ORIGINS

The chief festival of summer in the United States, the Fourth of July commemorates the day in 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was approved by the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. For more than two centuries, Americans have been celebrating this historic event with FIREWORKS, PARADES, and backyard barbecues. But it wasn't until 1941 that Congress officially established the Fourth of July as a legal holiday.

Independence Day is a national holiday in the United States. National holidays can be defined as those commemorations that a nation's government has deemed important enough to warrant inclusion in the list of official public holidays. They tend to honor a person or event that has been critical in the development of the nation and its identity. Such people and events usually reflect values and traditions shared by a large portion of the citizenry.

In the United States, patriotism and identity were nurtured from the beginning of the nation by the very act of celebrating new events in holidays like the Fourth of July, battle anniversaries, and other notable occasions. This was even more important in the country's early years because the nation was composed of people from a variety of backgrounds and traditions. The invention of traditions and the marking of important occasions in the life of the new nation were crucial in creating a shared bond of tradition and a sense of common belonging to a relatively new homeland through the shared experience of celebrating common holidays. As more and diverse peoples migrated to the United States, it became even more important to celebrate significant annual anniversaries, and the Fourth of July has become one of the nation's most important shared celebrations.

The Fourth of July could just as well have been the Second of July, the day on which the Continental Congress approved a resolution for independence, or August 2, the day on which the members of Congress actually signed the document. But it was on July 4 that the final text of the Declaration, which had been drafted by Thomas Jefferson, was ratified. John Adams wrote to his wife that the event "ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other." As it turned out, Adams managed to touch on almost every feature of the modern Fourth of July celebration.
The first celebration took place in 1777. Warships along the docks in Philadelphia fired a thirteen-gun salute in honor of the thirteen United States, and the soldiers who were stationed there paraded through the streets. By 1788, the Fourth of July commemorated the U.S. Constitution as well, which had recently been approved by ten states. The celebration that year featured a parade with horse-drawn floats, one of which was a huge EAGLE carrying the justices of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1790, Washington DC was chosen as the site of the nation's permanent capital. President Thomas Jefferson observed July 4, 1801, by opening the executive mansion to guests. This custom continued under subsequent presidents, but the burning of the White House by the British in 1814 put a damper on the practice. Other notable celebrations include the one held at the end of the Civil War in 1865 on the battlefield at Gettysburg, the procession of freed black slaves who paraded through the streets of Richmond, Virginia, in 1866, and the Bicentennial celebration in New York City on July 4, 1976.

Today, not every American greets the Fourth of July with enthusiasm. African Americans, many of whom celebrate JUNETEENTH—June 19, the day in 1865 when news that the slaves had been freed finally reached Galveston, Texas, by ship—have often felt that the freedom celebrated by white Americans on this day is not really theirs to share. In addition, many women's groups have pointed out that the phrase “All men are created equal” excludes half the country's population. Native Americans usually join in the celebration with dances and powwows, paying respect to their own ancestors rather than to the nation's founding fathers.

For most Americans, however, the Fourth of July is a day of national unification, a time when political, religious, and ethnic differences are put aside. In some parts of the United States—Maine, for example—the eve of the Fourth was at one time a popular occasion for pulling pranks, such as stealing outhouses and removing porch steps. Toasts were also popular on July 4, but the Temperance movement in the early 1900s discouraged public drinking. Today the Fourth is usually celebrated by tolling bells (see LIBERTY BELL), listening to patriotic prayers and speeches, igniting fireworks, saluting flags, and watching parades.

It is a striking coincidence that Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, died quietly at his Virginia home at noon on July 4, 1826—the fiftieth anniversary of the document's signing. John Adams of Massachusetts, another early supporter of independence and father of President John Quincy Adams, died just a few hours later on the same day.

**SYMBOLS AND CUSTOMS**

**American Flag**

The red, white, and blue American flag can be seen everywhere on the Fourth of July, and its colors carry their own symbolic meanings: Red stands for courage, white for liberty or purity, and blue for loyalty.

