

## DECEMBER - BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### 1. Hans Christian Andersen

Hans Christian Anderson (1805-1875) was a Danish author and poet. He wrote numerous poems, plays, stories, and travel essays. He is best known for writing over 150 fairy tales. These were published in many collections during his lifetime, and most are still in print today. His very first book of fairy tales, *Fairy Tales, Told for Children*, was published on December 1, 1835. His writings use irony and humor to teach moral lessons. His memorable characters were inspired by the primitive folk tales he heard as a child. Not all of his fairy tales end happily, but they capture the authenticity and sincerity of a man who could truly see life through the eyes of a child. Some of his better-known titles include The Princess and the Pea, Thumbelina, The Little Mermaid, and The Ugly Duckling. These and many other favorites are still widely read and enjoyed today.

### 2. National Cookie Day

December 4th is National Cookie Day. The English word “cookie” comes from the Dutch word “koekje,” which means “little cake.” To test oven temperatures and prevent the waste of an entire cake mix, Dutch bakers used to place small amounts of batter in the oven. These “little cakes” were found to be quite tasty. Soon, in addition to the full-size cakes, bakers started intentionally making the miniature cakes, and the cookie was born.

### 3. Hand Washing Awareness Week

Hand Washing Awareness Week is observed during the first week of December. Its primary purpose is to bring attention to the health and safety benefits of good hand hygiene. Washing hands properly cleanses them of pathogens (bacteria and viruses) and chemicals that can cause disease or personal harm and greatly aids in reducing the spread of infectious diseases. According to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there is a large body of well-documented research supporting the claim that the most important measure for preventing the spread of pathogens is effective hand washing.

### 4. International Volunteer Day

International Volunteer Day takes place on December 6th. Each year the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program highlights this observance and supports government efforts to develop volunteer organizations at the local, state, national, and international levels. Over the years, there have been rallies, parades, community volunteering projects, environmental awareness endeavors, free medical care, and other advocacy campaigns conducted in honor of International Volunteer Day. The idea is to encourage individuals and groups to give something of themselves for the benefit of others.

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### 5. National Cocoa Day

This is primarily a fun celebration of the hot cocoa beverage and the pleasant things associated with it. The observance recognizes many other uses of cocoa, as well, however. National Cocoa Day is celebrated on December 13th each year and is referred to as a “National” holiday, even though there are no Congressional records or Presidential proclamations for it. So, the holiday’s origin is uncertain. It is believed that the Mayan peoples were the first to have a chocolate beverage over 2000 years ago. A cocoa drink was also part of the Aztec culture by 1400 A.D. Hot cocoa became popular in Europe after it was introduced to the New World from Mexico. It is now enjoyed in many variations around the globe. Cocoa contains antioxidants and can provide some health benefits if prepared with moderate amounts of fats and sugars.

### 6. Hanukkah

Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish holiday that starts on the 25th day of the month of Kislev on the Jewish lunar calendar. This usually falls sometime between late November and late December on the secular calendar. In Hebrew, the word “hanukkah” means “dedication.” Historical background for Hanukkah’s origins can be found in the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, which are not part of the Jewish canon of the Hebrew Bible. The Maccabees were a small band of Jewish fighters who sought to free the Land of Israel from the Syrian-Greek occupation in the mid-160s B.C. The Syrian-Greeks had defiled the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and banned their religious practices. The Maccabees waged war against the Syrian-Greeks, and after a three-year battle, the Jewish Temple was reclaimed, cleaned, and rededicated. Hanukkah has become a celebration of this victory. About 250 years after these events took place, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote his account of the holiday’s origins. He called it the “Festival of Lights,” and that description is still often used today.

### 7. Winter Solstice

Winter solstice is an astronomical event that occurs around December 21 each year. Solstices happen two times annually – December 21 (winter solstice) and June 21 (summer solstice). They are the result of the Earth being tilted by an average of 23.5 degrees as it orbits the sun. The winter solstice is marked by the point where the Earth tilts its furthest distance away from the sun. At this time, the sun hugs closer to the horizon than at any other time, yielding the least amount of daylight and the shortest day of the year. After months of growing shorter and lower since the summer solstice, the sun’s arc through the sky appears to stabilize, with the sun seeming to rise and set in the same two places for several days. This could explain how the term “solstice” came to be used. It is derived from the Latin phrase for “sun stands still.” Immediately following the winter solstice, the sun’s daily arc begins growing longer and higher in the sky, reaching its peak at the summer solstice. Then the whole thing starts over again.

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### 8. Christmas Day

Christmas is an annual Christian holiday observed on December 25th. It celebrates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and marks the start of the larger season known as Christmastide, which lasts twelve days. Jesus's nativity is the basis for the anno Domini (A.D.) system of dating. It isn't known for certain if December 25th is the actual date of Jesus's birth, but it may have been selected to correspond with a Roman festival or the winter solstice. Regardless, it is a holiday that has been celebrated worldwide for centuries, and numerous traditions have been developed in its honor.

### 9. Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa is a week-long holiday that is observed from December 26th to January 1st each year. It is celebrated primarily by African-Americans in the United States and by people of African descent throughout the world. The name Kwanzaa comes from the Swahili phrase “matunda ya kwanza,” which means “first fruits.” The Kwanzaa celebration has seven days of activities, including candle lighting ceremonies, gift giving, and feasting. Homes are decorated with colorful African art and cloth and fresh fruits. There is music and storytelling that reflect African history and respect for ancestors. Libations are shared by all participants, including children, and passed around in a common chalice known as the “Kikombe cha Umoja.” The daily greeting for the Kwanzaa holiday is “Habari Gani,” which means “What’s the news?” in Swahili.

### 10. National Candy Cane Day

National Candy Cane Day is December 26th each year. This is another “National” holiday for which there is no Congressional record or Presidential proclamation. It is just widely accepted as a fun day to enjoy learning about and eating candy canes. The candy cane is traditionally white with red stripes and flavored with peppermint, but it can be found in a variety of other colors and flavors, as well. The candy cane started as a straight, hard, all-white stick invented by French priests in the early 1400s. Legend has it that in 1670, a choirmaster at Cologne Cathedral in Germany curved the peppermint sugar sticks into cane shapes to represent the shepherd staff of Jesus and gave them to children at church services. Candy canes are a tradition that can be found in greatest abundance during the Christmas holidays in North America, but limited quantities are also available for the rest of the year.