

The Fourth of July: History, Significance, and Local Traditions

By

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The Fourth of July, also known as Independence Day, is one of the most deeply rooted and celebrated holidays in the United States. It commemorates the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, marking the colonies' formal separation from Great Britain and the birth of a new nation. Beyond its symbolic status, the holiday reflects evolving meanings, traditions, and civic engagement both nationally and in local communities such as Gilroy and Santa Clara County.

The origins of Independence Day are intertwined with the political unrest of the 18th century. Colonial Americans faced growing tensions with Great Britain, including taxation without representation, trade restrictions, and lack of self-governance. In response, the Second Continental Congress appointed a committee Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston to draft a statement of independence. Jefferson's Declaration articulated the colonies' grievances and presented a philosophical foundation for self-government. This document would serve not merely as a political proclamation but as a transformative blueprint for national identity.

On July 4, 1776, the Declaration was formally adopted, signaling a revolutionary break from Britain. The first recorded Fourth of July celebration occurred in 1777. In Philadelphia, cannons were fired, ships were decked with flags, fireworks illuminated the night, and public readings of the Declaration were held. In Bristol, Rhode Island, citizens fired thirteen gunshots, once in the morning and again in the evening, honoring the original thirteen states. These early celebrations established practices that persist today: civic gatherings, public readings, and fireworks as symbolic expressions of liberty.

Over the decades, Independence Day became a vehicle for unity and civic identity. During the Revolutionary War, George Washington gave troops double rations of rum and organized artillery salutes, emphasizing celebration even amidst conflict. Massachusetts became the first state to formally acknowledge the day in 1781, and subsequent celebrations spread nationwide. Fireworks became central, with Philadelphia's 1777 rockets and artillery salutes inspiring enduring national tradition.

The official recognition of July 4 evolved over time. After the War of 1812, which reinforced American sovereignty, Independence Day grew in national prominence. In 1870, Congress first declared it a federal holiday, and by 1941 it became a paid federal holiday for

all federal employees. Special anniversaries added layers of meaning: the Bicentennial in 1976 featured parades, re-enactments, fireworks, and Operation Sail in New York Harbor, drawing international attention. Post-war celebrations, especially after World War II and during the Cold War, reinforced themes of unity, resilience, and democratic identity.

In California, July 4 is honored through annual gubernatorial proclamations and legislative resolutions. Governor Gavin Newsom's 2025 proclamation declared July 4 as Independence Day for the state, while the California State Senate passed SR 99, encouraging citizens to celebrate with reflection and gratitude. At the local level, Santa Clara County and the City of Gilroy regulate celebrations with an emphasis on safety. The county prohibits all fireworks in unincorporated areas and enforces strict penalties, while Gilroy permits only "safe and sane" fireworks from July 1 to July 4, with fines escalating for repeated violations. These ordinances balance communal celebration with public safety.

Gilroy's local traditions reflect a community-centered approach. The annual fireworks display at Gilroy High School begins around 9:30 PM and draws families from across the city. Complementing this, Gilroy Gardens hosts a "Red, White & Blue" weekend featuring rides, barbecues, and free admission for veterans, first responders, and military personnel (City of Gilroy). Beginning in the early 1970s, the Poppy Lane neighborhood hosted a children's mini-parade, complete with floats, decorated wagons, and occasionally live animals. Families conclude the day with neighborhood barbecues, reinforcing community cohesion. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Gilroy adapted its celebrations with social distancing measures, maintaining tradition while ensuring safety.

Beyond Gilroy, other areas of Santa Clara County host larger-scale celebrations. Morgan Hill's Freedom Fest, dating to 1896, features a parade, 5K run, car show, and fireworks display. San José's Rose, White & Blue Parade and Festival highlight multicultural performances, food, and vendors along The Alameda near Lincoln High School. These regional events illustrate the diversity of local celebrations, ranging from intimate neighborhood gatherings to large civic parades, reflecting adaptations to community size and resources.

Independence Day has also been a symbol for social and political movements. Marginalized groups have invoked its ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to advocate for civil rights, women's suffrage, labor protections, and immigrant justice. Through these reinterpretations, July 4 functions as both a celebration of history and a living reminder of democratic aspiration.

In conclusion, the Fourth of July is a layered and evolving American ritual. From its first recorded observation in 1777 to the Bicentennial in 1976, post-war commemorations,

and local traditions in Gilroy and Santa Clara County, the holiday reflects both national ideals and local identities. Fireworks, parades, festivals, and neighborhood gatherings collectively embody the spirit of independence, civic responsibility, and communal celebration. July 4 continues to function as a moment of reflection, unity, and patriotic affirmation, a celebration rooted in history but constantly renewed by contemporary civic life.