

Valentine's Day is a holiday celebrated every February 14; this year Valentine's Day falls on a Friday. Across the United States and in other places around the world, candy, flowers and gifts are exchanged between loved ones, all in the name of St. Valentine.

But who is this mysterious saint and where did these traditions come from? Find out about the meaning and history of Valentine's Day, from the ancient Roman ritual of Lupercalia that welcomed spring to the card-giving customs of Victorian England.

The history of Valentine's Day—and the story of its patron saint—is shrouded in mystery. We do know that February has long been celebrated as a month of romance, and that St. Valentine's Day, as we know it today, contains vestiges of both Christian and ancient Roman tradition. But who was Saint Valentine, and how did he become associated with this ancient rite?

The Catholic Church recognizes at least three different saints named Valentine or Valentinus, all of whom were martyred. One legend contends that Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome. When Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men. Valentine, realizing the injustice of the decree, defied Claudius and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret. When Valentine's actions were discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death. Still others insist that it was Saint Valentine of Terni, a bishop, who was the true namesake of the holiday. He, too, was beheaded by Claudius II outside Rome.

Other stories suggest that Valentine may have been killed for attempting to help Christians escape harsh Roman prisons, where they were often beaten and tortured. According to one legend, an imprisoned Valentine actually sent the first "valentine" greeting himself after he fell in love with a young girl—possibly his jailor's daughter—who visited him during his confinement.

Before his death, it is alleged that he wrote her a letter signed "From your Valentine," an expression that is still in use today. Although the truth behind the Valentine legends is murky, the stories all emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic and—most

importantly—romantic figure. By the Middle Ages, perhaps thanks to this reputation, Valentine would become one of the most popular saints in England and France.

Origins of Valentine's Day: A Pagan Festival in February

While some believe that Valentine's Day is celebrated in the middle of February to commemorate the anniversary of Valentine's death or burial—which probably occurred around A.D. 270—others claim that the Christian church may have decided to place St. Valentine's feast day in the middle of February in an effort to "Christianize" the pagan celebration of Lupercalia. Celebrated at the ides of February, or February 15, Lupercalia was a fertility festival dedicated to Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture, as well as to the Roman founders Romulus and Remus.

To begin the festival, members of the Luperci, an order of Roman priests, would gather at a sacred cave where the infants Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, were believed to have been cared for by a she-wolf or lupa. The priests would sacrifice a goat, for fertility, and a dog, for purification. They would then strip the goat's hide into strips, dip them into the sacrificial blood and take to the streets, gently slapping both women and crop fields with the goat hide.

Far from being fearful, Roman women welcomed the touch of the hides because it was believed to make them more fertile in the coming year. Later in the day, according to legend, all the young women in the city would place their names in a big urn. The city's bachelors would each choose a name and become paired for the year with his chosen woman. These matches often ended in marriage.

Valentine's Day Meaning: A Day of Romance and Love

Lupercalia survived the initial rise of Christianity but was outlawed—as it was deemed "un-Christian"—at the end of the 5th century, when Pope Gelasius declared February 14 St. Valentine's Day. It was not until much later, however, that the day became definitively associated with love.

During the Middle Ages, it was commonly believed in France and England that February 14 was the beginning of birds' mating season, which added to the idea that the middle of

Valentine's Day should be a day for romance. The English poet Geoffrey Chaucer was the first to record St. Valentine's Day as a day of romantic celebration in his 1375 poem "Parliament of Fowls," writing, "For this was sent on Seynt Valentynes day / Whan every foul cometh ther to choose his mate."

Valentine greetings were popular as far back as the Middle Ages, though written Valentine's didn't begin to appear until after 1400. The oldest known valentine still in existence today was a poem written in 1415 by Charles, Duke of Orleans, to his wife while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London following his capture at the Battle of Agincourt. (The greeting is now part of the manuscript collection of the British Library in London, England.) Several years later, it is believed that King Henry V hired a writer named John Lydgate to compose a valentine note to Catherine of Valois.

