

Presidents Day: How We Got Such a Lame Holiday

“This is Washington’s Birthday,” sings Fred Astaire in the movie classic *Holiday Inn*, “And I can’t tell a lie.” Americans of a certain age no doubt can remember when the day we now know as Presidents Day was called Washington’s Birthday, invariably celebrated on February 22. George Washington was officially born on February 11, 1731 according to the old Julian calendar; February 22, 1732 according to the Gregorian calendar now in use. In the early days of our nation Washington was universally revered for his role in the Revolution and the founding of the Republic; unofficial celebrations to mark his birthday were held [throughout the nineteenth century](#).

It was not until 1879 that Washington’s birthday was recognized as a federal holiday, thanks to a measure signed into law by President Rutherford B. Hayes. Thus began the unchallenged reign of Washington’s Birthday throughout the land—a reign undisturbed by an unsuccessful attempt in 1951 to establish March 4 (the original inauguration day) as “Presidents’ Day,” to honor all U.S. Presidents.

The big change occurred in 1968, when Congress proposed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act. This measure sought to shift various civil holidays from specific dates to predetermined Mondays (in the case of Washington’s Birthday, the third Monday of February). The Act was seen by many as a way to create more three-day weekends for the country’s employees; critics saw it as cheapening the meaning of the holidays.

When President Richard Nixon signed the measure into law in 1971, the day was still officially known as “Washington’s Birthday,” but the shift to “Presidents Day” in common usage was not long in coming. It so happens that Abraham Lincoln

was also born in February (on the twelfth), and Presidents Day was fixed at a date falling in between the two birthdays. This has led to the general impression that the holiday was meant to honor both Washington and Lincoln...or perhaps all the Presidents. Then there's the matter of punctuation: Is it "Presidents Day," "President's Day," or "Presidents' Day"? All those spellings are found in the legislature of various states, and each has a different shade of meaning. Let's face it: "Presidents Day" is ambiguous. It renders a holiday that used to be specific vague and generic—and perhaps ultimately negligible.

In the wake of the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, advertisers jumped at the opportunity to hype up Presidents Day as a day for sales—a stark contrast with the past, when many businesses and stores were closed on this civic holiday. Nowadays, car dealers routinely run commercials featuring actors dressed as Washington and Lincoln hawking cars. Thus the shift from Washington's Birthday to Presidents Day is tied in with the increasing absorption of all of life by the commercial. Thus is the Father of our Country demoted to the level of a used car salesman.

Thankfully, pride in George Washington still lives on in his adopted hometown of Alexandria, Virginia, where I live. Here parades, tours and reenactments take place throughout the month of February; and in Virginia as a whole the holiday is officially on the books as "George Washington's Day." To me that strikes just the right note.