

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Happy Presidents' Day

Each February my traditionalist tendencies assert themselves when President's Day shows up again on the calendar. I really miss the Good Old Days when George Washington and Abraham Lincoln both had their own day of remembrance. But the 21st century is now well under way, and the calendar is changed. This seems like a good year for me to accept the reality – and the benefits – of the calendar change that has now been in place for 30 years.

For those of you who do not remember, it used to be that February 12th was celebrated as Abraham Lincoln's birthday. It was not a holiday in the sense that workers had the day off (unless, as my husband tells me, you grew up in Illinois), but it was a day to recall the life of our 16th president. As a schoolchild, I learned the lore of Honest Abe.

February 22nd was Washington's Birthday. It was more serious, because, after all, George Washington was the father of our country. The day was a federal, though not a school holiday in my Midwestern town. School lessons around this holiday always seemed to cover the apocryphal of young George chopping down the cherry tree.

The two days seemed to work pretty well. Lincoln's birthday was more academic; Washington's birthday had become a traditional day for men to check out sales at car dealerships. Women went shopping at retail stores.

Then Congress acted to make the nation's holidays more consumer friendly. Holidays that fell on Mondays would allow more three-day weekends, so the lawmakers passed laws to create more Monday holidays. In the late 1960s Memorial Day, Columbus Day, and Veteran's Day (since restored to November 11), were moved to Mondays. The third Monday of February replaced February 22nd as a holiday. In 1971 it took the name of Presidents' day to honor both Washington and Lincoln, as though it could never fall either famous birthday. Adding a little confusion to the mix, news commentators occasionally broaden today's meaning to honor all the presidents.

In this new century, a whole generation has no memory of the old calendar. The mere fact that the holiday changes its name will deter children from learning the history of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Advertisements may announce Presidents' Day sales, but their promotional intent is the same as ever. The third Monday of February is now well established as the beginning of school vacation, the long ski weekend, today with no mail delivery. Since the recent passage of a state law Massachusetts retailers can be open for a full day of Presidents' Day sales, and it's a day for both Mom and Dad to shop for a new car.

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