Who Is Cupid?

Cupid is often portrayed on Valentine's Day cards as a naked cherub launching arrows of love at unsuspecting lovers. But the Roman God Cupid has his roots in Greek mythology as the Greek god of love, Eros. Accounts of his birth vary; some say he is the son of Nyx and Erebus; others, of Aphrodite and Ares; still others suggest he is the son of Iris and Zephyrus or even Aphrodite and Zeus (who would have been both his father and grandfather).

According to the Greek Archaic poets, Eros was a handsome immortal played with the emotions of Gods and men, using golden arrows to incite love and leaden ones to sow aversion. It wasn't until the Hellenistic period that he began to be portrayed as the mischievous, chubby child he'd become on Valentine's Day cards.

Valentine's Day Greetings and Gifts

In addition to the United States, Valentine's Day is celebrated in Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, France and Australia. In Great Britain, Valentine's Day began to be popularly celebrated around the 17th century.

By the middle of the 18th, it was common for friends and lovers of all social classes to exchange small tokens of affection or handwritten notes, and by 1900 printed cards began to replace written letters due to improvements in printing technology. Ready-made cards were an easy way for people to express their emotions in a time when direct

expression of one's feelings was discouraged. Cheaper postage rates also contributed to an increase in the popularity of sending Valentine's Day greetings.

Americans probably began exchanging hand-made valentines in the early 1700s. In the 1840s, Esther A. Howland began selling the first mass-produced valentines in America. Howland, known as the "Mother of the Valentine," made elaborate creations with real lace, ribbons and colorful pictures known as "scrap."

Today, according to Hallmark, an estimated 145 million Valentine's Day cards are sent each year, making Valentine's Day the second largest card-sending holiday of the year (more cards are sent at Christmas).

Celebrating Valentine's Day in the United States comes with multiple go-to practices. Offering a bouquet of red roses to your beloved. Purchasing a card with a heartfelt message. Sharing a candlelit meal with your partner. Giving a heart-shaped box of delicious chocolates.

However, different times, places and cultures have commemorated February 14 and the days surrounding it in other ways. Here are seven of these lesser-known traditions.

1. Packing Meaning Into Different Flowers

Roses weren't always the go-to Valentine's flower. In the 19th century, bouquets could contain a variety of flowers, each chosen to convey a specific meaning.

Elizabeth White Nelson, an associate professor of history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and author of *Market Sentiments: Middle-Class Market Culture in 19th-Century America*, says 19th century flower dictionaries categorized and gave meanings to every flower. She explains that for Valentine's Day, "The idea was that you could give a bouquet that was not just a bouquet of flowers. It had a whole message encoded into the flowers." A bouquet with yellow acacia (which means "concealed love"), jonquils ("I desire a return of affection") and snowdrops ("hope") sends the message that you secretly adore the recipient and hope those feelings might be reciprocated.

Nelson notes that sending these bouquets in the 19th century "depends on who you are and what kind of flowers you have access to, which I would say is a very small group of people in the middle of the winter in the United States." She adds, "At the end of the [19th]

century, you get more commercial florists and therefore more availability of flowers at more affordable price points. Then I think you see the shift toward roses.”

2. Gifting a Puzzle Purse

In the 18th and 19th centuries, puzzle purses were popular Valentine’s gifts in England and the United States. A puzzle purse consists of an intricately folded sheet of paper with parts of a message or verses written on different corners.

As a puzzle purse is intended to be read in a specific order, folds were usually numbered so the recipient knew how to proceed. Unfolding one part—undoing the puzzle—revealed a section of writing. Sometimes there was also a small gift waiting in the center.

3. Celebrating Black Love Day on February 13

Ayo Handy-Kendi, founder of the African American Holiday Association, was inspired to start Black Love Day in 1993 after seeing Malcolm X's assassination depicted in the biopic *Malcolm X*. She says she wanted a holiday to focus on “increasing peace and stopping violence.” For Black Love Day, Handy-Kendi instituted “a value system based on principles, like Kwanzaa.” She says, “The five tenets were showing love for the creator, showing love for ourself, showing love for the Black family, the Black community and the race.”