The first national flag was raised on a hill near Boston on January 4, 1776, by troops serving under General George Washington. It was called the Grand Union flag, and it had thirteen red and blue stripes. Instead of stars, it had the crosses of St. Andrew and St. George, the symbols of Great Britain. After the Declaration of Independence was signed, however, the American people wanted a new flag that would symbolize their independence from Britain. The Second Continental Congress appointed a committee (whose members included George Washington) to come up with an appropriate design.

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The committee asked Betsy Ross, an expert seamstress and upholsterer, to make them a sample. She looked at the sketch they gave her and suggested only one change: that the number of points on each star be reduced from six to five. The thirteen stars, representing the thirteen colonies that fought for freedom, were placed in a circle to signify that the Union would be without end.

Each time a new state was added to the Union, a new star and a new stripe had to be added to the flag. By 1792, it had fifteen stars and fifteen stripes. Congress soon realized that if this practice continued, the flag would just keep getting larger. So they decided in 1818 that the number of stripes would remain fixed at thirteen, and that only the number of stars would change.

Since Hawaii became the fiftieth state in 1960, the American flag has had seven red stripes and six white ones, with fifty white stars on a blue background. The flag’s colors and design have inspired many nicknames, among them the “Stars and Stripes,” the “Star-Spangled Banner,” and the “Red, White, and Blue.”

Eagle
The bald eagle is the national bird of the United States and one of the largest birds in the world. When the first English settlers in America saw the eagle they called it “bald” meaning “white”—not hairless.

Eagles have been a symbol of power since ancient times. One of the Egyptian pharaohs used the eagle as his emblem, and golden eagles were perched atop the banners that Roman armies carried into battle. In fact, many Americans felt that because it had represented kings and empires, the eagle wasn’t an appropriate symbol for a young, democratic nation. Benjamin Franklin pointed out that the eagle was “a bird of bad moral character” because it was too lazy to fish for itself. He suggested the turkey, a true American native, as a better choice for the national bird.

America’s eagle population dwindled as the popularity of hunting grew. In 1940 Congress passed a law forbidding the capture or killing of a bald eagle. Pesticides like DDT lowered the eagles’ birth rate, but its use was banned in 1972. Since that time, biologists estimate that the eagle population of the United States has increased from 1,000 to over 9,700 breeding pairs in the lower forty-eight states.

The eagle appears on coins, postage stamps, dollar bills, and the Great Seal of the United States. On the Fourth of July it can be seen decorating banners, balloons, and Independence Day floats.

Fireworks
The term “fireworks” was first used in 1777 in connection with the first Fourth of July celebration; before that, they were called “rockets.” After 1820, those that were made to be heard rather than seen were called “firecrackers.” And in the 1880s, “sparklers” appeared—thin wands that sent off a shower of sparks and could be safely used by children.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, fireworks displays were used to celebrate military victories, religious festivals, and the crowning of kings or queens. These displays were created by experienced handlers called “firemasters,” and their helpers were called “wild men” or “green men” because they wore caps made of green leaves. The green men would act like jesters, running through the crowds and telling stories, cracking jokes, and warning people to stand back. Then they would set off the fireworks with lighted sticks called fire clubs. Many green men were injured or killed when their firecrackers went off too soon or failed to rise high enough in the air. The largest and most elaborate fireworks displays today are staged by experts who have much in common with the old firemasters. Since 1977, Macy's
has produced one of the country’s most spectacular displays, featuring forty-thousand fireworks illuminating the sky above New York’s East River. The annual Independence Day celebration on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. rivals Macy’s in size, and the Boston Pops Fireworks Spectacular is notable for its history and scope.

When fireworks were brought to America, they were used for domestic as well as public celebrations. By the 1870s, American companies were marketing fireworks for private use with names like Roman Candles, Flying Dragons, Sun Wheels, and Prismatic Fountains. The popularity of “at-home” fireworks displays meant that, in many areas, the Fourth of July celebrations moved off the streets and into private back yards.

