

The Origins of Presidents' Day

By Judy Haynes

Presidents' Day as a holiday was first held to honor our first commander-in-chief, George Washington, and it was celebrated on his actual birthday, February 22. Washington was born in Virginia 1732 and died 1799 at the age of 67 years. In those 67 years he was an active gentleman farmer and soldier, who made his fame as the commander of the Continental Army during the American Revolution. With the colonies break from their mother country, England, and the successful revolution, it was decided by the gentlemen patriots that Mr. Washington should be the first President of the United States. He served in that capacity from 1789 to 1797.

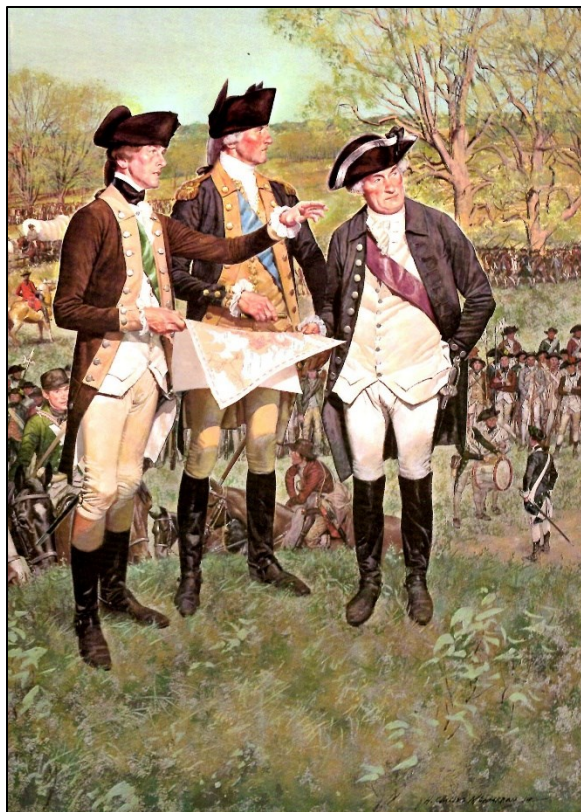
It was in 1862 that President Lincoln issued a proclamation declaring February 22nd as a day of celebration honoring the esteemed George Washington. In 1879, Washington's Day was formally made a federal holiday when it was officially passed into law. In 1885 it was extended beyond Washington, D. C. area to cover all Federal employees.¹

The first attempt to create a Presidents' Day occurred in 1951 when the "Presidents' Day National Committee" was formed by Stonebridge Fischer of Compton, California, who became its National Executive Director for the next two decades. The purpose was not to honor any particular president but to honor the office of the presidency.² It is very possible that this made good sense to Mr. Fischer since there were some states already observing Abraham Lincoln's birthday (born February 12, 1809) as a public state holiday. Kentucky, where Lincoln was born; Illinois, where he worked and lived; Indiana, Ohio, Texas, California, Missouri, and New York all observed Lincoln's birthday as well as Washington's. It is believed that the earliest known observance of Lincoln's birth occurred in Buffalo, New York either in 1873 or 1874 when Julius Francis (d. 1881), a Buffalo druggist, made it his life's mission to honor the slain president.³ Until 1968 we celebrated both Washington and Lincoln's birthdays as legal holidays.

Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Bill in 1968 and moved a number of federal holidays to Mondays so that workers might have several long weekends throughout the year. Of course, there was some objection by those saying we should honor on the actual birthdays, but finally in 1971 the new name, Presidents' Day was proposed since it was at least in proximity to both Washington and Lincoln's birthdays. There was much contention for the lawmakers and the point of changing the name was dropped, but since the 2000's it became adopted commonly by the 50 states.⁴ However, the federal government has held steadfast in honoring the country's first president so officially it remains Washington's Birthday on federal calendars.⁵

