

## Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

### The History of Labor Day: Why We Should Celebrate the Origins and Importance

Dr. Judith Lynch

Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence

September 2020

---

**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.**

-- U.S. Department of Labor

---

There are 10 federally declared national holidays. One of them is Labor Day, signed into law in 1894 by President Grover Cleveland. The adoption of Labor Day as a national holiday came in a time of economic and political challenge. Yes, there were more women entering the workforce in the late 19th century, but Labor Day did not commemorate the struggles of women giving birth to new Americans. Labor Day came as a result of political change, economic recession, growing industrialization and urbanization, and increasing labor unrest which gave birth to federal recognition of the importance of American labor.

The political turmoil of the late 19th century brought the first Democrat to the presidency since before the Civil War. After the Civil War, every president from Abraham Lincoln, elected in 1860, to Chester Arthur who took office in 1881 was a Republican with one exception, Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Lincoln after his assassination. Johnson was a southerner and member of the short-lived National

Union Party. The last democrat previous to the Civil War to serve as president was James Buchanan who served from March 1857 to March 1861 when, Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president took office.

U.S. NATIONAL HOLIDAYS	
DATE	HOLIDAY
?	New Year
1777	Independence Day
1789	Thanksgiving Day
1870	Christmas
1879	George Washington's Birthday
1886	Memorial Day
1894	Labor Day
1934	Columbus Day
1938	Veterans Day
1994	Martin Luther King Day
• Date approved by Congress	

After the Civil War Americans continued to choose Republicans as their presidents. It was not until Grover Cleveland was elected in 1884 that a member of the Democratic Party occupied the White House. Cleveland was from New York state. Before becoming president, Cleveland had a rich career in elective politics serving as Sheriff of Erie County, New York, Mayor of Buffalo, New York, and then Governor of New York state.

As Governor of New York, Cleveland fought and prevailed against Tammany Hall corruption. In doing so, Cleveland lost the support of the Democratic powerhouse Tammany Hall, but won the support of progressive Republicans, one of whom was Theodore Roosevelt, who, along with other reform-minded Republicans, supported Cleveland politically and helped the Cleveland administration to pass several laws addressing corruption throughout New York state.

Governor Cleveland's defiance of Tammany Hall and political corruption won him popular acclaim and when it came time for the Democratic Presidential Convention of 1884, Cleveland was nominated and led on the first ballot, with 392 votes out of 820. On the second ballot, Cleveland's Tammany Hall archenemies threw all their support to Cleveland's opponent, but the rest of the delegates shifted to Cleveland, impressed by his record of fighting corruption and his support of merit-based civil service reform, free public education, and lower tariffs. Cleveland won the presidential nomination and then won the presidency by a narrow margin in the highly contested election of 1884.

---

## THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1884

Several days after the Democratic convention, the Buffalo Evening Telegraph published an exposé, headlined "A Terrible Tale: A Dark Chapter in a Public Man's History," which revealed a secret episode in Cleveland's life. The article alleged that Cleveland was the father of an illegitimate 9-year-old child, and that he'd been paying the mother for years to keep her quiet. Republican newspapers gleefully picked up the story, and Blaine supporters started reciting a jeer of their own: "Ma, ma, where's my pa?"

The allegation stunned Cleveland's advisers, and immediately the question arose in his political camp: How do we respond? That is the make-or-break question facing every politician hit with scandalous accusations. And more often than not he follows a time-honored, though dishonorable, tradition: He dodges or denies the charges until the

investigation loses steam or the public loses interest. With the election still 14 weeks away, Cleveland could have adopted that tactic, but he didn't. In a telegram to his Buffalo friend Charles Goodyear, who had written asking for instructions, the presidential nominee took the high road. "Whatever you do, tell the truth," wrote Cleveland, who also refused to do any mudslinging.

---

During the presidential election Cleveland was confronted by an allegation that he had secretly fathered a child. His answer was to confront the charges and admit the truth. As a result, Cleveland became the first Democrat since before the Civil war to take the office of president of the United States.

Running for re-election in 1888, Cleveland lost the electoral vote but won the popular vote. The presidential election held on Nov. 6, 1888, saw Republican Benjamin Harrison defeat Democratic incumbent Grover Cleveland. Despite receiving fewer popular votes than Cleveland, Harrison won the electoral college vote by 65 votes and became president. In American history, this circumstance would not be repeated until the election of 2016.

