



From *The History of Christmas*  
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## The Twelve Days of Christmas

At one time, Christmas was not celebrated as a single day. In fact, it was a celebration lasting twelve days. Why were there once twelve days of Christmas? Where did this tradition go?

In more modern times, December 25<sup>th</sup> is Christmas Day and is commonly thought of as the end of the Christmas season. However, there was a time when Christmas Day marked the beginning of the Christmas season. The day was known as Christmastide, marking the start of the Twelve Days of Christmas. December 26<sup>th</sup>, known as Boxing Day or St. Stephens Day, was the official first day of the twelve.



The Twelve Days of Christmas were celebrated in various ways. In some regions, it was traditional to only give presents on Christmas night. Others exchanged gifts on the final night of the twelve. A few even held gift exchanges on every night of all twelve days!

There were other traditions associated with the Twelve Days of Christmas. In the Middle Ages, it was a time of yearly feasts and merrymaking. The feasts would become more elaborate each night before peaking on the final night. In some places it was traditional to make a Christmas wreath which was hung on the door throughout the twelve days.

The final day of the Christmas season, or Twelfth Night, was January 6<sup>th</sup> (or in some places, January 5<sup>th</sup>). This day was known as Epiphany or Three Kings Day, in honor of the Wise Men or Magi. It became a tradition in some cultures that all decorations should be removed by this day and all Christmas edibles eaten.

Many of these traditions have been lost, but some remain. Many European nations still recognize the holidays of Boxing Day and Epiphany. Also, the term "Christmastide" still lingers with us in the term "Yuletide" (as in "Yuletide Greetings").

By far, the most recognizable remnant of the Twelve Days of Christmas is the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas". The song describes an elaborate set of gifts given to the singer by their "true love" on each of the twelve days. The gifts include: 12 drummers drumming, 11 pipers piping, 10 lords a-leaping, 9 ladies dancing, 8 maids a-milking, 7 swans a-swimming, 6 geese a-laying, 5 golden rings, 4 colly birds, 3 French hens, 2 turtledoves, and a partridge in a pear tree. (A colly bird is an old term referring to a black bird, but the line is often mistaken for "calling birds").

**Words to watch for:**  
*peaking edibles  
lingers remnant*

Many suggestions have been made as to a hidden meaning in the lyrics. Sadly, if there was a deeper meaning, it has been lost over time, just as most of the traditions associated with the Twelve Days of Christmas have been.

**Multiple Choice:** Select the choice that completes the statement or answers the question.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following statements is true?
- At one point in time, Christmas Day was the beginning of the Christmas season.
  - It was once required that gifts be given for all Twelve Days of Christmas.
  - Christmas Day was once known as Twelfth Day, the last day of the Christmas season.
  - The Twelve Days of Christmas were in honor of each of the twelve Wise Men.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following was traditional in some cultures?
- Christmas stockings were hung outside to see if the wind would blow favorably in the coming year.
  - Christmas wreaths were made and hung on the door throughout the Christmas season.
  - Christmas cookies were made and eaten each of the Twelve Days of Christmas.
  - Gifts were exchanged with blindfolds on so that the gift-giver remained unknown.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Twelfth Night, the final day of the Christmas season, is celebrated on what night in most cultures?
- December 6th
  - December 25th
  - January 1<sup>st</sup>
  - January 6<sup>th</sup>
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of these is not a holiday associated with the Twelve Days of Christmas?
- Boxing Day
  - St. Stephen's Day
  - St. Nicholas Day
  - Epiphany
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The most recognizable remnant of the Twelve Days of Christmas in the modern Christmas tradition is what?
- the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas".
  - the tradition of giving each person twelve gifts.
  - gifts must still be exchanged each of the twelve days.
  - Boxing Day is a major holiday all over the world.

**Vocabulary:** Match each word with its correct definition. Consider how the word is used in the lesson. This might help you define each term. Use a dictionary to help if necessary.

- |            |            |
|------------|------------|
| a. peaking | d. remnant |
| b. edible  | e. lyrics  |
| c. linger  |            |
6. \_\_\_\_\_ the highest or most important point
7. \_\_\_\_\_ the words of a song or poem
8. \_\_\_\_\_ to stay in place longer than expected
9. \_\_\_\_\_ something fit to eat; food
10. \_\_\_\_\_ a small remaining part



**Guided Reading:** Fill in the blanks below to create complete sentences.

1. December 25<sup>th</sup> is commonly thought of as the end of the \_\_\_\_\_ season.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ is known as Boxing Day or St. Stephens Day in many parts of the world.
3. The Twelve Days of Christmas were celebrated in \_\_\_\_\_ ways.
4. In the \_\_\_\_\_, the Twelve Days of Christmas was a time of yearly feasts and merrymaking.
5. In some places it was traditional to make and hang a \_\_\_\_\_ on the door throughout the twelve days.
6. The final day of the Christmas season, or Twelfth Night, was celebrated on \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Many European nations still recognize the holidays of \_\_\_\_\_ and Epiphany.
8. The most recognizable remnant of the lengthy Christmas celebration is the song "\_\_\_\_\_".
9. The song describes an elaborate set of \_\_\_\_\_ given to the singer.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ is an old term referring to a black bird.