Black Love Day is celebrated on February 13, not the 14th. “Most of the holidays [in the United States] evolved from European culture,” Handy-Kendi explains. “You’re celebrating someone else's culture on a regular basis.”

Traci Parker, an associate professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, says of Black Love Day, “To have a place where love can be celebrated, especially in a community where it has been historically attacked, is really important.” She adds, “Looking at the history of Black love in this country, if we go back to slavery, it's something that has been weaponized against African Americans. It's something that wasn't seen to be something that African Americans should hold because African Americans weren't even deemed human.”

“Young folks by the 1950s and '60s have understood how to politicize their love and use it in the revolution to end white supremacy, to end Jim Crow,” Parker adds. “So I think that the holiday allows us to take a moment and remember that history. And do the work of

reminding us of how central and integral love has been, romantic love has even been, in the Black community.”

4. Pigs and Gingerbread

Valentine’s Day, called Valentinstag, only took hold in Germany after the end of World War II. Since then, Germans have put their own spin on the day. One is by incorporating pigs, which are a symbol of luck in Germany, into Valentine’s gifts.

Germans also give out large heart-shaped gingerbread cookies, known as lebkuchen, for Valentine’s Day. These may include a personal message.

5. Celebrating Friendship Instead

February 14 is for friends, not just lovers, in parts of Latin America, including Ecuador, El Salvador and Mexico. Known as El Día del Amor y Amistad (Day of Love and Friendship), it’s meant to recognize and honor friendship. In El Salvador, people draw names and exchange gifts in a tradition known as Amigo Secreto, Secret Friend, on that day.

In the 1980s, Estonia and Finland started to recognize platonic love and friendship alongside romance on February 14. Instead of exchanging cards or going out to eat with a romantic partner, people in these two countries do this with friends. In Estonia, this is Friend’s Day, Sõbrapäev. Finland’s Friend’s Day is Ystävän Päivä.

6. Mass Marriages in the Philippines

To help couples who can’t afford their own weddings, local governments in the Philippines organize mass weddings on or around Valentine’s Day. On February 14, 2010, 1,500 couples tied the knot at a mass ceremony in a Manila suburb.

Couples even turned out, albeit in reduced numbers, to get married on Valentine’s Day during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Thanks to these efforts, February 14 is the most common wedding anniversary in the country.

7. Japanese Men Receive Valentine's Chocolate

In Japan, women traditionally offer Valentine’s chocolates to men. One origin story for this is a chocolate manufacturer’s 1958 suggestion that women use Valentine’s chocolates to confess romantic feelings. Another says Japanese department stores promoted the practice in the 1970s.

Women give different types of chocolate. Honmei choco, which means true feelings chocolate, goes to male romantic interests. Giri choco, obligation chocolate, is offered to

male colleagues or classmates. However, the desire to distribute obligation chocolate has been declining. In a 2017 poll, less than 40 percent of women intended to hand out giri choco.

Tomo choco—friend chocolate—can go to friends of any gender. Japanese women who follow the gender-specific tradition have their own day to receive presents from the men in their lives when White Day arrives on March 14.

8. Naming a Roach After Your Ex

Flowers, chocolates, sentimental cards, even pig-themed gifts—these things may all be wonderful. But sometimes a relationship doesn't work out, which can make Valentine's Day difficult. However, if the ex responsible for your broken heart is still on your mind, there is a Valentine's solution: cockroaches.

Several zoos now allow people to pay a small fee to give a roach the name of their choosing. The Bronx Zoo has Name a Roach for your Valentine, Chicago's Brookfield Zoo offers Name a Cockroach After Your Ex and the San Antonio Zoo organizes a Cry Me a Cockroach Fundraiser. All offer some type of certificate to commemorate the naming—and to send along to the roach's honoree.