

George Washington's
MOUNT VERNON
ESTATE & GARDENS

Why Today is Not “Presidents’ Day”

By James C. Rees, Executive Director, Historic Mount Vernon

Every February, thousands of shopping malls and car dealerships should be accused of false advertising during their massive “Presidents’ Day” sales. This annual holiday is not “Presidents’ Day.” Officially, it is the national tribute to only one president – George Washington.

Declared a legal holiday by the federal government in 1885, George Washington’s Birthday has culturally morphed into “Presidents’ Day.” Even the so-called authority on American holidays, *The American Book of Days*, has it wrong. In 1968, the “Monday Holiday Law” was enacted by the United States Congress to provide for uniform annual observances of public holidays. George Washington’s Birthday was slated to be recognized on the third Monday in February. The law was enacted in 1971, yet popular culture has perpetuated the myth that the holiday was designated to honor presidential officeholders in general. Officially, however, the holiday has never changed. Nor should it.

To lump Washington together with the 42 other men who have been elected president in this country does not assign him the significance he deserves. The only president to be elected unanimously – and it happened to him twice – Washington essentially shaped the office of the president. With tremendous foresight, he knew that his actions would set important precedents, and he conscientiously labored over many of his decisions. Unlike modern presidents, Washington did not conduct polls to determine what steps to take. Instead, he asked the same question, over and over again: “What is the best course for America?” His instincts were seldom wrong, and his patriotism never faltered. Washington once said, “I can never resist the call of my country,” and he responded to his country’s needs time and time again.

Washington’s critical role as commander in chief during the Revolutionary War, his refusal to become king when others called for it, his chairmanship of the Constitutional Convention, his ability to hold the nation together and remain neutral during European conflicts, and his wise and steady influence during the nascent development of the new republic – these are just some of the reasons why Washington, The Father of His Country, should be given singular attention.

George Washington was said to be “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” Unfortunately, that oft-repeated quote, originally proclaimed by Henry Lee at one of the hundreds of memorial services to George Washington, is not as ubiquitous as it once was. Schools no longer feature portraits of Washington in their classrooms, and children grow up with the vague notion that Washington was a great man, but they are unable to articulate why.

Many Americans may take seriously their love of country, yet evidence suggests we are caring less and less about the people and events that played key roles in the history of the United States. As author and historian David McCullough so eloquently said, “Indifference to history isn’t just ignorant; it’s a form of ingratitude.”

We have a long road to travel to reverse this disturbing trend. A good place to start is by returning “Presidents’ Day” to its rightful name and purpose. On this day that is set aside to honor George Washington, Americans should re-discover why he was so crucial to the founding of this nation. They should talk to their children about his renowned character and virtues. Families should plan trips to Mount Vernon and other historic places where Washington lived and worked. And most of all, Americans should shed their indifference and be grateful for the man who led this remarkable nation to freedom.

And wouldn’t it be refreshing if families postponed their trips to the mall to gather around the dinner table to talk about George Washington and the other Founding Fathers. That linen sale will still be there tomorrow, so don’t be bashful – have that second slice of cherry pie.