The History of Valentine's Day

The most popular romantic holiday is named after a saint about whom little is known, including his true identity! In this activity, we learn about the persons who may—or may not—have been the "real" Valentine, and we learn about the history of this heartfelt day.

Preparations & How-To's

- [Pictures](#) can be printed and passed around during the activity or [displayed on a computer or television](#).

- Set the mood by playing ["That's Amore"](#) by Dean Martin.

- Distribute themed candies or other treats to enjoy.

- Check the [Additional Activities](#) section for other ideas to bring to the activity.

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Who Was Valentine?

One reason that Valentine's Day may be associated with secret admirers is that the saint behind the holiday is a mystery. We know that a man named Valentine existed and that he died around 270 AD. However, at least two people named Valentine lived at that time, and either—or neither—might be the holiday's namesake.

The first person who may have been the famous Valentine is a priest who lived during the third century in Rome. During this time, Emperor Claudius II made a decree that young men could not be married because he wanted them to be single-minded while they served in his military. However, Valentine felt the decree was wrong, so he secretly continued to marry young men and women. When the emperor discovered what Valentine was doing, he had the priest beheaded.

The second person who is purported to be the holiday's namesake is St. Valentine of Terni, a bishop in the third century. He was also beheaded by Claudius II. He was said to have helped Christians who were imprisoned, beaten, and often executed for their faith. Valentine assisted them in escaping the jails. Eventually, Valentine was caught and imprisoned himself. In one telling of this story, Valentine fell in love with the jailor's daughter, who often visited him. He sent her a letter signed, "from your Valentine." This is credited as being the first valentine greeting. Some stories add that she was blind and that Valentine restored her sight. In this version, the judge and his entire household converted to Christianity.

Some believe that the two men were one and the same, but we have no way of knowing because there is very little factual information about Valentine, other than the approximate year of his death. Questions about Valentine's true identity were raised as early as 496 AD by Pope Gelasius I, who said that facts about the martyr and his actions were "known only to God."

Discussion Starters

- Did it surprise you to learn that Valentine lived so long ago?

- Which Valentine do you believe was the namesake for the holiday?

- What stories have you heard about St. Valentine?

Origins of Valentine's Day

Valentine's Day has been celebrated in February for more than 1,500 years. It may have been placed in February to commemorate the anniversary of Valentine's death, or it may have been placed to coincide with (and replace) the Roman celebration of Lupercalia, a rowdy celebration of fertility and planting.

Lupercalia dates all the way back to the founding of Rome. According to folklore, Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus, twin nephews of an ancient king who ordered the small boys drowned. But a servant took pity on them and instead placed them in a water-tight basket in the river, where they were carried downstream and became caught in a wild fig tree.

A she-wolf found and cared for them in a cave at the base of Palatine Hill, where Rome was founded. The boys named the cave Lupercal, and the celebration of Lupercalia was meant to honor the she-wolf and the god Lupercus, who was the god of farmers, harvest, and packs of animals.

Like festivals of other ancient religions, including Judaism, the Lupercalia celebration began with a ritual sacrifice. In this case, a goat and a dog were sacrificed to the god Lupercus. Next, two priests' foreheads were smeared with sacrificial blood, and then they were wiped clean with a cloth soaked in milk. After this, the feasting began. Legend has it that another part of the festival celebration included a temporary "coupling," in which single men would draw a name of a single woman from the jar, and these couples were considered "married" until the end of the festival. Some of them stayed together until the start of the following year's festival. And some fell in love and actually got married!

Discussion Starters

- We know that other Christian holidays, like Easter and Christmas, may have been strategically placed to replace other religions' holidays. Do you think Valentine's Day was also deliberately placed near Lupercalia? Why or why not?

- What do you think of the Lupercalian method for pairing up couples? Do you think this would work today?

- If you have been married, how did you meet your partner?

Valentine's Day Turns to Romance

While Lupercalia was outlawed by the beginning of the sixth century, Valentine's Day continued. Geoffrey Chaucer is sometimes credited with making Valentine's Day a romantic holiday. In a poem he wrote around 1375, he links courtly love with the feast of St. Valentine. He poetically states that February 14 is the day that birds and people come together to find their partner: *For this was sent on Seynt Valentyne's day / Whan every foul cometh ther to choose his mate.* The popularity of Valentine's Day as a romantic holiday soared after his poem became popular.

It wasn't until the 1500s that people started sending romantic or friendly greetings to one another on this day, calling them valentines. By the late 1700s, commercially printed cards were available. The Victorians loved Valentine's Day. Their Valentine cards were flat sheets of paper, printed with illustrations and often embossed. These sheets could be folded, sealed with wax, and mailed.

In 1840, Great Britain created Uniform Penny Post, which allowed Valentines to be mailed for just one penny. So many Valentines were sent that postal carriers were given extra money for food and drink to help them make it through their strenuous rounds! In 1841, more than 400,000 valentines were mailed in Great Britain, and by 1871, more than one million cards were processed in London alone.

Some Victorians eschewed the commercial cards and instead used lace, ribbon, bits of glass, seashells, and other craft materials to make their own valentines. It was popular to use church spires or churches on cards to signify honorable intentions.

The tradition came to America in the late 1840s, thanks to a young woman named Esther Howland, who received a British valentine when she was 20. She was enchanted by the card but discovered that the British imports were spendy and not affordable for many Americans. So, she imported lace and other materials from Britain and began creating her own designs. Today, she is known as the Mother of the American Valentine.

The holiday continues to be popular throughout the English-speaking world and is also popular in other countries, including Argentina, France, Mexico, and South Korea. In the Philippines, people get married in mass ceremonies numbering in the hundreds on the holiday. It's the most popular day of the year to get married, so many people share a wedding anniversary.

The oldest known valentine still in existence was written in 1415 by Charles, Duke of Orleans. He wrote a poem to his wife while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London after being captured at the Battle of Agincourt. Perhaps his gesture inspired the English king because, several years later, King Henry V hired a writer named John Lydgate to compose a valentine note to Catherine of Valois.

The holiday has continued to gain in popularity: in 2020, more than $25 billion was spent in the United States alone on gifts and cards!

Discussion Starters

- Have you given or received a Valentine's Day card or gift?

- Watch this eight-minute video of a [Valentine's Day prank](#) that a British wife played on her husband.

- Do you find her Valentine's Day gift amusing?

- What do you think of her husband's reaction?

Did you Know?

- There are twelve people named Valentine (or variations of the name) officially listed as saints in religious rosters. The saint of February 14th fame is called St. Valentine of Rome, to distinguish him from the others. There was even a Pope Valentine, who served only 40 days in the early ninth century. *Valentinus* comes from a Latin word that means "admirable, noble, and strong," and it was a popular name for centuries.

- Valentine is the patron saint of beekeepers, epilepsy, fainting, and the plague, as well as of engaged and married couples.

- We may know very little about Valentine, but his relics still exist. His skull is displayed in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, Rome. Other relics of St. Valentine are distributed in churches around the world.

Additional Activities

1. Watch the movie *Valentine's Day*, which is currently streaming on Netflix. (Or you can rent it.)

2. Make our EZ All-in-One Valentine or String HeART craft.

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