

Labor Day

Monday, September 7, 2026

Labor Day is a federal holiday on the first Monday of September every year. It has its roots in the American labor movement.



"Labor Day" was promoted by the Central Labor Union and the Knights of Labor, which organized the first parade in New York City

The Controversy Over Who Founded Labor Day

Americans have been celebrating workers since the late 19th century, but exactly who is responsible for the holiday is debated.



Members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union march in a Labor Day parade in New York City, September 1982. The first Labor Day in 1882 was marked by a parade.

On the first Monday in September, many Americans celebrate [Labor Day](#) with parties or barbecues. Others mark Labor Day weekend, often considered the last weekend of summer, with a vacation or a [trip to the beach](#). These modern-day activities echo the revelry at the first observance of Labor Day nearly 150 years ago.

The earliest documented Labor Day parade was held in New York City in 1882. Two years later, the largest workers' association in the United States, [Knights of Labor](#), adopted a resolution for the holiday to [occur](#) on the first Monday in September. By 1894, Congress and President [Grover Cleveland](#) had [made Labor Day](#) into a federal holiday paying tribute to American workers. The idea for the holiday came from an East Coast laborer, but two men—Peter McGuire and Matthew Maguire—can be credited for suggesting the holiday. Exactly who founded [Labor Day](#) remains contested.

Peter McGuire: The Original Founder of Labor Day

Carpenter [Peter McGuire](#) (1852-1906) was a dedicated labor advocate from New York City. After organizing a union of carpenters in St. Louis, he successfully negotiated for higher wages and garnered national attention for that effort. In 1881, he founded the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and co-founded what became the American Federation of Labor (AFL), [serving](#) as each

organization's secretary for some time. McGuire was also an outspoken proponent of the [eight-hour workday](#).

[Reportedly](#), on May 12, 1882, McGuire proposed the idea of setting aside one day a year in honor of workers to the New York City-based Central Labor Union. He suggested a festive parade through the city, and [the date](#) was set for Tuesday, September 5. Organizers selected the timing because it was about halfway between [Fourth of July](#) and [Thanksgiving](#). Estimates suggest at least 10,000 and up to as many as 30,000 workers took the day off and participated.

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Peter McGuire was a New York carpenter and labor organizer in the 19th century. He took credit as the founder of Labor Day in an 1897 newspaper article, but his role has been contested.

Having seen Labor Day grow into a nationwide [tradition](#), McGuire died in February 1906. Both his gravestone at a cemetery in Pennsauken, New Jersey, and a statue in his honor there are inscribed with "Father of Labor Day." But more recently, that claim has been challenged, says historian and author [Allen J. Wiener](#).

"New evidence indicates that it was really Matthew Maguire who first came up with the idea," he explains.

Matthew Maguire: The True Labor Day Founder?

Like Peter McGuire, New Jersey machinist [Matthew Maguire](#) (1855-1917) was focused on improving working conditions for American laborers. In the 1870s, Maguire led strikes for a shorter workday. "His efforts raised public awareness of the long work hours and poor working conditions factory workers faced each day," Wiener says.

Maguire's lifelong commitment to workers' rights also saw him serve as secretary of Paterson Local 344 in the Machinists and Blacksmiths Union and as the Socialist Labor Party's vice-presidential nominee in 1896.

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The year of the first Labor Day parade, 1882, Maguire had become the secretary of the Central Labor Union, which [organized the parade](#). Over the next several decades, multiple accounts suggest it was he who proposed the holiday.

An 1891 article in socialist newspaper *The People* [reported](#) the first Labor Day parade "was arranged by the Central Labor Union through the instrumentality of its first Secretary, Matthew Maguire." Three years later, a Paterson, New Jersey, newspaper similarly backed this claim after the pen President Cleveland had used to sign the bill making Labor Day into a nationwide holiday was presented to AFL founding President [Samuel Gompers](#). In an 1894 editorial, Paterson's *Morning Call* stated, "the souvenir pen should go to Alderman Matthew Maguire of this city, who is the undisputed

author of Labor Day as a holiday.” The editorial went on to call him the “Father of the Labor Day holiday,” according to the [New Jersey Historical Society](#).

Curiosities of Popular Customs (1897) by William S. Walsh also [credited](#) Maguire as one of the day’s chief organizers: “Maguire was made chairman of the committee to arrange for the first Labor Day celebration in that year.” After Maguire’s death in 1917, he was buried in a New Jersey cemetery. An interment card from the cemetery that year—which was publicized in a 2020 [New York Times article](#)—says, “This man founded Labor Day.” However, a cemetery spokesperson told *The Times* she didn’t know who wrote it.



Labor Movement

Why the Founder of Labor Day Remains Contested

Both Peter McGuire and Matthew Maguire attended the first Labor Day parade in September 1882. By the turn of the century, the narrative that the event was McGuire’s doing was beginning to solidify despite some pushback.

McGuire claimed credit for creating the holiday in an 1897 article he wrote in *The Carpenter*, a union publication. However, the parade’s grand marshal soon refuted this claim. In an article in *The Cleveland Recorder* from the same year, the grand marshal said it was actually Maguire who proposed the idea for Labor Day. But McGuire had a powerful supporter in the AFL’s Samuel Gompers, who gave credit to the New York carpenter for founding the holiday during an 1897 interview.

Ultimately, politics might have played a role in who was propped up as Labor Day’s founder. “Matthew Maguire’s Socialist politics may have worked against him,” Wiener says. As author Theodore Watts [argued](#) in his 1983 book *The First Labor Day Parade* and [elsewhere](#), the AFL was worried that Maguire’s leftist politics would be associated with Labor Day, therefore reducing public favor of the occasion.

Personality differences might also have made an impact on the historical record, Wiener says. Whereas McGuire was more outspoken and sought to take credit for establishing Labor Day, the more reserved Maguire focused on improving conditions for workers more than his personal legacy. “It is an unfortunate controversy since both men worked for the cause of American labor and should be celebrated on the holiday, regardless of who came up with the idea first,” Wiener says.