

Holiday Observances

THE ORIGINS, MEANINGS AND TRADITIONS.

Symbols & Legend



American Holiday



Canadian Holiday



World (or Western) Holiday



Jewish Holiday



Christian Holiday



Muslim Holiday



New Year's Day (JANUARY 1)

New Year's day is often celebrated with fireworks at the stroke of midnight as the new year starts and marks the end of a period of remembrance of a particular passing year. Many people make New Year's resolutions to improve their lives in the coming year.

day on which people express their love for each other, exchanging cards and gifts.



Martin Luther King Jr. Day (3RD MONDAY IN JANUARY)

Marks the approximate birth date of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (born Jan. 15th) who was a champion of civil rights and workers rights. Serves to challenge Americans to transform the day into a day of citizen action through volunteer service.



Family Day (3RD MONDAY IN FEBRUARY)

Celebrated in Canada on the third Monday in February, this holiday coincides with the U.S. holiday Presidents Day. Alberta was the first to institute Family Day in 1990, followed by Saskatchewan (2007) and Ontario (2008).



Presidents Day (3RD MONDAY IN FEBRUARY)

Initially "Washington's Birthday," the holiday celebrated the birthday of America's first president, George Washington, on February 22. In the late 1980s the holiday was renamed Presidents Day to honor Abraham Lincoln and other Presidents. Celebrations encourage the exploration of early colonial history.



Ash Wednesday (40 DAYS BEFORE EASTER)

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the 40 days of Lent (a period of fasting and penitence in preparation for Easter). In some traditions the priest or minister marks the forehead of each participant with black ashes, in the shape of a cross, signifying repentance before God.



Leap Day (FEBRUARY 29)

The sun takes 365 days and about five hours to travel around the earth each year. A leap day is added to the calendar every four years during a "leap year" to keep our dates synchronized with the annual seasons. The next leap day will occur in 2012.



Valentine's Day (FEBRUARY 14)

Named after St. Valentine, a Christian martyr, it is the



Daylight Saving Time Begins

(2ND SUNDAY IN MARCH)

Clocks are adjusted during Daylight Saving Time (DST) to take full advantage of the daylight hours. Clocks "spring forward" one hour near the start of spring, and "fall back" one hour in the autumn.



St. Patrick's Day (MARCH 17)

This annual Catholic holiday celebrates Saint Patrick, one of the patron saints of Ireland. Modern secular celebrations are themed around all things green and Irish; both Christians and non-Christians (and non-Irish!) celebrate Irish culture by wearing green or orange, attending parades and parties and enjoying the food and drink of Ireland.



Passover

(BEGINS ON THE EVE OF THE 15TH DAY OF NISAN, THE 1ST MONTH OF THE JEWISH CALENDAR)

Passover commemorates the liberation of the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt. Ten plagues were inflicted on the Egyptians to convince the Pharaoh to release the Israelite people. The tenth plague was the death of the first-born sons. The Israelites were instructed to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a lamb, so the plague would "pass over" their homes. No leavened food is eaten during Passover in remembrance that the Jewish people left Egypt so quickly that their bread did not have time to rise.



Palm Sunday (SUNDAY BEFORE EASTER)

Palm Sunday falls on the Sunday before Easter and celebrates Jesus' Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Crowds celebrated by spreading their cloaks and palm branches on the street and greeting Jesus as Messiah and King. The actions of the crowd frightened the authorities, who plotted to put Jesus to death.



Good Friday (FRIDAY BEFORE EASTER)

Good Friday commemorates the events that led to the death of Jesus. Jesus was arrested and falsely accused, brought before the Roman governor Pilate, questioned by King Herod and sentenced to death. Pilate declared Jesus innocent but gave in to the crowd's demands for his crucifixion. Jesus, who was without sin, gave his life as a sacrifice for the sin of the world.



Easter Sunday (SUNDAY AFTER THE FIRST FULL MOON ON/AFTER MARCH 21)

Easter Sunday is a time for rejoicing in celebration of Jesus' resurrection; the triumph over sin and death,

redemption and a new beginning for the whole world. The day is also associated with a celebration of spring, as the rebirth and renewal of life at the end of winter.



Easter Monday (MONDAY AFTER EASTER)

The day following Easter is a statutory holiday in many countries around the world.



