

# English articles

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*This page will be updated on **Mondays**. The first article is aimed at a B1 and upwards level and the second article is aimed at a B2 and upwards level*

## Articles of the week



## How President's Day has evolved from reverence to retail

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By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — Like the other Founding Fathers, George Washington was uneasy about the idea of publicly celebrating his life. He was the first leader of a new republic, not a king.

And yet the United States will once again commemorate its first president on Monday, 293 years after he was born.

The meaning of Presidents Day has changed dramatically, from being mostly unremarkable and filled with work for Washington in the 1700s to the bonanza of consumerism it has become today. For some historians, the holiday has lost all discernible meaning.

Historian Alexis Coe, author of "You Never Forget Your First: A Biography of George Washington," has said she thinks about Presidents Day in much the same way as the towering monument in D.C. bearing his name.

"It's supposed to be about Washington, but can you really point to anything that looks or sounds like him?" she remarked in an interview with The Associated Press in 2024. "Jefferson and Lincoln are presented as people with limbs and noses and words associated with their memorials. And he's just a giant, granite point. He has been sanded down to have absolutely no identifiable features."

Here is a look at how things have evolved:

### **Washington's birthdays were celebrated, sometimes**

Washington was born Feb. 22, 1732, on Popes Creek Plantation near the Potomac River in Virginia.

Technically, though, he was born Feb. 11 under the ancient Julian calendar, which was still in use for the first 20 years of his life. The Gregorian calendar, intended to more accurately mark the solar year, was adopted in 1752, adding 11 days.

Either way, Washington paid little attention to his birthday, according to Mountvernon.org, the website of the organization that manages his estate. Surviving records make no mention of observances at Mount Vernon, while his diary shows he was often hard at work.

"If he had it his way, he would be at home with his family," Coe said. "Maybe some beloved nieces and nephews (and friend) Marquis de Lafayette would be ideal. And Martha's recipe for an indulgent cake. But that's about it."

### **Washington's birthday was celebrated by his peers in government when he was president, mostly.**

Congress voted during his first two terms to take a short commemorative break each year, with one exception, his last birthday in office, Coe said. By then, Washington was less popular, partisanship was rampant and many members of his original Cabinet were gone, including Thomas Jefferson.

"One way to show their disdain for his Federalist policies was to keep working through his birthday," Coe said.

The Library of Congress does note a French military officer, the comte de Rochambeau, threw a ball celebrating Washington's 50th birthday in 1782.

### **After his death, a market for memorabilia is born**

Washington was very aware of his inaugural role as president and its distinction from the British crown. He didn't want to be honored like a king, Seth Bruggeman, a history professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, told the AP last year.

Still, he said, a market for Washington memorabilia sprang up almost immediately after his death in 1799 at age 67, with people snapping up pottery and reproductions of etchings portraying him as a divine figure going off into heaven.

“Even in that early moment, Americans kind of conflated consumerism with patriotic memory,” said Bruggeman, whose books include “Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument.”

### **Making it official with parades and festivals**

It wasn't until 1832, the centennial of his birth, that Congress established a committee to arrange national “parades, orations and festivals,” according to the Congressional Research Service.

Only in 1879 was his birthday formally made into a legal holiday for federal employees in the District of Columbia.

The official designation for the holiday is Washington's Birthday, although it has come to be known informally as Presidents Day. Arguments have been made to honor President Lincoln as well because his birth date falls nearby, on Feb. 12.

A small number of states, including Illinois, observe Lincoln's birthday as a public holiday, according to the Library of Congress. And some commemorate both Lincoln and Washington on Presidents Day.

But on the federal level, the day is still officially Washington's Birthday.

### **A shift to consumerism**

By the late 1960s, Washington's Birthday was one of nine federal holidays that fell on specific dates on different days of the week, according to a 2004 article in the National Archives' Prologue magazine.

Congress voted to move some of those to Mondays, following concerns that were in part about absenteeism among government workers when a holiday fell midweek. But lawmakers also noted clear benefits to the economy, including boosts in retail sales and travel on three-day weekends.

The Uniform Monday Holiday Act took effect in 1971, moving Presidents Day to the third Monday in February. Sales campaigns soared, historian C. L. Arbelbide wrote in Prologue.

Bruggeman said Washington and the other Founding Fathers “would have been deeply worried” by how the holiday became taken over by commercial and private interests.

“They were very nervous about corporations,” Bruggeman said. “It wasn't that they forbade them. But they saw corporations as like little republics that potentially threatened the power of The Republic.”

Coe, who is also a fellow at the Washington think tank New America, said by now the day is devoid of recognizable traditions.