In American, more was going on than divisive politics. The country was rapidly changing from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy. The years of the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century became known as the Gilded Age. It was the time of Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Morgan. Wealth was no longer just in owning land but in building and controlling the railroads, the iron and steel industry and the growing consumer economy. Immigrant population, the Germans, Irish, Italians, and Polish, among others, flooded into America's cities filling the need for labor. Further, American farmers, by the thousands, moved from the land to live in the cities. By the 1920 census, for the first time a majority of Americans lived in its urban areas.

The years of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were also a time of growing labor unrest. Workers in the new factory economy worked 10-hour shifts, six days a week, for wages barely enough to survive. Children worked in the factories rather than attend school. Men and women worked until their bodies broke down from age and disabilities, and yet, there were no retirement benefits; medical coverage did not exist; women who became pregnant were often fired; and compensation for being hurt while on the job was zero.



In 1892, the growing labor unrest, concern over tariffs, and inflation helped Grover Cleveland return to the presidency when he defeated Republican Benjamin Harrison, again in a close election. The election did not quell the labor strife. After the 1892

election of Cleveland, a group of workingmen led by [Jacob S. Coxey](#) marched east toward Washington, D.C. to protest the growing problems of American workers. This group became known as [Coxey's Army](#) and agitated in favor of a national roads program to give jobs to workingmen, and a paper currency to help farmers pay their debts. Reaching Washington, D.C. on April 30, 1894, during the 1893 recession, one of the worst in U.S. history, Coxey's Army was down to a few hundred and were arrested for walking on the lawn of the [United States Capitol](#). Despite its evident inability to accomplish its goals, Coxey's Army signaled a growing worker dissatisfaction and civil unrest in a turbulent America.

---

## LABOR DAY LEGISLATION

The first governmental recognition came through municipal ordinances passed in 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 1887, 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 more states had adopted the holiday.

On June 28, 1894, Congress passed an act making the first Monday in September of each year a legal holiday in ALL THE STATES, the District of Columbia and the territories.

---

By the spring of 1894, the economy had still not recovered and President Cleveland met his greatest test, the Pullman Strike. The leader of that strike was Eugene V. Debs who would later found the American Socialist Party. At the time of the Pullman Strike, Debs was the head of the American Railway Union which he had founded in 1892.

In May 1894, Debs led one of the largest and most violent strikes in American history – the great Pullman Strike based in Chicago. It began when workers refused to accept a pay cut, which was presumably linked to the recession of 1893, which was still wreaking havoc in the United States economy. Also precipitating the strike was the firing of 5,000 Pullman Car Company employees and the Company's refusal to reduce costs of those unemployed and living in the company town of Pullman.

Most of the factory workers who built Pullman cars lived in Pullman, a town built on the [South Side](#) of [Chicago](#) by the Pullman Company. However, when the Pullman Company fired and laid off workers and lowered wages, it did not reduce rents or lower utility costs in Pullman, and the workers responded by calling for a strike. Among the

reasons cited for the strike were the absence of democracy within the town of Pullman and rigid paternalistic control, excessive water and gas rates, and the refusal by the company to allow workers to buy and own houses. To show support for the Pullman workers, Debs, head of the American Railway Union, responded by calling railroad employees to refuse to operate any trains that used Pullman cars.

When the strike was declared illegal by a court injunction, chaos erupted and the President Cleveland responded with force. Thousands of [United States Marshals](#) and some 12,000 [United States Army](#) troops, commanded by [Brigadier General Nelson Miles](#), were moved into the area, increasing civil violence and unrest. President Cleveland wanted the trains moving again. He based his right to call in federal troops on his constitutional responsibility for ensuring the delivery of the mail. In addition, Cleveland's lawyers argued that the strike violated the [Sherman Antitrust Act](#), and further was a threat to public safety.

The armed conflict that erupted with the arrival of the federal troops ended with at least 30 deaths of workers which led to further outbreaks of violence. More federal troops were sent. By the end of June 1894, order was restored. In the end, the strike failed, but President Cleveland and the Democrats paid a price. Cleveland's intervention to keep the railroads moving angered labor unions nationwide and the Democrats did not regain the presidency until Woodrow Wilson was elected in 1912.