The danger involved in lighting fireworks led to restrictions on their purchase and use. They are legal for general use in only 35 of the 50 states today; even so, there are laws governing what kind of fireworks can be sold and when. Cherry bombs and other large firecrackers have been banned nationwide since 1966 due to the large number of injuries associated with them. The majority of the fireworks used in the United States today are imported from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Liberty Bell

The bell that originally stood on top of the State House in Philadelphia is known today as the Liberty Bell. When it arrived from England in 1752, it was placed on a temporary stand so its ring could be tested. The bell developed a crack. Some people thought it should be sent back to England for replacement, but it was finally decided to recast the bell in Philadelphia. The original bell was broken into small pieces so the metal could be melted down. A new mold was prepared, the metal was poured in, and the bell was recast. But the new bell had a dull, muffled-sounding ring. So it was melted down again, this time with success.

From 1753 until 1776, the State House bell was used to summon public officials to meetings. There is no record of its having been rung on the day the Declaration of Independence was adopted, but it did ring on July 8, 1776, when Colonel John Nixon, commander of the city guard, read the document in public for the first time. The bell was hastily removed from the State House in September of 1777 because the British army was approaching and people were afraid they would melt it down for ammunition. It was hidden in a church basement in Allentown and shipped back to Philadelphia after the British left the city in June of 1778. It was tolling for the funeral procession of John Marshall, chief justice of the Supreme Court, on July 8, 1835, when it suddenly cracked for the second time—exactly 59 years after it had summoned the people of Philadelphia to the first reading of the Declaration of Independence.

The bell remained silent until 1846. Then the edges of the crack were filed down so they wouldn’t vibrate against each other. But when the bell was rung on George Washington’s birthday that year, the crack spread. After that, it was never used again. It was put on display in the State House in 1852, the 100th anniversary of its arrival in the United States. It traveled to New Orleans in 1885, to Chicago in 1893, to Boston in 1903, and to St. Louis in 1904, riding on a flat, open railroad car surrounded by a protective railing. After a final trip to San Francisco in 1915, it was discovered that the crack had widened. The bell has remained in Philadelphia ever since, a symbol of the nation’s independence.

At the Bicentennial celebration in 1976, the Liberty Bell was displayed in a modern pavilion on the grassy mall below Independence Hall. On July 4 that year, descendants of the original signers of the
Declaration of Independence gathered at the Liberty Bell pavilion. Exactly at 2:00 p.m., they tapped the bell gently with rubber-tipped hammers.

Parades
The first Fourth of July parade took place on the Potomac River in Washington DC, when President John Quincy Adams (1825-29) and a group of American and foreign dignitaries boarded a steamboat and led a procession of barges and other boats up the river to the site of what is known today as the Tidal Basin. Transferring to smaller boats, the entourage floated up the old Washington Canal to the place that had been selected for the new Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. There President Adams turned the first spade of dirt for the waterway that for many years cut through the heart of Washington DC, between the Capitol Building and the Washington Monument.

Today, parades are held in almost every city, town, and village on the Fourth of July. Marching bands, fife and drum corps, and members of organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts participate in the parades. Local veterans usually march in formation or ride in specially decorated cars, and floats are used to illustrate various patriotic themes.

Picnics
Feasting has always been part of July Fourth celebrations. In 1777, grand banquets were held in Philadelphia and other cities to commemorate the first anniversary of the approval of the Declaration of Independence. Eventually the parties moved outdoors, and by the mid-nineteenth century, the Fourth of July picnic had become a national tradition. It usually included sports and games such as tug-of-war, potato sack races, watermelon-eating contests, and chasing after a greased pig. Favorite picnic foods included fried chicken, potato salad, lemonade, chocolate and angel food cakes, pickles, deviled eggs, and homemade ice cream.

By the late nineteenth century, it was customary for political campaigns to begin on the Fourth of July. Local politicians would often sponsor holiday picnics, offering free hotdogs, corn on the cob, and steamed clams to anyone willing to listen to long political speeches. Political campaigns today don't get under way until Labor Day, but families still pack picnic baskets on the Fourth of July and head to the nearest state park, picnic area, or beach. The games afterward are usually confined to softball, but in some places tugs of war, sack races, and watermelon-eating contests are still popular.