“There's no moment of reflection,” Coe said. Given today's widespread cynicism toward the office, she added, that sort of reflection “would probably be a good idea.”

# Scientists are racing to discover the depth of ocean damage sparked by the LA wildfires



By DORANY PINEDA Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — On a recent Sunday, Tracy Quinn drove down the Pacific Coast Highway to assess damage wrought upon the coastline by the Palisades Fire.

The water line was darkened by ash. Burnt remnants of washing machines and dryers and metal appliances were strewn about the shoreline. Sludge carpeted the water's edge. Waves during high tide lapped onto charred homes, pulling debris and potentially toxic ash into the ocean as they receded.

"It was just heartbreaking," said Quinn, president and CEO of the environmental group Heal the Bay, whose team has reported ash and debris some 25 miles (40 kilometers) south of the Palisades burn area west of Los Angeles.

As crews work to remove potentially hundreds of thousands of tons of hazardous materials from the Los Angeles wildfires, researchers and officials are trying to understand how the fires on land have impacted the sea. The Palisades and Eaton fires scorched thousands of homes, businesses, cars and electronics, turning everyday items into hazardous ash made of pesticides, asbestos, plastics, lead, heavy metals and more.

Since much of it could end up in the Pacific Ocean, there are concerns and many unknowns about how the fires could affect life under the sea.

"We haven't seen a concentration of homes and buildings burned so close to the water," Quinn said.

Fire debris and potentially toxic ash could make the water unsafe for surfers and swimmers, especially after rainfall that can transport chemicals, trash and other hazards into the sea. Longer term, scientists worry if and how charred urban contaminants will affect the food supply.

The atmospheric river and mudslides that pummeled the Los Angeles region last week exacerbated some of those fears.

When the fires broke out in January, one of Mara Dias' first concerns was ocean water contamination. Strong winds were carrying smoke and ash far beyond the blazes before settling at sea, said the water quality manager for the Surfrider Foundation, an environmental nonprofit.

Scientists on board a research vessel during the fires detected ash and waste on the water as far as 100 miles (161 kilometers) offshore, said marine ecologist Julie Dinasquet with the University of California, San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Things like twigs and shard. They described the smell as electronics burning, she recalled, "not like a nice campfire."

Runoff from rains also are a huge and immediate concern. Rainfall picks up contaminants and trash while flushing toward the sea through a network of drains and rivers. That runoff could contain "a lot of nutrients, nitrogen and phosphate that end up in the ash of the burn material that can get into the water," said Dias, as well as "heavy metals, something called PAHs, which are given off when you burn different types of fuel."

Mudslides and debris flows in the Palisades Fire burn zone also can dump more hazardous waste into the ocean. After fires, the soil in burn scars is less able to absorb rainfall and can develop a layer that repels water from the remains of seared organic material. When there is less organic material to hold the soil in place, the risks of mudslides and debris flows increase.

Los Angeles County officials, with help from other agencies, have set thousands of feet of concrete barriers, sandbags, silt socks and more to prevent debris from reaching beaches. The LA County Board of Supervisors also recently passed a motion seeking state and federal help to expand beach clean ups, prepare for storm runoff and test ocean water for potential toxins and chemicals, among other things.

Beyond the usual samples, state water officials and others are testing for total and dissolved metals such as arsenic, lead and aluminum and volatile organic compounds.

They also are sampling for microplastics, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs, that are harmful to human and aquatic life, and polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a group of man-made chemicals shown to cause cancer in animals and other serious health effects. Now banned from being manufactured, they were used in products like pigments, paints and electrical equipment.

County public health officials said chemical tests of water samples last month did not raise health concerns, so they downgraded one beach closure to an ocean water advisory. Beachgoers were still advised to stay out of the water.

Dinasquet and colleagues are working to understand how far potentially toxic ash and debris dispersed across the ocean, how deep and how fast they sunk and, over time, where it ends up.

Forest fires can deposit important nutrients like iron and nitrogen into the ocean ecosystem, boosting the growth of phytoplankton, which can create a positive, cascading effect across the ecosystem. But the potentially toxic ash from urban coastal fires could have dire consequences, Dinasquet said.

"Reports are already showing that there was a lot of lead and asbestos in the ash," she added. "This is really bad for people so its probably also very bad for the marine organisms."

A huge concern is whether toxic contaminants from the fire will enter the food chain. Researchers plan to take tissue fragments from fish for signs of heavy metals and contaminants. But they say it will take a while to understand how a massive urban fire will affect the larger ecosystem and our food supply.

Dias noted the ocean has long taken in pollution from land, but with fires and other disasters, "everything is compounded and the situation is even more dire."

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