SAMUEL GOMPERS  
PRESIDENT OF AFL

After the strike ended in 1894, in an effort to conciliate organized labor, President Grover Cleveland and Congress designated [Labor Day](#) as a federal holiday. Six days after the strike ended, legislation for the holiday was quickly pushed through Congress. Samuel Gompers, who served as President of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 to 1924, had sided with President Cleveland and the federal government in its effort to end the American Railway Union strike. Despite his support of Cleveland, Gompers was an early, ardent and out-spoken proponent of labor and the need to commemorate labor's unequalled contribution to America through the creation of a Labor Day holiday.

By 1894, most of the states had already adopted the first Monday in September as a legal holiday to honor American workers. Then, on June 28, 1894, six days after the Pullman Strike was quelled, Congress adopted the Act certifying the first Monday of September as a national holiday honoring American workers. President Cleveland quickly signed the legislation and Labor Day became America's seventh national holiday.

In 1910, in a different America, where there was another Democratic political leader who was president, Woodrow Wilson, Samuel Gompers gave the following speech extolling labor's tremendous contribution to building America.

**“Among all the festive days of the year, of all the days commemorative of great epochs in the world’s history, of all the days celebrated for one cause or another, there is not one which stands so consciously for social advancement of the common people as the first Monday in September of each recurring year—Labor Day”** (Samuel Gompers Papers).

---

**SAMUEL GOMPERS SPEECH  
LABOR DAY  
SEPTEMBER 4, 1910**

Labor Day marks a new epoch in the annals of human history. It differs essentially from some of the other holidays of the year in that it glorifies no armed conflicts or battles of man’s prowess over man.

It is a deep-seated propensity of human nature to observe with appropriate ceremonies the periodical return of certain times, suspending the ordinary business of life on certain days for the purpose of preserving the recollection of some important event or principle. The observance of such festivals is an evidence of growing civilization. Our inferior fellow-animals pursue an unvaried course from day to day, but man varies his life by elevating some days above others.

The institution of the weekly rest day or festival called Sunday has been of incalculable benefit to mankind, and in comparatively recent times there were numerous other holidays to give needed relaxation to the laborers and cheer the heart of man.

Among all the festive days of the year, of all the days commemorative of great epochs in the world’s history, of all the days celebrated for one cause or another, there is not one which stands so conspicuously for social advancement of the common people as the first Monday in September of each recurring year—Labor Day.

Labor Day is the day conceded by no one class or set of people to another; it is the day of the workers, secured by the workers for the workers, and for all. Its observance now is sanctioned by law in thirty-three States, in the District of Columbia, and in the United States Territories.

But Labor Day—labor’s holiday—was celebrated by organized labor years before its recognition as a legal holiday by the enactment of law. It appears that a beneficent purpose must be demonstrated by the people before our legislators give it the dignity of the law’s authority.

No martial glory or warlike pomp signals Labor Day. The marching host of workers manifest their growing intelligence and unalterable determination for the effacement of the unnatural and brutal causes that impel man to raise his hand against his brother.

Labor Day stands for industrial peace and for the toiler's economic, political, social, and moral advancement.

Organized labor in its essence presents a rational, hence a peaceful, means for the introduction of normal, fair and just conditions for all; so there ought not to be, and in the near future will not be, conflicts other than those which are conducted normally, peacefully, and rightly. It is in the best sense the modern knighthood in defense of the toiling men, women, and children of our day and of the future.

The struggle of labor is to free man from his own weakness, from his own cupidity, from his own unfair, unjust, and unnecessarily cruel environments. The struggle is for home and fireside, for a higher life, a nobler manhood, womanhood, and childhood, which may look forward to the day of deliverance from absurd economic conditions and cruel burdens. The future will substitute the college and forum for the arsenal and jail; the home, and not the factory, for motherhood; the playground, school, and sunlight, and not the mill or workshop, for childhood.

In our time, when so many look upon the dark side of the progress of the labor movement, and predict worse things in store for the laborer, it is not amiss to call attention to the fact that the life of the human family is one vast struggle, and that though the progress is not so swift as I, as well as some of my impatient brothers and sisters of labor, would like it to be, yet the fact is that in our decade we can see the rights of labor more clearly defined, the vantage ground obtained, and obtaining a clearer insight into existing wrongs, the more intelligent perception of and determination to achieve labor's rights.

