January 1, 1863, that changed the character of the Civil War.



Whereas

On the Twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a Proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing among other things the following, to-wit:

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State, the people whereof are, or shall be, in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward and forever free: and the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

That the executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, where the people thereof, residing there, shall be then in a condition to be represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such State shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong counterwailing testimony, be deemed constituting a part of the United States, and the people thereof are not then in rebellion against the United States.

Now, therefore, I, ABRAHAM LINCOLN, President of the United States, by virtue of the power and authority, in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing such rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do, publicly and solemnly declare that on and after the first day of January above mentioned order, and designation of the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof, residing there, shall be then in a condition to be represented in the Congress of the United States, the following parts of ARKANSAS, TEXAS, LOUISIANA, except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James, Ascension, Assumption, Terre Bonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the city of New Orleans, MISSISSIPPI, ALABAMA, FLORIDA, GEORGIA, SOUTH CAROLINA, NORTH CAROLINA and VIRGINIA (except the forty-eight counties which are, or shall be, in West Virginia), and also the counties of Berkeley, Accomack, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth, and which excepted parts are, for the present, left precisely as if this Proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States and parts of States are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons. And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free, to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defense, and I recommend to them that in all cases, when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service. And I do further declare that the rights and justice of the United States in its relation to all nations, and to all men, in accordance with the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the conciliatory judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my name, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-seventh.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN  
By the President.

WILLIAM H. Seward, Secretary of State.

NOTE.—The rest of the slaves were afterwards freed by Legislation and Constitutional Amendments.

even travel to neighboring farms and counties to borrow books. **Legend** claims that he was often found reading next to a pile of logs that he should have been splitting.

Even as a boy Lincoln showed skill as a speaker. He noticed that people loved to listen to stories, and he began telling **tall tales** in the general store where people often gathered.

In 1830 the family moved again, this time to Illinois. Lincoln began working in a store in the 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 Illinois State **Legislature**, and began studying to become a lawyer. There were few law schools in those days, so Lincoln studied law from books that he borrowed from an attorney. He received his license to practice law in 1836. In 1839, he met his future wife Mary Todd. After a long **courtship**, they married in November 1842, and eventually had four boys.

Lincoln practiced law all across the state, traveling far on horseback and by buggy to different counties. He became well known during this time for his ability to argue a strong convincing case and for his honesty. These experiences eventually led him down the road to become the sixteenth president of the United States.

In 1847 he was elected into Congress, but his **criticism** of then President Polk made him unpopular, and he did not run for a second term.

He returned to his law practice, but continued to present his views publicly. He was **vehemently** against slavery and took stands on other **controversial issues**.

Within a few years, slavery had become 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 his oppo-

nent, the Democratic nominee, to a series of debates in which he argued the moral evil of slavery. With the simple language that he used to communicate with people all his life, he defeated his opponent in the debates, but lost the election.

However, the debates had made Lincoln a national figure, and in 1860, he was nominated by the Republican Party as its candidate for the Presidency of the United States. Lincoln won the election with a majority of the electoral votes—all from the north. But with this election, the country began the process of “dividing against itself.” South Carolina, a strong slave state, had already **seceded** from the Union. Other slave 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 about the abolition of slavery, but also the right of individual states to make their own laws on other key issues.

As the nation was approaching the third year of the war, on January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which stated that all persons who had been slaves within the southern states were free. Though this Proclamation was limited in that it only applied to states that had seceded from the Union, it transformed the focus of the war. From then on, the march from the North was equated with an expansion of freedom.

The Battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania in 1863 was one of the bloodiest of the Civil War, and the largest battle ever fought on American soil. On November 19, 1863, a ceremony was held to dedicate the Gettysburg battlefield as a national monument. At that ceremony Lincoln delivered what was to become one of the finest speeches in American history, the Gettysburg Address. After Lincoln's short speech there was a polite, but reserved applause. The main speaker of the day was Edward Everett, ex-governor of Massachusetts, who delivered a two-hour **oration**. As the two speakers returned to Washington together, Lincoln expressed disappointment in his own presentation. “I was a flat failure,” he said of his speech. “I ought to have prepared it with more care.” But Everett reassured him, saying, “I would be glad if...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.*

On April 9, 1865, the South surrendered, and the Civil War ended. The Union army soldiers spread the word of the war's end and of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. (See Juneteenth, page 93) 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 were attending a play at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. An actor, John Wilkes Booth, who disagreed with Lincoln's political opinions, stepped into the presidential box and shot the President. Lincoln died the following morning.

