

History 389-009
Commemoration and Celebration—American History Through Its Holidays
George Mason University Department of History & Art History
Tuesdays: 7:20-10:00 p.m.

Professor: Dr. Dan Gifford

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**Office Hours: Robinson B 371A 5:30-7:00 Tuesdays
or by appointment**

Course Overview

Holidays are more than days off, opportunities to indulge, and the occasional source of familial angst (although they are certainly all of those). Holidays are days of commemoration and celebration that require a collective understanding of their purpose, their traditions, and their symbols. However, the creation and sharing of this knowledge is rarely universal and is never static. Although we may think of the calendar of American holidays as bound by timeless traditions that are shared by all Americans, history suggests otherwise. Over the course of this semester we will explore how holidays are created, how their traditions become institutionalized and contested, and how they have evolved over time. In doing so we will ask important questions about control and power, and how holidays can become points of social conflict as well as cohesion. This will be a fast-paced journey through American history, from our colonial origins to the present day. As such, it will combine lectures with what should be lively in-class discussion.

Grading and Assignments

30% Writing and Group Assignments

25% Weekly Blog, Attendance, and Participation

20% Midterm Exam

25% Final Exam

Writing and Group Presentation Assignments

In addition to learning about holidays and their intersections with American history, we will use this course to explore and refine a variety of important skills. This will be accomplished through three writing assignments, and one group presentation.

The three written papers will be 3-4 double-spaced pages (approx. 1,000 words). The group presentation will be around 20 minutes. Their focus will be:

Assignment 1) Comparative Analysis

Compare how Matthew Davis and Stephen Nissenbaum approach analysis of their discussed holidays in the pages you've read thus far—Independence Day and Christmas respectively. What are the basic questions they ask of their holidays? What are the similarities and differences in their approaches to answering those questions? Do you feel one succeeds where the other fails, and why? Provide and cite specific examples from both works.

Assignment 2) Image description

In this assignment you will be asked to select a holiday-related image from one of the existing databases available through the library. Exact parameters will be provided in class. The purpose of this assignment is to “read” an image closely and carefully. You will describe the image by highlighting its unusual features, and its interesting or surprising elements. A key part of this assignment is to have you insert your own voice and your own opinion into the description. What questions or thoughts or ideas are sparked in your mind when you see the picture? You will be exploring choices—why did the artist do this and not that; and what was accomplished in making that choice?

Assignment 3) Object analysis and context

You will start this project with analysis similar to what you accomplished in Assignment 2. From there you will expand on those ideas and:

- Describe the object or images’ historical context. Be strategic and precise. This part will require some research on your part and will need to be properly cited.
- Bring these two parts together in an original argument. Why is this object historically relevant? What about its time and circumstances does it reflect? Why is it unique to its particular historical moment. In short, how does the item add to our understanding of American history?

For this project you can pick your own object to study. GMU’s library subscribes to many outstanding online databases including ProQuest Historical Newspapers; American Periodicals Series; ARTstor; and Harpweek. You can also find rich sources at the American Memory website from the Library of Congress: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>. Additionally, I encourage you to explore such online treasure troves as the YouTube; Wikimedia Commons; eBay; and Flickr—but with this major caveat: Be sure you can identify and trust the source information!

Assignment 4) Film Critique (Group Presentation)

At the beginning of the semester we will divide a list of 20th century Christmas movies among several teams. Teams will be expected to work together to deliver a twenty-minute in-class presentation about their movie, which will answer basic questions such as: How was the film received/critiqued at the time of its release, and how has it been discussed since? Has the film fostered scholarly analysis? What does the movie suggest about the period in which it was made? How is the Christmas holiday depicted and how can that depiction be used as historical evidence in a larger argument? This is not a comprehensive list. Teams should feel free to explore other topics in the film in a way that is engaging to the rest of the class—so long as those topics remain of scholarly interest and merit.

Late Papers:

It is expected you will turn in your paper assignments on time. They will be collected at the beginning of the scheduled class, and need to be brought to class printed, stapled, and ready for evaluation. Late materials will be penalized one-half grade for each day after the due date, starting with the day the assignment is due if not turned in at the beginning of class.

We will talk more about these assignments in class and use our classroom time to explore examples together. This is just one reason attendance and participation in class is vital. Which brings us to...

Engaging with the readings and class participation

A quarter of your overall grade will be based on regular attendance and active participation—both prior to class through a weekly blog entry and in class during discussions. The blog will be established at the beginning of the semester. Each week I will post an overarching topic or question inspired by the readings, and all students need to submit a response through the comments section **by 12:00 noon on the day of class** if you wish to receive credit. These postings should be about 250-500 words—around three or four well-conceived paragraphs. Your comments will be submitted but not publicly posted until after the noon deadline, so that I can see your original thoughts and work. After the noon deadline I will post the comments, and we will spend some of our class time that evening using them for further discussion.

