History Of The Month Of December

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December is a month steeped in history and significance across various cultures and religions. As the final month of the Gregorian calendar, December marks the end of the year and is associated with numerous festivals, traditions, and historical events. From the celebration of Christmas to the observance of Hanukkah, December has been a time of reflection, celebration, and festivity for centuries. This article delves into the rich history of December, exploring its origins, cultural significance, and notable events that have shaped this month.

Origins and Etymology

The name "December" is derived from the Latin word "decem," meaning ten. This nomenclature reflects its position as the tenth month in the ancient Roman calendar, which began in March. The Roman calendar underwent several reforms, and by the time of Julius Caesar's Julian calendar reform in 45 BCE, December had become the twelfth month. Despite its reclassification, the name persisted, illustrating the complexities of calendar evolution.

December in Ancient Rome

In ancient Rome, December was a month of celebration and preparation for the upcoming year. The Romans celebrated the festival of Saturnalia, dedicated to the god Saturn, from December 17 to December 23. This festival involved feasting, gift-giving, and a reversal of social roles, where slaves were temporarily freed and could participate in the festivities. The joyous atmosphere of Saturnalia laid the groundwork for many of the customs associated with modern-day Christmas.

Winter Solstice Celebrations

December also coincides with the winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year, which usually occurs around December 21 or 22. Many ancient cultures celebrated this event,

marking the return of longer days and the rebirth of the sun.

- Celtic Traditions: The Celts celebrated Yule, a festival that honored the rebirth of the sun god and the promise of spring. They would light fires, decorate their homes with holly and ivy, and hold feasts to celebrate the turning of the seasons.
- Norse Influence: The Norse celebrated Yule with feasting and the Yule log, a tradition that has persisted into modern Christmas celebrations.

Religious Observances in December

December is a significant month for several major religions, each with its own traditions and observances.

Christianity

The most prominent celebration in December for Christians is Christmas, commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ. Although the exact date of Jesus' birth is not recorded in the Bible, December 25 was chosen by the early Church in the 4th century CE, likely to coincide with the pagan celebrations of the winter solstice and Saturnalia.

Key traditions associated with Christmas include:

1. Advent: The period of four weeks leading up to Christmas, marked by prayer, reflection, and preparation.
2. Nativity Scenes: Depictions of the birth of Jesus, showing Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus, often accompanied by shepherds and the Three Wise Men.
3. Christmas Carols: Timeless songs sung to celebrate the season, often recounting the Nativity story.

Judaism

Hanukkah, also known as the Festival of Lights, is another significant celebration that often falls in December. This eight-day Jewish festival commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the miracle of the oil that lasted eight days despite only being enough for one.

Key aspects of Hanukkah include:

- Lighting the Menorah: Each night, an additional candle is lit on the menorah until all eight candles are illuminated.
- Playing Dreidel: A traditional game played with a spinning top, symbolizing the struggle for religious freedom.
- Eating Traditional Foods: Foods fried in oil, such as latkes (potato pancakes) and sufganiyot (jelly-filled doughnuts), are enjoyed during the festival.

Other Cultural Celebrations

December is also a time for various cultural celebrations around the world that reflect local customs and traditions.

- Kwanzaa: Celebrated from December 26 to January 1, Kwanzaa honors African heritage and culture. It was created in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga and focuses on seven principles known as the Nguzo Saba.
- Festivus: A secular holiday created by comedian Dan O'Keefe, celebrated on December 23, as a parody of the commercialism of Christmas. It features traditions like the "Airing of Grievances" and the "Feats of Strength."

Historical Events in December

December has witnessed significant historical events that have shaped nations and cultures.

Political Milestones

1. The Boston Tea Party (1773): On December 16, American colonists protested against British taxation by dumping tea into Boston Harbor, a pivotal event leading up to the American Revolution.
2. The Attack on Pearl Harbor (1941): On December 7, Japan launched a surprise military strike against the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, resulting in significant losses and leading the U.S. to enter World War II.
3. The Emancipation Proclamation (1862): President Abraham Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, but it officially took effect on January 1, 1863. December was significant in rallying support for the measure.

Scientific Discoveries

December has also been a month of notable scientific advancements:

- Discovery of the Element Lithium (1817): Swedish chemist Johan August Arfwedson discovered lithium while analyzing petalite ore on December 6, marking a significant advancement in the field of chemistry.
- Launch of the Hubble Space Telescope (1990): On December 24, NASA launched the Hubble Space Telescope, which has since provided invaluable insights into the universe and profoundly impacted astronomy.

Modern Observances and Traditions

In contemporary society, December remains a month filled with various observances and traditions, many of which incorporate historical and cultural elements.

Holiday Shopping Season

The commercialization of Christmas has transformed December into a major shopping season, with Black Friday and Cyber Monday marking the beginning of holiday shopping. Retailers often offer significant discounts, and consumers flock to stores and online platforms to purchase gifts.

New Year's Eve Celebrations

As the month draws to a close, celebrations for New Year's Eve on December 31 take center stage. People around the world engage in various traditions, including:

- Fireworks Displays: Major cities host spectacular fireworks shows at midnight.
- Countdown Parties: Social gatherings where people count down the final seconds of the year together.
- New Year Resolutions: Many individuals take this time to reflect on the past year and set goals for the upcoming year.

Conclusion

December is a month rich in history, culture, and tradition. From ancient Roman festivals to modern-day celebrations, it encapsulates a period of reflection, festivity, and anticipation for the new year. The diverse observances and historical events that have occurred in December highlight the month's significance across various societies. As people around the world come together to celebrate, December serves as a reminder of the shared human experience, marked by joy, hope, and the promise of renewal.

Frequently Asked Questions

What significant historical event happened on December 7, 1941?

The attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese military, which led to the United States' entry into World War II.

Which famous document was adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1948?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

What is the significance of December 25th in Christian

history?

December 25th is celebrated as Christmas, marking the birth of Jesus Christ.

What major event in the U.S. history took place on December 15, 1791?

The ratification of the Bill of Rights, which comprises the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution.

What happened on December 1, 1955, that became a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement?

Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man, leading to the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Which treaty was signed on December 17, 1892, that affected international relations?

The Treaty of the Bering Sea, which aimed to protect fur seals in the Bering Sea.

What notable scientific achievement was announced on December 14, 2017?

The discovery of gravitational waves, confirming a major prediction of Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity.

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