**The 20 Greatest Historical Myths**

It is said that those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it - and as any history buff can tell you, much of history is something you would NOT want to repeat. However, many well-known historical "facts" are myths, with no basis in fact. Here (and in the next few segments) are 20 of the most common, which have misled and misinformed people for years, decades, or centuries.

If more people knew the facts, a few of the great history-makers would be recognised (anyone heard of Ub Iwerks?), some famous people would stop taking so much credit, and we would stop blaming apples for everything! Let's start with the following misconceptions...

**20. Eve ate a bad apple**

An apple a day might keep the doctor away, but they have still had bad publicity as the "forbidden fruit" that Eve tasted in the Garden of Eden, thereby making life difficult for all of us. Yet nowhere in the biblical story of Adam and Eve is an apple mentioned. It is simply called "the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden" (Genesis 3:3). OK, it COULD have been an apple, but it might just as well have been an apricot, a mango, or any other sort of fruit.

**19. Newton was hit by an apple**

Apples continued to get bad press with the famous story that scientist Sir Isaac Newton was under a tree, minding his own business, when an apple fell on his head. Just as well it provided him the inspiration for the laws of gravity, or the poor apple would never be forgiven! But while the falling apple is a good story, it probably never happened. The story was first published in an essay by Voltaire, long after Newton's death. Before that, Newton's niece, Catherine Conduitt, was the only person who ever told the story. It was almost certainly an invention.

**18. Walt Disney drew Mickey Mouse**

One of the world's most famous fictitious characters, Mickey Mouse, is credited to Walt Disney. However, Mickey was the vision of Disney's number one animator, Ub Iwerks. Disney, never a great artist, would always have trouble drawing the character who made him famous. Fortunately for him, Iwerks was known as the fastest animator in the business. He single-handedly animated Mickey's first short film, Plane Crazy (1928), in only two weeks. (That's 700 drawings a day.) But give some credit to Disney - when sound films began later that year, he played Mickey's voice.

**17. Marie Antoinette said "Let them each cake"**

In 1766, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote of an incident he recalled from some 25 years earlier, in which "a great princess" (name unknown) was told that the country people had no bread. "Then let them eat cake," she replied. When Rousseau wrote of this, Marie Antoinette was an 11-year-old child in Austria. The French Revolution would not begin for another 23 years. The myth that she spoke these infamous words was probably spread by revolutionary propagandists, to illustrate her cold indifference to the plight of the French people.

In the next chapter of this list, we uncover a tall tale about Napoleon, and find out how witches did NOT die, whatever you might have heard...

**16. The Great Train Robbery was the first feature film**

When it was released in 1903, "The Great Train Robbery" pioneered several techniques, includes jump cuts, medium close-ups and a complex storyline. But the first feature film? It was only ten minutes long! Even most short films are longer than that. The first feature-length film was a 100-minute Australian film, "The Story of the Kelly Gang", released three years later. Even if you think of a feature film as the "feature" of a cinema program, the title would go to one of a number of French films made during the 1890s (but I won't name one, as that could cause any number of arguments).

**15. Van Gogh sliced off his ear**

Van Gogh is known as the archetypal starving artist, only selling one painting in his lifetime, and - in a quarrel with Gauguin - slicing off his ear, not long before committing suicide. Though he did face a tragic end, and his own paintings sold poorly, it is worth noting that he spent most of his life teaching and dealing art. He only spent eight years of his life painting, which helps to explain why he didn't starve to death. Also, he didn't slice off his entire ear, just a portion of his left lobe. Painful, but not nearly as bad as you might have thought.

**14. Witches were burned at stake in Salem**

The Salem (Massachusetts) witch trials of 1692 led to the arrests of 150 people, of whom 31 were tried and 20 were executed. But just as these trials were based on ignorance, there are many misconceptions about them. For starters, the 31 condemned "witches" were not all women. Six of them were men. Also, they were not burned at stake. As any witch-hunter would know, a true witch could never be killed by this method. Hanging was the usual method - though one was crushed to death under heavy stones.

