

1. Thanksgiving

On the fourth Thursday in November, in houses around the United States, families get together for a feast, or a large meal. Almost all families eat turkey and cranberry sauce for this meal, and have pumpkin pie for dessert. This feast is part of a very special day, the holiday of Thanksgiving.

In 1620, the Pilgrims made a difficult trip across the ocean from England. They landed in what is now Massachusetts. In England the Pilgrims had not been allowed to practice their religion freely. So they went to the New World in search of religious freedom.

The Pilgrims' first winter was very hard. Historians say that almost half the group died of cold, hunger, and disease. But the Native Americans of Massachusetts taught the Pilgrims to plant corn, to hunt, and to fish. When the next fall came, the Pilgrims had plenty of food. They were thankful and had a feast to give thanks. They invited the Native Americans to join them. This was the first Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving became a national holiday many years later because a woman named Sarah Hale. For forty years Sarah Hale wrote to each president and asked for a holiday of Thanksgiving. At last she was successful. In 1863, President Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a holiday.

2. George Washington

In 1775, when the American War of Independence began, Congress chose George Washington to lead the American army. Washington knew his job would be difficult. The army was small. The soldiers were untrained and had few guns. The British army was large and strong. Its soldiers were very well trained.

The early battles showed Washington's problems. His army was easily defeated in the Battle of New York. Then Washington thought of a plan. On Christmas night in 1776, he had his soldiers attack the enemy in the city of Trenton, New Jersey. The enemy soldiers never expected an attack on such a night. They were having a Christmas party. Washington won his first victory. Washington's army won the final battle in Yorktown in 1781.

George Washington was a great leader and was respected by all his men. He was not interested in fame or money, but only in helping his country. There are many stories about George Washington. Many are probably not true. The most famous story, though, is about the cherry tree. It is said that young George cut down his father's cherry tree. When his father asked who cut down the tree, George confessed and said, "I cannot tell a lie."

In 1789, leaders from all the states met to choose the first president of the United States. The vote was unanimous. Everyone voted George Washington. He became the country's first president and is remembered as the "Father of our Country."

3. Tornadoes

Tornadoes are storms with very strong turning winds and dark clouds. These winds are perhaps the strongest on earth. They reach speeds of 300 miles per hour. The dark clouds are shaped like a funnel-wide at the top and narrow at the bottom. The winds are strongest in the center of the funnel.

Tornadoes are especially common in the United States, but only in certain parts. They occur mainly in the central states. A hot afternoon in the spring is the most likely time for a tornado. Clouds become dark. There is thunder, lightning, and rain. A cloud forms a funnel and begins to twist. The funnel moves faster and faster. The faster the winds, the louder the noise. Tornadoes always move in a northeasterly direction. They never last longer than eight hours.

A tornado's path is narrow, but within that narrow path, a tornado can destroy everything. It can smash buildings and rip up trees. Tornadoes can kill people as well.

The worst tornado swept through the states of Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana in 1925, killing 689 people. Modern weather equipment now makes it possible to warn people of tornadoes. People have a much better chance of protecting themselves. But nothing can stop tornadoes from destroying everything in their path.

4. The Gold Rush

It was January 1848. A man was digging near the small village of San Francisco, California. Suddenly, he saw something shiny--gold!

By the next year, the California gold rush had begun. Thousands of men came to California. They were called "forty-niners," after the year 1849. The forty-niners came from all around the United States. They even came from other countries, including Mexico, Australia, China, France, and England. They left their families and jobs and made the difficult trip to California. They all shared a dream. They all wanted to make a fortune in gold.

Towns and camps grew quickly wherever gold was found. These towns were rough places. There was almost always a saloon, where the men drank and gambled for money with cards. In mining towns, men stole and sometimes killed for gold.

Did the miners make their fortunes? Some did, especially those who came early and were lucky. In 1848, miners usually made about \$20 a day. In 1852, miners made about \$6 a day. Many other people came to California to make money from the miners. Prices were very high. A loaf of bread, which cost 5 cents in New York, cost almost \$1 in San Francisco.

In 1848, San Francisco was a village. Six years later, it was a city with a population of 50,000. In 1850, California had enough people to become a state.

5. Jazz

Americans have contributed to many art forms, but jazz, a type of music, is the only art form that was created in the United States. Jazz was created by black Americans. Many blacks were brought from Africa to America as slaves. The slaves sang and played the music of their homeland.

Jazz is a mixture of many different kinds of music. It is a combination of the music of West Africa, the work songs the slaves sang, and religious music. Improvisation is an important part of jazz. This means that the musicians make the music up as they go along, or create the music on the spot. This is why a jazz song might sound a little different each time it is played.

Jazz bands formed in the late 1800s. They played in bars and club in many towns and cities of the South, especially New Orleans. New Orleans is an international seaport, and people from all over the world come to New Orleans to hear jazz.

Jazz became more and more popular. By the 1920s, jazz was popular all over the United States. By the 1940s, you could hear jazz not only clubs and bars, but in concert halls as well. Today, people from all over the world play jazz. Jazz musicians from the United States, Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe meet and share their music at festivals on every continent. In this way jazz continues to grow and change.

6. Bill Gates

Personal computers, or PCs, are an important part of our everyday lives. Many people cannot imagine life without them. One of the most important people in making these machines work is Bill Gates.

Bill Gates was born in 1955 in Washington state. He grew up in a rich family. His parents sent him to private school. There he met his business partner, Paul Allen. When they were in the eighth grade, they were writing programs for business computers and making money.

In 1973, Gates was accepted to Harvard University. His parents were happy. They thought he would get over his obsession with computers and become a lawyer like his father. Two years later, Gates dropped out of Harvard to work on a computer program with his friend Allen. They worked eighteen hours a day in a dormitory room at Harvard. They were writing the program that would run one of the first personal computers. In 1975, they created a company called Microsoft to sell their product.

Allen became ill with cancer and left Microsoft in 1983. He recovered a few years later and started his own company. Meanwhile, Microsoft became a giant company. By 1990, at the age of thirty-four, Gates was the youngest billionaire in the history of the United States. He was the "King of Software." He achieved his success with a lot of hard work. For more than ten years, he worked sixteen-hour days seven days a week. He had a dream and the will to succeed. By 1997, he was the richest man in the world