

The History of Labor Day

By Jay L. Zagorsky, The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.01.17

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The first Labor Day was not a holiday. Workers had to go on strike to celebrate it. This meant they skipped work, even if their boss did not want them to. This drawing shows the first Labor Day Parade. Photo from Public Domain. Photo from Public Domain.

The first Monday of September is a national U.S. holiday called Labor Day.

Labor Day is not like many other U.S. holidays. It is a celebration without specific traditions, like family dinners or prayers. For most people, Labor Day just marks the last weekend of summer and the start of a new school year.

This is not what the people who started the holiday had in mind, more than 100 years ago. They wanted it to be a special day that would bring workers together. Their goal was also to give these workers time off work.

History of Labor Day

The first Labor Day holiday was in 1882 in New York City. It was led by one of the city's unions. A union is an organized group of workers who have come together to protect their rights. Unions might ask the employers for higher pay or better working conditions.

Back then, employers did not recognize Labor Day as a day off work. So, workers decided to go on strike. A strike is when workers refuse to go to work, and instead go on a demonstration. At the demonstration, they usually bring signs and shout what they want their employer to change.

On that first Labor Day, workers went to march in a parade and then had a giant picnic.

Why was Labor Day invented?

Labor Day came about because people were spending too much time working.

In the 1830s, people who worked in factories had to work 70 hours each week. Today, 40 hours a week is considered full-time.

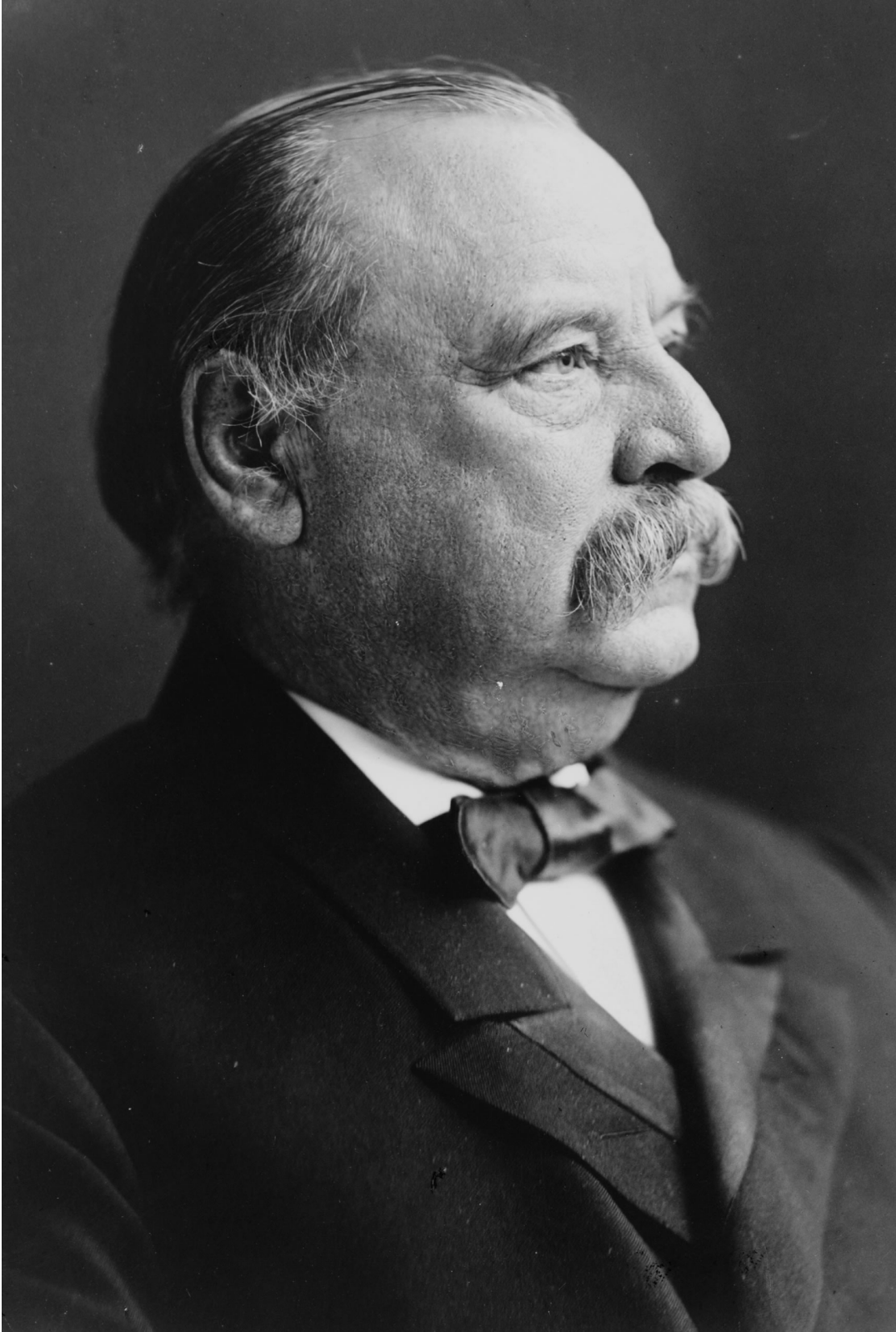


Many unions wanted workers to have an eight-hour workday. Unions also wanted workers to have more days off. This meant working six days a week instead of all seven.

Many politicians and business owners liked these ideas. They thought if workers had more time off, they would spend more money. This would help the U.S. economy grow since businesses would be able to sell more.

Common misconceptions

It was easy for many lawmakers to support Labor Day. It didn't cost them anything but made them likable to voters.



In a short time, half the states in the U.S. recognized Labor Day as a holiday. By 1894, President Grover Cleveland made Labor Day a national holiday.

However, it is up to each state to declare its own holidays. Just because there is a national holiday does not mean employers have to give their workers the day off.

For example, many stores stay open on Labor Day. Even some government services don't take the day off, like police, public transportation and national parks.

Controversy: Militants and founders

Today most people do not think of Labor Day as a controversial holiday. They did 100 years ago.

Unions did not agree on how workers should behave on this day, which was made to honor them. Some wanted workers to go on marches and protests.

Other union members wanted Labor Day to have parades and picnics. In the U.S., this is what people chose to do.

No one really knows who started the idea of a Labor Day holiday. It will likely never be known who actually came up with it.

Have we lost the spirit of Labor Day?

Labor Day began in the 1800s as a way to go against long working hours and no time off. These problems seem to be coming back today.

Many different types of workers are constantly connected to work. They work even when they are away from their jobs, often at nights, on weekends and on vacations, too.

Maybe stopping for one day could become a Labor Day tradition. Workers could shut off phones, computers and other electronic devices and enjoy at least one day without any work!

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