There is only one danger of the failure of constant and peaceful evolution for the elimination of all abnormal conditions under which workers are compelled to toil, and this danger is the possible failure of the wage earners to realize the necessity of more general and thorough organization in the unions of their respective trades. Such a failure, beyond doubt, would be taken advantage of by all the elements which prey upon and take advantage of the weak, and it is a source of great gratification that the workers have organized and federated so largely and comprehensively that there is little fear of a step backward.

On the contrary, every evidence is shown that the toilers have awakened to the new-found power of organized effort. Never before in the history of our country have they been so well organized as they are to-day, and the good work is going on day by day.

In spite of the fact that occasionally we have great industrial disputes, yet the organized labor movement in its essence stands for industrial peace, and presents a rational method for the inauguration of fairer and more just conditions for all. The trade-union movement carries the scars of many cruel battles of the past. It exemplifies all tenderness and genuine sympathy with the sufferer of the present. It voices the hopes and aspirations of the masses for future freedom and justice.

At no time in the history of the world have the workers demonstrated more clearly their purpose not only to be just, but to demand justice. They realize that without organization in this day of concentrated wealth and industry their lives and their liberties are doomed. They have organized, and are organizing, with greater rapidity than ever. The earnestness of their expressions, the sincerity of their actions, the solidarity of their movements, the fraternity which they engender, all bespeak a brighter future for all who toil, for all who are dependent upon them.

Our labor movement has no system to crush. It has nothing to overturn. It purposes to build up, to develop, to rejuvenate humanity.

It stands for the right. It is the greatest protestant against wrong. It is the defender of the weak.

Its members make the sacrifices and bear the brunt of battle to obtain more equitable and humane conditions in the everyday lives of all the people.

It may be true that here and there a setback is encountered in the battle of labor; but it is simply a skirmish, for the grand army is ever moving onward and forward. One column in our ranks may be defeated, yet it is only a retreat for greater organization, better preparation for a more propitious time.

Splendid as has been the progress in organization and federation within the recent past, yet there is much to do to convince the yet unorganized workers that their duty to themselves, their wives and children, their fellow-workers, their fellow-men is to organize and help in the great cause. We must win or regain the confidence of the indifferent, negligent, or ignorant non-unionists, to impress on his mind that he who will not stand with his brother for the right is equally responsible with the wrongdoer for any wrong done. The excuse and justification for tyranny is the servility and indifference of the slaves.

By the organization of the workers we not only quicken the conscience of those inclined to the wrong, but we create a healthier public opinion regarding the great cause for which we stand. Hence, our fellow-unionists, rank and file, officers, organizers, leaders, in fact all, are devoting themselves unfalteringly and persistently to the work of bringing the non-unionists within the fold of organization.

The workers can be free. Justice and right can and must be proclaimed, established, and maintained.

The full realization of these principles and potent purposes can come only by the work, and if necessary, the sacrifices, of the hosts of unionists through whose earnest effort must be fulfilled the mission to unite the world of workers and usher in the dawn of



that bright day of which the poets have sung, philosophers dreamed, and the workmen struggled and yearned to achieve for the human family.

**SAMUEL GOMPERS PAPERS**  
**September 4, 1910**

---

References:

1. <https://www.dol.gov/>
2. <https://www.historynet.com/>
3. <https://www.archives.gov/nhprc/projects/catalog/samuel-gompers>

Photo Sources:

- Map: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1892\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1892_United_States_presidential_election)
- Gompers: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_Gompers#/media/File:Samuel\\_Gompers\\_cph.3a02952.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Gompers#/media/File:Samuel_Gompers_cph.3a02952.jpg)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Judy Lynch, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society. She was named the Jefferson's Decadean Scholar in 2018. She continues to serve on the Jefferson's Board of Trustees and was its first chairwoman. From 2004 to 2017, she served as Associate Professor of Political Science and History at Mercyhurst University. From 2002 to 2004, Dr. Lynch taught at Allegheny College and was part of the Civic Engagement Institute. Prior, she worked as an analyst for the CIA and served for 20 years as Erie County Executive. She received her Doctorate With Distinction in Political Science in 2001 from the University of Pittsburgh and her M.A. in Social Studies from Gannon University. Her undergraduate degree, a B.A. in History and Political Science, is from George Washington University.*