As for class participation, a few key points:

- Read each week's required readings before the class for which they are assigned—something the blog will help you accomplish.
- Attend classes ready to discuss the readings. Attendance will be taken.
- Pay attention in class to the lectures and discussions. Laptops for note-taking are allowed; laptops for Internet surfing are not (along with cellphones; texting; Facebook updating; headphones; and falling asleep).
- Actively participate in the discussion.
- Be courteous. Good discussions frequently involve disagreements, and holidays can elicit powerful emotions and beliefs; however, disagreements should always be respectful.

Exams

The course will include both a one hour midterm exam, and a final take-home exam. Questions will draw from the weekly readings, in-class lectures, and even the blogs and discussions, so full participation in all these elements is critical.

Students should let me know if they have any disabilities which require accommodation. All of GMU's academic policies and honor code are applied to this course. Please review the academic calendar for important dates to add and drop classes. Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated. If you are unclear as to what constitutes plagiarism (or cheating for that matter), see me or refer to the Undergraduate Catalog.

Required Books

Matthew Dennis: *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar*. (Cornell University Press, 2005)

Stephen Nissenbaum: *The Battle for Christmas* (Vintage, 1997)

Leigh Eric Schmidt: *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, 1997)

Ellen Litwack: *America's Public Holidays 1865-1920* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000)

August 30—Introductions

September 6—Forging Holidays for a New Nation

Readings

Matthew Dennis: *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*. Pages 1-80 (Introduction and Chapter 1)

September 13—Holidays and Power: The Early Battle for Christmas

Readings

Stephen Nissenbaum: *The Battle for Christmas*. Pages 1-89 (Chapters 1 and 2)

Text of “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (widely available online)

September 20—Shaping Young Minds: The Second Battle for Christmas

Readings

Stephen Nissenbaum: *The Battle for Christmas*. Pages 90-174 (Chapters 3 and 4)

September 27—Holidays and Courtship: Valentine’s Day in Early America

Writing Assignment #1: Handed in at the beginning of class

Readings

Leigh Eric Schmidt: *Consumer Rites*. Pages 1-104 (Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2)

October 4— Race, Remembrance, and Holidays

Readings

Stephen Nissenbaum: *The Battle for Christmas*. Pages 258-300 (Chapter 7)

David Blight: “Decoration Day” from *Race and Reunion: The American Civil War in American Memory*. (Will be posted as a PDF)

Ellen Litwack: *America’s Public Holidays*. Pages 50-69 (Chapter 2)

October 11—No Class (Monday classes meeting today)

October 18— Thanksgiving: We Gather Together?

Writing Assignment #2: Handed in at the beginning of class

Readings

Matthew Dennis: *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*. Pages 81-118 (Chapter 2)

Elizabeth Pleck: “The Making of the Domestic Occasion: The History of Thanksgiving in the United States.” *Journal of Social History*. Vol. 32, No. 4 (Summer, 1999) Pages 773-789 (available on JSTOR)

October 25—Midterm Exam

November 1—Holidays, Gender, and the Rise of Mass Consumer Culture

Readings

Leigh Eric Schmidt: *Consumer Rites*: Pages 148-243 (Chapter 3 starting on page 148 and Chapter 4)

November 8—Class and Ethnicity: Labor Day, St. Patrick’s Day, and Columbus Day
Readings

Email me a copy of your selected holiday object for analysis and context in assignment #3

Ellen Litwicki. *America’s Public Holidays*. Pages 70-190 (Chapters 3, 4, 5)

Matthew Dennis: *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*. Pages 81-118 (Chapter 2)

November 15—Halloween: Progressives, Transgressives, and the “Gay Christmas”

Readings

Joel Best and Gerald Horiuchi. “The Razor Blade in the Apple: The Social Construction of Urban Legends.” *Social Problems*. June 1985. Vol. 32, No 5, Pages 488-499 (Available through HeinOnline)

Doug Will. “Halloween: Is the Party Over?” *The Advocate*. 11/6/2007, Issue 996, Pages 30-38 (Available through LGBT Life with Full Text)

November 22—Religion and Holidays

Writing Assignment #3: Handed in at the beginning of class

Readings

George Janockso. “Beyond the Plastic Reindeer Rule: The Curious Case of County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union” *Duquesne Law Review*, 28, 1989-1990. Pages 445-488. (Available through HeinOnline)

November 29—Creating Holidays in the 20th Century: Earth Day and Martin Luther King Day

Readings

Ellen Litwicki. *America’s Public Holidays*. Pages 191-247 (Chapter 6 and Conclusion)

Matthew Dennis: *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*: Pages 256-280 (Chapter 6)

Jack Lewis. “The Spirit of the First Earth Day.” *EPA Journal*. Jan/Feb. 1990. Pages 8-12. (Available through HeinOnline)

Janisse Ray. “Essay.” *Washington Post*. April 22, 2005. (Available through LexisNexis Academic)

Christopher Muther. “The Selling of Earth Day.” *Boston Globe*. April 22, 2010 (Available through Factiva)

December 6-- Visualizing Christmas in the Modern Era (Christmas Movies)

Group Presentation Assignment Due in Class

December 13--Take Home Final Exam Due by 10:15 p.m. sent to dgifford@gmu.edu. No Late Exams will be Accepted.