Uncle Sam
Uncle Sam—the gray-bearded man on stilts wearing a top hat, tailcoat, and striped trousers—is a popular symbol of the United States. But he is not entirely imaginary. The real Uncle Sam was Samuel Wilson, born in Arlington, Massachusetts, in 1766. He ran away from home at the age of fourteen to enlist in the army. After the Revolutionary War was over, he moved to Troy, New York, and started a meat-packing business.

Known for his honesty and common sense, Sam Wilson supplied meat to the U.S. Army during the War of 1812. When a group of officials visiting his meatpacking plant saw that all the barrels of beef were stamped with the initials “U.S.,” they asked what it meant. A workman told them it stood for “Uncle Sam” Wilson. The story was picked up by the newspapers, and soon people were referring to everything supplied to the army as “Uncle Sam's.” The soldiers themselves began saying that they were in “Uncle Sam's Army.”

After the war was over, Uncle Sam began appearing as a political cartoon figure. In the 1830s he was...
portrayed as a young man with stars and stripes on his shirt but without the gray hair, chin whiskers, top hat, or tailcoat that later became his trademarks. Some say that the costume now associated with Uncle Sam was invented by Dan Rice, a clown in the 1840s. Rice also walked on stilts, to make Uncle Sam look taller.

Uncle Sam’s appearance was actually derived from two earlier symbolic figures in American folklore: Brother Jonathan and Yankee Doodle. Both Uncle Sam and Brother Jonathan were used interchangeably to represent the United States by cartoonists from the early 1830s to 1861. The first political cartoonist to standardize the figure of Uncle Sam was Thomas Nast, beginning in the 1870s. It was Nast who gave Uncle Sam his chin whiskers. Perhaps the most famous portrait of this symbolic figure is the one used on an army recruiting poster painted by James Montgomery Flagg during World War I. Uncle Sam is looking straight out at the viewer with his finger pointed, saying, “I Want You.”

In recent years, some people have criticized the use of Uncle Sam as a symbol for the United States because he no longer reflects the diversity of the American population. But in 1961 the U.S. Congress passed a special resolution recognizing “Uncle Sam” Wilson of Troy, New York, as the namesake of our national symbol. His birthday, September 13, has been proclaimed “Uncle Sam’s Day” in New York State.

“Yankee Doodle”

As the unofficial anthem of the United States, the simple melody known as “Yankee Doodle” is played in almost every Fourth of July parade, usually by fife and drum corps. “Yankee” (Janke) is a familiar nickname for the Dutch name Jan, just as Johnny is a nickname for John. The Dutch who settled in New York used the term to describe the English settlers of Connecticut, who were regarded during colonial times as people who were more interested in making money than they were in behaving morally. A “doodle” was a simpleton or a foolish person.

Dr. Richard Shuckburg, a British army doctor who was serving in the American colonies, is believed to have written the lyrics for the popular tune. “Stuck a feather in his hat” is probably a mocking reference to the Yankees’ attempts to appear stylish and European when they were actually quite uncivilized. “Macaroni” was symbolic of all things Italian, and was used in eighteenth-century England to mean a fop —someone who dressed as if he were Italian. The British loved to make fun of the poorly dressed, poorly educated Americans.

Some scholars think that “Yankee Doodle” derived from a children’s play song— possibly a slave song— in Surinam on the coast of South America, whose lyrics went like this: Mama Nanni go to town, Buy a little pony. Stick a feather in a ring Calling Masra Ranni.

“Masra” is the equivalent of “Massa”—the way American slaves were taught to address their white “Masters.” It is possible that British soldiers heard the children’s song and thought it would be a good way of mocking the upstart Americans. But the Americans liked the song so much that they adopted it as their own and, during the Revolutionary War, whistled it as they marched into battle.

“Yankee Doodle” was sung at the first Independence Day celebration in Philadelphia in 1777 and quickly became a July Fourth tradition. Other songs frequently played on this day include “Yankee Doodle Boy” (also known as “I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy”) by George M. Cohan, “America,” and “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

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