Earth Day (APRIL 22)

Earth Day began in America in the 1970s as a grassroots demonstration to call attention to environmental issues – more than 20 million Americans participated in the first event. Earth Day continues to be an ecological day of action, and an opportunity to reflect on global environmental concerns.



Mother's Day (2ND SUNDAY IN MAY)

Mother's Day honors the role of mothers in the family and in society. The holiday possibly originated in a Christian tradition called "Mothering Sunday," when people customarily visited their home church, reuniting mothers with their children. It is usually celebrated with a family meal (not prepared by the mother!) as well as cards and gifts. Common greeting: Happy Mother's Day.



Victoria Day (MONDAY ON OR BEFORE MAY 24)

This is a Canadian holiday celebrating both the birthday of Queen Victoria (the first sovereign of Canada), as well as the current reigning Canadian sovereign's birthday. The holiday is often observed with fireworks and parades.



Memorial Day (LAST MONDAY IN MAY)

First enacted after the Civil War, Memorial Day (formerly Decoration Day) commemorates American men and women who have died in military service. Many observe the day by visiting cemeteries and memorials; a national moment of remembrance takes place at 3 p.m., Washington D.C. time.



Father's Day (3RD SUNDAY IN JUNE)

Father's Day is a celebration of fathers and fatherhood, established in the early twentieth century to complement Mother's Day. The celebrations are similar – family, food and gifts. Common greeting: Happy Father's Day.



St. Jean Baptiste Day (JUNE 24, QUEBEC ONLY)

The holiday, also called the Fête Nationale, grew from the feast day of St. John the Baptist (patron saint of Quebec) and ancient festivities marking the summer solstice, the

longest day of the year. The day is marked in Quebec with music, fireworks and celebrations of French-Canadian traditions and culture.



Canada Day (JULY 1)

Canada Day (formerly Dominion Day), marks the day the Dominion of Canada was founded through the union of four British North American colonies (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario) in 1867. Canada Day is celebrated across the country with fireworks, barbecues, picnics and events honoring Canadian history, government and traditions.



Independence Day (JULY 4)

Independence Day commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, as the 13 American colonies announced their decision to form their own country, separate from Britain. The act launched the Revolutionary War, as Americans fought for their independence. Today, the day is marked with fireworks, as well as festivals and parades across the country.



Civic Holiday (1ST MONDAY IN AUGUST)

The first Monday in August is celebrated across Canada by different names (eg. British Columbia Day in BC, or Heritage Day in Alberta). The date is generally termed "Civic Holiday" to tie together the various celebrations. It is not celebrated in Quebec or Newfoundland.



Labor Day (1ST MONDAY IN SEPTEMBER)

Labor Day is a celebration of unions, trades and workers' rights. Labor Day parades and festivities have been held in Canada and the United States since the 1880s.



Ramadan (9TH MONTH OF THE ISLAMIC CALENDAR)

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims refrain from eating during daylight hours, and avoid any negative thoughts, actions or spoken words. Observances include prayer at sunrise and sunset, and spiritual reflection. In the last 10 days of this month, the Angel Gabriel brought the Koran to the Prophet Mohammed.



Eid Al-Fitr (END OF RAMADAN)

The sighting of the crescent "hila" moon officially marks the end of Ramadan and the beginning of the three-day celebration of Eid. The first day begins with prayers and a small meal. The celebration marks the achievement of greater piety, forgiveness, moral victory, unity and thankfulness to God for strengthening their self-control throughout the month of Ramadan. Muslims celebrate

Eid with extravagant meals that are shared through gatherings held in their homes and gifts exchanged with friends and family. Common greetings: Blessed Eid, or Happy Eid.



Rosh Hashanah

(1ST DAY OF TISHRI, THE 7TH MONTH OF JEWISH CALENDAR)

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year celebration (literal translation "head of the year"). Rosh Hashanah is both a day of renewal and a day of judgment, when God opens the books of life and death. Rosh Hashanah is characterized by the blowing of a ram's horn (the shofar) like a trumpet, intended as a wake up call to repent, as well as a call for celebration and rebirth. Common greetings: "Shana Tova"/ Good Year, or "Chatima Tova"/ Good Signing in the Book of Life.