**13. Napoleon was a little corporal**

Some people believe that Napoleon's domineering ambitions were to compensate for being so physically small. Not so. True, Napoleon was called Le Petit Corporal ("The Little Corporal"), but he was 5 feet, 7 inches tall - taller than the average eighteenth-century Frenchman. So why the nickname? Early in his military career, soldiers used it to mock his relatively low rank. The name stuck, even as he became ruler of France.

**12. King John signed the Magna Carta**

The Magna Carta (Great Charter) is known as a landmark in history, limiting the power of the King of England and sowing the seeds of democracy. Paintings show King John reluctantly signing the Magna Carta in a meadow at Runnymede in 1215. Fair enough, except for one thing. As well as being a rogue, John was probably illiterate. As anyone could see from looking at one of the four original Magna Cartas in existence, he simply provided the royal seal. No signature required.

**11. Walter Raleigh introduced potatoes and tobacco to England**

Sir Walter Raleigh - explorer, courtier, privateer - Is one of greatest myth figures ever to come from England. Virtually every reason for his fame is untrue. Was he handsome? According to written accounts, he was no oil painting - though somehow he charmed Queen Elizabeth I, and had a reputation as a ladies' man. Did he lay his cloak across a puddle so that the Queen could step on it? No, that was pure fiction. Most importantly, he didn't return from his visit to the New World (America) with England's first potatoes and tobacco. Though Raleigh is said to have introduced potatoes in 1586, they were first grown in Italy in 1585, and quickly spread throughout Europe (even across the English Channel). Also, though people all over Europe blame Sir Walter for their cigarette addictions, Jean Nicot (for whom nicotine is named) introduced tobacco to France in 1560. Tobacco spread to England from France, not the New World.

**10. Magellan circumnavigated the world**

Everyone knows two things about Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan. One, he was the first man to circumnavigate the world; and two, during this historic trip, he was killed by natives in the Philippines. Of course, those two things tend to contradict each other. Magellan only made it half-way around the world, leaving it to his second-in-command, Juan Sebastian Elcano, to complete the circumnavigation.

**9. Nero fiddled while Rome burned**

We all know the story of mad Emperor Nero starting the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, then fiddling while the city burned. However, this would have been impossible. For one thing, the violin wouldn't be invented for another 1,600 years. OK, some versions of the story suggest that he played a lute or a lyre - but then, scholars place the emperor in his villa at Antium, 30 miles away, when the fire began. Though he was innocent of this disaster, however, there is much evidence to show that he was ruthless and depraved.

**8. Captain Cook discovered Australia**

Many Australians will agree that this isn't so - but for the wrong reasons. They will point out that, many years before Cook arrived in Sydney in 1770, Australia had already been visited by Dutchmen Abel Tasman and Dirk Hartog, and an English buccaneer, William Dampier. Of course, it had been previously been discovered some 50,000 years earlier by the indigenous Australians.

But in fairness to Cook, he did discover a new part of the country - and more importantly, this led to the first white settlers (an opportunity that Tasman, Hartog and Dampier didn't take). So let's say that Cook DID discover Australia! Fine, but Cook was actually a Lieutenant when he sailed to the Great South Land. The "captain" rank might be a minor point, but it's certainly inaccurate - and as he is called "Captain Cook" so often that it might as well be his name, it's one worth correcting.

**7. Shakespeare wrote the story of Hamlet**

William Shakespeare is generally known as the greatest playwright who ever lived, even though most of his plays were not original, but adaptations of earlier stories. "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" (1603), probably his most famous play, was based on an ancient Scandinavian story. But while it might not have been the original version of the story, we can safely assume it was the best.

**6. America became independent on July 4, 1776**

Hold the fireworks! As most American school children (and many non-American ones) are aware, America's founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. However, the war raged for another seven years before independence from England was finally granted on September 3, 1783. On that day, Britain's George III and US leaders signed the Definitive Treaty of Peace.

