

Labor Day becomes a National Holiday - (1894)

History of Labor Day

Labor Day: What it Means

Labor Day, the first Monday in September, is a creation of the labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country.

Labor Day Legislation

Through the years the nation gave increasing emphasis to Labor Day. The first governmental recognition came through municipal ordinances passed during 1885 and 1886. From these, a movement developed to secure state legislation. The first state bill was introduced into the New York legislature, but the first to become law was passed by Oregon on February 21, 1887. During the year four more states — Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York — created the Labor Day holiday by legislative enactment. By the end of the decade Connecticut, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania had followed suit. By 1894, 23 other states had adopted the holiday in honor of workers, and on June 28 of that year, Congress passed an act making the first Monday in September of each year a legal holiday in the District of Columbia and the territories.

A Nationwide Holiday

The form that the observance and celebration of Labor Day should take was outlined in the first proposal of the holiday — a street parade to exhibit to the public "the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations" of the community, followed by a festival for the recreation and amusement of the workers and their families. This became the pattern for the celebrations of Labor Day. Speeches by prominent men and women were introduced later, as more emphasis was placed upon the economic and civic significance of the holiday. Still later, by a resolution of the American Federation of Labor convention of 1909, the Sunday preceding Labor Day was adopted as Labor Sunday and dedicated to the spiritual and educational aspects of the labor movement.

The character of the Labor Day celebration has undergone a change in recent years, especially in large industrial centers where mass displays and huge parades have proved a problem. This change, however, is more a shift in emphasis and medium of expression. Labor Day addresses by leading union officials, industrialists, educators, clerics and government officials are given wide coverage in newspapers, radio, and television.

The vital force of labor added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy. It is appropriate, therefore, that the nation

pay tribute on Labor Day to the creator of so much of the nation's strength, freedom, and leadership — the American worker.

Founder of Labor Day

While most sources, even the Department of Labor, credit Peter McGuire with the origination of Labor Day, recent evidence suggests that the true father of Labor Day may in fact be another famous union leader of the 19th Century, Matthew Maguire.

According to legend, Peter McGuire stood before the New York Central Labor Union on May 12, 1882, to suggest the idea of setting aside one day a year to honor labor. McGuire believed that Labor Day should "be celebrated by a street parade which would publicly show the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations."

Peter McGuire was a young, though well-respected, union leader. A child of immigrants, he quit school at an early age to go to work. In 1881, he founded the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, which would become the largest trade union of the time. Later, McGuire would join with his friend, Samuel Gompers, to found the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Through the AFL and the Carpenters, McGuire led the great strikes of 1886 and 1890, which would eventually result in the adoption of the eight-hour workday on the nation's agenda.

Recently, however, evidence uncovered at the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark reveals that another respected union figure of the day, Matthew Maguire, may quite possibly be the man behind the creation of Labor Day.

In the 1870s, Matthew Maguire led several strikes, most of which were intended to force the plight of manufacturing workers and their long hours into the public consciousness. By 1882, Maguire had become the secretary of and a leading figure in the Central Labor Union of New York.

According to the New Jersey Historical Society, after President Cleveland signed into law the creation of a national Labor Day, *The Paterson (N.J.) Morning Call* published an opinion piece entitled, "Honor to Whom Honor is Due," which stated that "the souvenir pen should go to Alderman Matthew Maguire of this city, who is the undisputed author of Labor Day as a holiday." This editorial also referred to Maguire as the "Father of the Labor Day holiday."

So why has Matthew Maguire been overlooked as the "Father of Labor Day"?

According to *The First Labor Day Parade*, by Ted Watts, Maguire held some political beliefs that were considered fairly radical for the day and also for Samuel Gompers and his American Federation of Labor. Allegedly, Gompers did not want Labor Day to become associated with the sort of "radical" politics of Matthew Maguire, so in a 1897 interview, Gompers' close friend Peter J. McGuire was assigned the credit for the origination of Labor Day.

More than 100 years after the first Labor Day observance, there is still some doubt as to who first proposed the holiday for workers.

Some records show that Peter J. McGuire, general secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and a cofounder of the American Federation of Labor, was first in suggesting a day to honor those "who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold."

But Peter McGuire's place in Labor Day history has not gone unchallenged. Many believe that Matthew Maguire, a machinist, not Peter McGuire, founded the holiday. Recent research seems to support the contention that Matthew Maguire, later the secretary of Local 344 of the International Association of Machinists in Paterson, N.J., proposed the holiday in 1882 while serving as secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York. What is clear is that the Central Labor Union adopted a Labor Day proposal and appointed a committee to plan a demonstration and picnic.