**Reading Comprehension & More:** Select the choice which answers each question.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following best describes the main idea of this lesson?
- a. Christmas was once a twelve day long holiday with many traditions and customs associated with it.
  - b. "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is one of the most popular Christmas songs of all time.
  - c. Epiphany is a long-forgotten tradition that was once associated with Christmas.
  - d. There are many hidden meanings in the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas."
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following sentences best supports the main idea of this lesson?
- a. In modern times, December 25th is Christmas Day and is commonly thought of as the end of the Christmas season.
  - b. December 26th, known as Boxing Day or St. Stephens Day, was the official first day of the twelve.
  - c. This day was known as Epiphany, or Three Kings Day, in honor of the Wise Men or the Magi.
  - d. Many suggestions have been made as to a hidden meaning of the lyrics.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of these statements is most accurate?
- a. The Twelve Days of Christmas have always been celebrated the same way.
  - b. More of an importance is placed on the Twelve Days of Christmas today than in the Middle Ages.
  - c. Boxing Day is the most important day of the Twelve Days of Christmas.
  - d. Christmas Day was once the beginning of the Christmas season, not the end.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following statements is an opinion?
- a. The most recognizable remnant of the Twelve Days of Christmas is the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas."
  - b. "The Twelve Days of Christmas" describes an elaborate set of gifts given to the singer by their "true love".
  - c. Many suggestions have been made as to a hidden meaning in the lyrics of "The Twelve Days of Christmas."
  - d. If there was a deeper meaning to the lyrics of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" it has been lost over time.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following statements is true?
- a. St. Stephens Day is on December 26th.
  - b. Boxing Day is the final day of the Twelve Days of Christmas.
  - c. In the Middle Ages, the Twelve Days of Christmas was a time of fear and mourning.
  - d. Epiphany is the first night of the Christmas season.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Which of the following statements is false?
- a. Boxing Day and St. Stephens Day are the same day.
  - b. Christmastide and Christmas Day are the same day.
  - c. Epiphany and Three Kings Day are the same day.
  - d. Christmas Day and Three Kings Day are the same day.



**Summarize:** Answer the following questions in the space provided.  
Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question.  
Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!



1. Who is giving the singer the gifts in the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas"?
2. In the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" what are the nine ladies doing?
3. When was the first day of the Twelve Days of Christmas?
4. Where is the partridge in the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas"?
5. Why is Epiphany also known as Three Kings Day?
6. How has the term "Christmastide" lingered with us?



**Student Response:** Write a paragraph addressing the questions raised below. A thorough response should consist of at least five complete sentences.

7. In The Twelve Days of Christmas you learned that the Christmas holiday used to span a much longer period of time and stretch into the New Year. For what reason(s) do you imagine this custom died out or never took hold in the United States?

1. Use the information in "The Twelve Days of Christmas" to correctly match up the number and the gift which corresponds to it:

Ladies dancing	1
Turtle-doves	7
Partridge in a pear tree	2
French hens	9
Maids a-milking	3
Colly birds	4
Golden rings	11
Pipers piping	8
Swans a-swimming	6
Lords a-leaping	12
Drummers drumming	10
Geese a-laying	5

**Answer Key:**

**The Twelve Days of Christmas:**

**Multiple Choice:**

- 1) A
- 2) B
- 3) D
- 4) C
- 5) A

**Vocabulary:**

- 6) A
- 7) E
- 8) C
- 9) B
- 10) D

**Guided Reading:**

- 1) Christmas
- 2) December 26<sup>th</sup>
- 3) Various
- 4) Middle Ages
- 5) Wreath (or evergreen wreath)
- 6) January 6<sup>th</sup>
- 7) Boxing Day
- 8) The Twelve Days of Christmas
- 9) Gifts
- 10) Colly birds

**Reading Comprehension & More:**

- 1) A
- 2) B
- 3) D
- 4) A
- 5) A
- 6) D

**Summarize:**

1. The gifts are being given by the singers “true love”.
2. The nine ladies are dancing.
3. The first day of the Twelve Days of Christmas was December 26th (Boxing Day or St. Stephens Day).
4. The partridge is in a pear tree.
5. It is known as Three Kings Day because the day is in honor of the three Wise Men (or Magi).
6. The term Christmastide has lingered in the form of the word Yuletide.

**Student Response:**

- 7) Student answers will vary

**Song match-up:**

- 1 – Partridge in a pear tree
- 2 – Turtle doves
- 3 – French hens
- 4 – Colly birds
- 5 – Golden rings
- 6 – Geese a-laying
- 7 – Swans a-swimming
- 8 – Maids a-milking
- 9 – Ladies dancing
- 10 – Lords a-leaping
- 11 - Pipers piping
- 12 – Drummers drumming