**5. Edison invented the electric light**

Thomas Edison is known as the world's greatest inventor. His record output - 1,093 patents - still amazes us, over a century later. Astonishing, except for one thing: he didn't invent most of them. Most Edison inventions were the work of his unsung technicians - and his most famous invention, the electric light, didn't even belong to his laboratory. Four decades before Edison was born, English scientist Sir Humphry Davy invented arc lighting (using a carbon filament). For many years, numerous innovators would improve on Davy's model. The only problem: none could glow for more than twelve hours before the filament broke. The achievement of Edison's lab was to find the right filament that would burn for days on end. A major achievement, but not the first.

**4. Columbus proved that the Earth was round**

It was American author Washington Irving, some 500 years after Columbus sailed to America, who first portrayed the Italian explorer as launching on his voyage to prove that the Earth was round, defying the common, flat-earther belief of the time. In fact, most educated Europeans in Columbus's day knew that the world was round. Since the fourth century BC, almost nobody has believed that the Earth is flat. Even if that wasn't the case, Columbus would never have set out to prove that the Earth was round... simply because he didn't believe it himself! Columbus thought that the Earth was pear-shaped. He set sail to prove something else: that Asia was much closer than anyone thought. Even in this, he was wrong. To further besmirch his memory, it should also be noted that he never set foot on mainland America. The closest he came was the Bahamas. Pear-shaped, indeed!

**3. Gandhi liberated India**

To westerners, Mahatma Gandhi is easily the most famous leader of India's independence movement. He deserves credit for promoting the ancient ideals of ahimsa (non-violence). However, most historians agree that Indian independence was inevitable. Gandhi was just one of several independence leaders. The Indian National Congress was founded as early as 1885, when he was only 16. Gandhi's much-publicised civil disobedience was only a small part in the movement, and some historians even suggest that India would have achieved independence sooner if they had focused on the more forceful methods that they had used 50 years earlier, and which were still advocated by other independence leaders, such as Gandhi's rival Netaji Chandra Bose (who is also revered in India).

**2. Jesus was born on December 25**

Christmas is meant to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but there is no evidence whatsoever, biblical or otherwise, that He was actually born on that day. Nor is there anything to suggest that He was born in a manger, or that there were three wise men (although, as any nativity play will remind you, three gifts were mentioned). There are differing views as to why December 25 was chosen as Christmas day, but one of the most interesting is that the day was already celebrated by followers of Mithras, the central god of a Hellenistic cult that developed in the Eastern Mediterranean around 100 BC. The followers of this faith believed that Mithras was born of a virgin on 25 December, and that his birth was attended by shepherds...

Which brings us to the number one historical myth - something that is drilled into the heads of nearly all American schoolchildren...

**1. George Washington was America's first President**

Everyone "knows" that Washington was the first of the (so far) 43 Presidents of the US. However, this isn't strictly the case. During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress (or the 'United States in Congress Assembled') chose Peyton Randolph as the first President. Under Randolph, one of their first moves was to create the Continental Army (in defence against Britain), appointing General Washington as its commander. Randolph was succeeded in 1781 by John Hancock, who presided over independence from Great Britain (see myth #6). After Washington defeated the British at the Battle of Yorktown, Hancock sent him a note of congratulations. Washington's reply was addressed to "The President of the United States". Eight years later, as a revered war hero, Washington himself became America's first popularly elected President - but strictly speaking, the FIFTEENTH President!

Who was the first president to live in the White House?  
Who was the first president to live in the White House? President John Adams and his wife, Abigail, moved into the White House in 1800, shortly before it was completed.

George Washington, and no one thought of any other person in connection with it. The unanimous vote of the electors made him the first president of the United States; their unanimous vote elected him for a second time in 1792-1793; and even after he had positively refused to serve for a third term, two electors voted for him in 1796-1797.