"Did you know? Presidents' Day never falls on the actual birthday of any American president. Four chief executives-George Washington, William Henry Harrison, Abraham Lincoln, and Ronald Reagan-were born in February, but their birthdays all come either too early or late to coincide with Presidents' Day, which is always celebrated on the third Monday of the month."⁶

The Historical Society has in its collection a wonderful sketch of Abraham Lincoln that was drawn by Alice C. (Gilman) Brigham (1866-1938), the wife of Herbert A. "Gramps" Brigham. The ancestors of the Brigham family were pioneer settlers of the Marlborough, Northborough and



THE AMERICAN SOLDIER, 1775
Aide-de-Camp, General Washington, General Ward
Troops of General Ward's Division
Lithograph
BHSM Archives Collection

¹ Wikipedia: www.history.com/topics/holidays/presidents-day.

² Ibid.

³ Op. cit.

⁴ Augustyn, Adam, article updated in the Encyclopedia Britannica

⁵ Presidents' Day 2023, History.com editors, updated 16 February 2023, original 26 October 2010, accessed 17 February 2023.

⁶ Ibid.

Boylston areas.⁷ The Historical Society has many Brigham family photographs, news items, and objects in its collection including the New Testament bible carried by Lloyd Brigham during his military service to our country in World War I.



Alice C. Brigham. Sketch Artist
Main Street
Boylston, Massachusetts
BHSM Photograph Collection



Herbert A. Brigham, posing with Sketch of President Abraham Lincoln
Sketch by Alice C. Brigham
Herbert was the husband of Alice C. (Gilman) Brigham
BHSM Archives and Photograph Collections

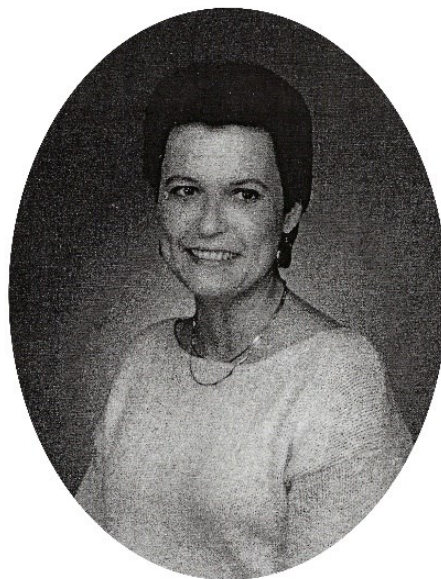
In a 2022 visit to the Historical Society, the Gilson sisters, Sharon Gilson Miller and Gail Gilson Ojala, donated a sketch of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and provided the Historical Society with an oral history interview about growing up in the Morningdale section of Boylston.

The Gilson family moved to Morningdale from Ashburnham in 1949. It was in Morningdale where Clifton Lewis Gilson became Deputy Fire Chief under Thomas Mackesy. And it was here that he and his wife, Marion Isabella (Cramn)'s three girls would grow up.

Jane Gilson (1947-1985), was attending Tahanto High School that fatal day of 22 November 1963 when President John F. Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States, was assassinated. She sketched her artist's rendition of the president to honor JFK and it was hung as a memorial at Tahanto High School for a period after his death.⁸



President John F. Kennedy
Sketch by Jane Gilson
Memorial Sketch displayed at
Tahanto Regional High School
following his assassination in 1963
BHSM Collection



Jane K. Gilson, Sketch Artist
Morningdale, Boylston, Massachusetts
BHSM Collection

Our Newspaper Collection does not yet have any special news items or notices of celebrations for Presidents' Day in Boylston; thus, we bring you this history of the day as seen through the Boylston artifacts for an appropriate focus on this February 20, 2023.

⁷ Boylston Historical Society & Museum Collections, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts.

⁸ Haynes, Judith, Oral history of Clifton Gilson and the Morningdale Fire Truck, 2022.

Editor, Nancy O'Loughlin Filgate, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc, Director.