Yom Kippur

(10TH DAY OF TISHRI, THE 7TH MONTH OF JEWISH CALENDAR)

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the most solemn Jewish holiday, marking the end of the new year celebrations begun with Rosh Hashanah. God inscribes each person's fate for the coming year into a book on Rosh Hashanah and waits until Yom Kippur to seal the verdict. It is a time of atonement and repentance, traditionally observed with a 25-hour fast and prayer. Wearing white clothing is traditional to symbolize one's purity on this day.



Thanksgiving (CANADA: 2ND MONDAY IN OCTOBER)

Thanksgiving is a day to celebrate a bountiful harvest. Canadian origins date back to the early explorers and settlers of the late 1500s, but Thanksgiving first became an official holiday in 1859. The holiday is typically celebrated with a feast of a roast turkey and traditional fall harvest fare like squash, sweet potatoes, corn and pumpkin.



Columbus Day (2ND MONDAY IN OCTOBER)

Columbus Day marks the anniversary of explorer Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492. The day is observed throughout North and South America. The first Columbus Day celebration was celebrated in New York City in 1792 to coincide with the 300th anniversary of the Columbus landing. The date was set aside as a national holiday in 1924 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.



Halloween (OCTOBER 31)

Halloween traditions have their origins in the Celtic festival of Samhain. Ancient Celts believed that the boundary between the living and the spirits of the dead dissolved during Samhain. They lit bonfires and wore costumes and

masks to ward off evil spirits. Christian celebrations of All Hallows Eve/All Saints Day developed from this festival. Modern secular practices incorporate costumes and “trick or treating,” providing treats to visitors to avoid mischief. Common greeting: Happy Halloween!



Daylight Savings Time Ends

(1ST SUNDAY IN NOVEMBER)

Clocks are adjusted backwards one hour in the autumn to take advantage of the light as the daytime hours grow shorter.



Remembrance Day/Veteran's Day

(NOVEMBER 11)

The ceasefire ending World War I took effect at 11 a.m., November 11, 1918 (the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month). Originally commemorating the “war to end all wars,” after World War II, the day became an occasion to honor the sacrifices of soldiers in wartime. Those who died are remembered with two minutes of silence at 11 a.m., and through public gatherings at war memorials and military cemeteries.



Thanksgiving

(UNITED STATES: 4TH THURSDAY IN NOVEMBER)

Thanksgiving is a day to celebrate a bountiful harvest. In the United States, Thanksgiving is sometimes believed to have originated with a meal shared by the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621. Thanksgiving in modern days marks the beginning of the winter holiday season and is one of the busiest retail shopping periods of the year.



Eid Al-Adha (10TH DAY OF DHU AL-HIJJAH, THE 12TH MONTH IN THE ISLAMIC CALENDAR)

Eid Al-Adha, the “Festival of Sacrifice,” honors Abraham’s devotion to God, through his willingness to sacrifice his son. God showed mercy for Abraham and provided a lamb as a substitute sacrifice. Eid Al-Adha also marks the end of the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. As part of the traditional festival ceremonies, an animal is sacrificed, and the meat is divided among family, friends and the poor. Common greetings: Blessed Eid, or Happy Eid.



Hanukkah

(BEGINS ON 25TH DAY OF KISLER, THE 3RD MONTH IN THE JEWISH CALENDAR)

Hanukkah, the Holiday of Lights, celebrates the miracle of a little oil that lasted eight days. Hanukkah recalls the defeat of Seleucid Empire forces that tried to prevent the people of Israel from practicing their faith, and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem. The eight-day

festival is marked by the kindling of lights (one on the first night, two on the second, and so on) using a Hanukkah menorah. Common greeting: Happy Hanukkah.



Christmas Day (DECEMBER 25)

Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus, God becoming human through birth to the Virgin Mary. Modern customs include gift-giving, church celebrations, decorations including the Christmas tree, lights and nativity scenes. Secularly, the jolly mythological figure Santa Claus, or Father Christmas, is traditionally believed by children to deliver gifts for Christmas morning. Common greetings: Merry Christmas, Season’s Greetings.



Boxing Day (DECEMBER 26)

This is a public holiday in most countries in the British Commonwealth, Boxing Day originated as a day for giving gifts to employees and the poor.