## Quotation 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

## Glossary (George Washington's Birthday)

**federal:** *adj.* of or relating to the national government, for example, a federal holiday is a holiday declared by the national government

**legacy(ies):** *n.* the good works that a person or group did that survive long after the person or group has left

**instrumental:** *adj.* influential; very important

**conglomeration:** *n.* a mixture or collection of dissimilar things

**colony(ies):** *n.* a group of people living in a new territory with strong ties or links to their parent country; the link is usually at the level of the government

**territory(ies):** *n.* a geographic area or subdivision of land that is under the jurisdiction or rule of a government, but is not a full part of that government's country, e.g., Puerto Rico is a territory of the U.S.

**plantation:** *n.* a farm or estate on which crops such as tobacco or sugar are cultivated by resident laborers

**surveying:** *n.* a field of work that involves measuring and mapping land

**frontier:** *n.* wilderness; unsettled, open lands

**settlement(s):** *n.* a village or town where people have established a new community

**rank(s):** *n.* position or level within the military, e.g. general; captain; sergeant

**resign(ed):** *v.* to quit a job or position

**tactic(s):** *n.* strategy; planned method

**renown(ed):** *adj.* well-known; famous

**widow:** *n.* a woman whose husband has died

**impose(d):** *v.* to place on, such as a rule or law

**rebellion:** *n.* opposition to authority; revolution

**spark:** *v.* to cause to set in motion; suddenly

**raid(ed):** *v.* to attack suddenly and without warning

**vehement(ly):** *adv.* strongly, with anger

**boycott:** *n.* a refusal to buy or use certain goods or services as an action of protest

**prevail(ed):** *v.* to triumph; to be victorious

**desertion(s):** *n.* abandonment; leaving a responsibility, often without warning or permission

**reluctant:** *adj.* not willing; hesitant

**swear into:** *v. phrase.* to take an oath before beginning an official position; be inaugurated

**glimpse:** *v.* to see briefly

**Union:** *n.* refers to the United States

**multitude:** *n.* a large number of; many

**hatchet:** *n.* a tool to cut wood

**presumably:** *adv.* assumption or belief that something is true

**confess(ed):** *v.* to tell or admit wrong doing

**feasible:** *adj.* possible; workable; practical

**pageant(s):** *n.* parades and plays for a special event

**reenactment(s):** *n.* performance of historical events

**milestone(s):** *n.* significant event in history or a person's life

**virtual:** *adj.* true

**pinnacle:** *n.* highest point

**chore(s):** *n.* regular or daily work, usually in a household or on a farm

**log schoolhouse:** *n. phrase.* a one-room school made of wooden logs (cut and cleaned tree trunks)

**instill(ed):** *v.* to give an idea or principle by example or teaching

**split(ting) logs:** *v. phrase.* to divide a log or length of tree trunk lengthwise

**quest:** *n.* a search

**instrumental:** *adj.* influential; very important

**legend:** *n.* a popular myth or story about someone or some event in the past; not verifiable

**tall tale(s):** *n.* a story that is untrue or exaggerated

**legislature:** *n.* an organized body of the government with the authority to make laws

**courtship:** *n.* the act of dating, or actions to attract a mate for marriage or union

**criticism:** *n.* the act of making a comment (written or oral) of evaluation, usually negative

**vehemently:** *adv.* strongly, with anger

**controversial:** *adj.* causing disagreement

**abolish:** *v.* to end, stop, finish

**issue(s):** *n.* a topic or matter of discussion

**dissolve(d):** *v.* to break apart

**oratorical:** *adj.* speaking; having to do with public speaking

**nominee:** *n.* a person who has been proposed for office

**electoral vote(s):** *n.* votes from the Electoral College which elects the President and Vice President of the U.S. Each state appoints as many electors as it has senators and representatives in Congress; the District of Columbia has three votes. Though pledged to vote for their state's winners, electors are not constitutionally obliged to do so. A candidate must win more than 50% of the votes to win the election. (from the online Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article-9363529>)

**secede(d):** *v.* to withdraw from an organization or group

**oration:** *n.* speech

**reconstruction:** *n.* rebuilding

**reconciliation:** *n.* forgiveness; settling a problem

### Glossary (Abraham Lincoln's Birthday)

**affection:** *n.* fondness; a deep, warm, good feeling

**motivation:** *n.* incentive; something that pushes you toward a goal

**integrity:** *n.* correct morals and behavior

**abolition:** *n.* an ending or termination of, by law

**Emancipation Proclamation:** *n.* the government document that officially proclaimed or stated American slaves to be free

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OPPOSITE PAGE: Presidents' Day celebrates the birthdays of George Washington (February 22) and Abraham Lincoln (February 12).

