CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

Presidents' Day

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how "We the People" interact with the government and each other. Let's help each other expand our civic literacy.
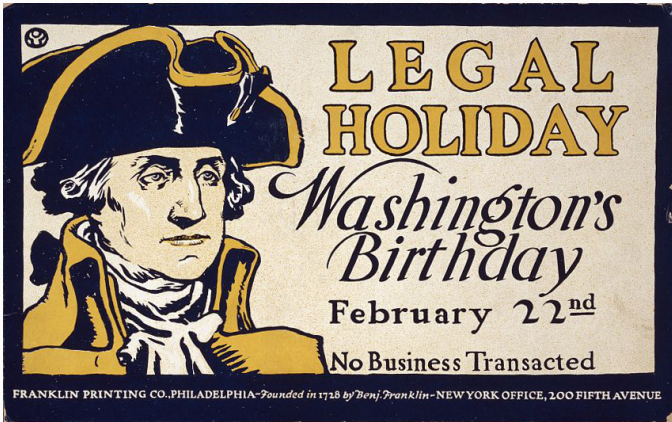
The story of Presidents' Day begins with our first president, George Washington. When he died in 1799, his birthday of February 22 became something of an unofficial day of remembrance for the father of the country. By 1885, Washington's birthday became the first federal holiday in the United States to recognize an individual national leader. So how did Washington's Day become Presidents' Day? To answer that question, we must skip ahead 70 years to Abraham Lincoln's birthday.

President Abraham Lincoln was not a father of the country, but it might be said that he was in some ways the savior of the country. It was Lincoln's leadership during the Civil War (1861-1865) that preserved the Union and contributed to the expansion of freedom in the United States. By the 1870's, his February 12th birthday became a holiday in multiple states, honoring the slain president for his contribution to the country.

The next part of the story of Presidents' Day actually has to do with a wonderful thing, at least if you work for the federal government or for a bank: three day weekends! In 1968, Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act. This established new dates for five permanent federal holidays to be celebrated on a Monday, in order to create the following three-day weekends: Memorial Day, Columbus Day, Labor Day, Washington's Birthday, and Veterans' Day (though Veterans' Day was moved back to November 11th by 1978). Many states that celebrated both Washington's Birthday and Lincoln's Birthday then chose to combine the two holidays into one Presidents' Day, to be officially celebrated on the third Monday in February.

And yet, there is quite a twist to the story of Presidents' Day: this federal holiday is not actually Presidents' Day! According to federal law, the third Monday in February is still Washington's Birthday. It is at the state level that we actually find 'Presidents' Day'. Only 27 states actually celebrate a Presidents Day.' Other states celebrate some version or combination of Washington's Birthday, Lincoln's Birthday, Jefferson's Birthday, or none at all.

A Guide to Great Sales This Holiday Weekend

The story of Presidents' Day is one that began as a national effort to honor a founding father, but evolved to recognize the accomplishments of Lincoln. But now, many people view Presidents' Day as a national celebration of the American presidency.

To Think and To Do: Presidents' Day, or Washington's Birthday as we now know it really is, is one of only two federal holidays that honor an individual American (Dr. Martin Luther, King, Jr. Day is the other!).

If you could honor any other American with an official holiday, who would it be and why?

Learn MORE about federal holidays
Free registration may be required.

- 5 U.S. Code § 6103.Holidays, from Legal Information Institute
- "Presidents' Day"? The Truth Behind the Holiday, from George Washington's Mount Vernon
- How Abraham Lincoln lost his birthday holiday, from National Constitution Center

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