

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## The Origins and Traditions of Lincoln's Birthday Holiday

Many Americans would be surprised to learn that Abraham Lincoln's birthday, February 12, 1809, has never been celebrated as a federal holiday. The day is often associated (erroneously) with Presidents Day, officially Washington's Birthday and celebrated on the third Monday in February.<sup>1</sup>

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On February 12, 1866, ten months after his assassination, the first address commemorating Lincoln's birthday was given to Congress. Historian and statesman George Bancroft wrote in his memorial remarks that Lincoln was "to be remembered through all time by his countrymen."<sup>2</sup> Seven years later, a holiday celebrating Lincoln was proposed by Julius Francis, a shopkeeper from Buffalo, New York. Francis began sending Congress elaborate memorial pamphlets as part of his campaign to establish a legal holiday for Lincoln on February 12. These memorials, signed by 50 residents of Buffalo, were placed "on parchment, backed with blue silk, with 50 white stars, and exquisite needlework border, inserted in a folding case of French walnut, and enclosed in a Russia leather case."<sup>3</sup> A year later, Francis organized the first public celebration of Lincoln's birth in Buffalo, which was celebrated each year until Francis's death in 1881. This event included many readings in honor of Lincoln, as well as an official address, singing, prayer, and instrumental music.<sup>4</sup> Francis also incorporated the original Lincoln Birthday Association on December 24, 1877.

But this sentiment was not shared by all Americans, nor acted upon at the federal level. Lincoln's legacy remained controversial and tied to the bitter politics of Reconstruction. The South, which made up one-fifth of the U.S. population at the time, was still occupied by the U.S. military. While many Southerners sincerely grieved over Lincoln's death, with notable expressions of regret by Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, others were unable to put the bitterness of the war behind them. As Southern diarist Kate Stone wrote, "What torrents of blood Lincoln has caused to flow, and how Seward has

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<sup>1</sup> For more about Washington's Birthday, see our ebook, *The Meaning of Washington's Birthday*, [www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-american-calendar/the-meaning-of-washingtons-birthday](http://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-american-calendar/the-meaning-of-washingtons-birthday).

<sup>2</sup> A free copy of the address can be found at <http://archive.org/details/abrahamlincolnme00banc>.

<sup>3</sup> Julius E. Francis, *The Lincoln Memorial Collection*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *The Lincoln Memorial Collection*, 26.

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aided him in his bloody work. I cannot be sorry for their fate. They deserve it. They have reaped their just reward.”<sup>5</sup>

The North-South split was not the only obstacle to designating Lincoln’s birthday as a national holiday. With the American centennial fast approaching, George Washington overshadowed Lincoln in the public memory. Beyond pointing to the practical problem of their birthdays being just ten days apart, critics argued that honoring Lincoln would be to depreciate Washington’s unique place in American history. As the *New York Times* argued, “It may be doubted, whether the distinctive honor conferred on the memory of Washington should be divided even in the case of Abraham Lincoln.”<sup>6</sup>

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This concern did not deter Hannibal Hamlin, Lincoln’s vice president from 1861–65 and the former governor of Maine, from taking up the cause. In an 1887 letter to the Republican Club of New York, expressing his regrets at being unable to attend a dinner marking the occasion, he wrote:

Your club has well and wisely acted in making this the commencement of an annual observance of Mr. Lincoln’s Birthday. The day should be made national like the Birth day of Washington. Let each be appropriately observed, as one of the best things to inculcate upon those who, in the ages, shall come after us. It is patriotic to do so, and it serves to promote a love of country and keep alive and fresh a memory of Patriotic men.<sup>7</sup>

In 1951, a Presidents Day National Committee was formed by Harold Stonebridge Fischer. He lobbied for the creation of a day honoring all presidents to be celebrated March 4, the original inauguration date. This act was defeated in the Senate Judiciary Committee, on the grounds that the holiday would be too close to Lincoln’s and Washington’s birthdays. Though not federally enacted, many state governors liked the idea and proclaimed Presidents Day a holiday.

Establishing Lincoln’s birthday as a federal holiday was further complicated by the passing of the 1968 Uniform Holiday Act, which moved several federal holidays,

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<sup>5</sup> For more about the debate of Lincoln’s Legacy, read *Smithsonian Magazine*’s “Lincoln’s Contested Legacy,” [www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Lincolns-Contested-Legacy.html](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Lincolns-Contested-Legacy.html).

<sup>6</sup> Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*, 101.

<sup>7</sup> A copy of the original letter sent from Hamlin is located at [www.shapell.org/manuscript.aspx?hannibal-hamlin-proposes-lincoln-birthday-national-observance](http://www.shapell.org/manuscript.aspx?hannibal-hamlin-proposes-lincoln-birthday-national-observance).



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including Memorial Day and Washington’s Birthday, to specific Mondays throughout the year in order to create more three-day weekends.

Eventually, individual states created their own Presidents Day holidays to be observed on the third Monday in February. This celebration has been enacted in some fashion by 38 states, though never federally, and each varies by state. While some mark the day as a specific remembrance of Washington and Lincoln (like Arizona), others view it as a day of general recognition for all U.S. presidents. Alabama celebrates Washington and Jefferson as opposed to the more common combination of Washington and Lincoln. A few states observe Washington’s Birthday in February and then celebrate Presidents Day in a different month, for example, the day after Thanksgiving in New Mexico and December 24 in Indiana and Georgia. Eighteen states don’t specify at all what Presidents Day celebrates.<sup>8</sup> Presidents Day has also gained some national recognition from retailers, who use the long weekend to offer sales.<sup>9</sup>

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A few state governments have enacted legislation recognizing Lincoln’s birthday on February 12 as its own official holiday. Most notably, Illinois, the “Land of Lincoln” and his adopted home state, celebrates Lincoln’s birthday as an official school holiday,<sup>10</sup> along with a few other states including New York, Connecticut, and Missouri. However, this number has declined in recent years, when both California and New Jersey ended the celebration of Lincoln’s birthday as paid holidays to cut budgetary costs. Unfortunately, more states now celebrate Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, as a holiday for state employees than celebrate Lincoln’s birthday.

Even without an official national holiday, Lincoln remains among the most admired American presidents. His face is printed on the five-dollar bill and stamped on the penny. He has national shrines in three states, including one of America’s most iconic landmarks—the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.

Though not federally recognized, Lincoln’s birthday is still commemorated by Americans. Wreaths are laid at notable Lincoln landmarks throughout the United States,

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<sup>8</sup> A state-by-state breakdown of the holiday can be found at <http://geometrx.com/2012/02/presidents-day-or-washingtons-birthday-which-states-observe-which-holiday/>.

<sup>9</sup> Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America*, 198–99.

<sup>10</sup> The state laws of Illinois can be found at [www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/documents/010500050k24-2.htm](http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/documents/010500050k24-2.htm).

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including his birthplace in Kentucky, his tomb in Springfield, Illinois, and the Lincoln Memorial—the walls of which still inscribed with this promise:

In this Temple  
As In The Hearts Of The People  
For Whom He Saved The Union  
The Memory of Abraham Lincoln  
Is Enshrined Forever.

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