

The Dating of Documents

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IN THE arrangement and description of archives one of the most important items of description of a document is its date. In working with records the modern archivist often comes upon documents that have no date or are incompletely or erroneously dated. For example, memoranda and informal minutes of meetings all too often are dated with the day of the week and the month but not the year; and some documents dated early in a new year carry over the date of the previous year—slaves of habit that we are! Because it is important for the archivist to know the date of a document, even if it is only approximate, any timesaving device for aiding him in this research should be a welcome addition to his working tools. To this end the following information about the calendar and the dating of documents has been brought together from various sources.

In most of the civilized world today time is reckoned by the Gregorian Calendar. Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, finding that the prevailing Julian Calendar was getting farther and farther behind the solar year, corrected it by dropping out ten days and providing that the centesimal years should be leap years only when divisible by 400. He also changed the date of the beginning of the year from March 25, which had been in effect for over a thousand years, to January 1. This change was initiated in 1582 on October 5 of the Julian Calendar by designating that day October 15 of the Gregorian Calendar.¹

England and the English colonies in America continued to use the Julian Calendar until 1752, when they adopted the Gregorian Calendar by designating September 3 of the Julian Calendar as September 14 of the new calendar. At the same time, January 1 was made the beginning of the year. In dating the documents of

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¹ An interesting story about the evolution of the calendar is given in Harrison J. Cowan, *Time and Its Measurement From the Stone Age to the Nuclear Age*, chapter 3 (Cleveland, 1958).

the period, the difference in the calendars was indicated by adding "O.S." (Old Style) to Julian Calendar dates and "N.S." (New Style) to Gregorian Calendar dates. When a date was given in both calendars, it was usually written in the style "September 3/14, 1752." The change in the date of the new year added a complication to dates between January 1 and March 24, as these dates in the Julian Calendar belonged to the old year. About 1670, such dates began to be written in the style "February 24, 1732/33," or "13 January, 1786-87," and toward the close of the seventeenth century it became customary to consider January 1 as the beginning of the year. For example, George Washington's birthday is recorded in the Washington family Bible² in the style "Feb. 11, 1731/32" and is referred to in the article on George Washington in the 1946 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in the style "Feb. 22 (old style Feb. 11), 1732."³

Based on the Gregorian Calendar, the following formula has been devised for finding the day of the week for any given date from 1753 to 2299:⁴

(1) Take the last two figures for the year date and add one quarter of the number formed by them, ignoring the remainder.

(2) If the first two figures of the year date are 17, add 4; 18, add 2; 19, add 0; 20, add 6; 21, add 4; 22, add 2.

(3) If the month is April or July, add 0; January or October, add 1, or in leap year for January, add 0; May, add 2; August, add 3; February, March, or November, add 4, or in leap year, for February, add 3; June, add 5; September or December, add 6.

(4) Add the day of the month.

(5) Divide the sum of (1) to (4) by 7, and the remainder will indicate the day of the week, Sunday being the first day. If there is no remainder, the day is Saturday.

A more useful timesaving device for answering many questions concerning dates is the accompanying perpetual calendar based on the Gregorian Calendar for the years 1753 to 2000. In this calendar, leap years are italicized, and the months of January and February each appear at the head of two columns, the ones to be used for leap years being italicized. To illustrate the use of this calendar:

² Reproduced as the frontispiece in Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington, a Biography*, vol. 1 (New York, 1948).

³ More detailed information about the dating of early documents and more recent international documents may be found in the *Harvard Guide to American History*, sec. 30, p. 91-95 (Cambridge, 1954).

⁴ By permission of the publishers, this information is taken from *Webster's New International Dictionary*, second edition, copyright 1959 by G. and C. Merriam Co., Publishers of the Merriam-Webster Dictionaries.

Days of the month	Jan. Oct.	Jan. April July	Sept. Dec.	June	Feb. March Nov.	Feb. Aug.	May	Days of the week
1 8 15 22 29	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	Monday
2 9 16 23 30	g	a	b	c	d	e	f	Tuesday
3 10 17 24 31	f	g	a	b	c	d	e	Wednesday
4 11 18 25	e	f	g	a	b	c	d	Thursday
5 12 19 26	d	e	f	g	a	b	c	Friday
6 13 20 27	c	d	e	f	g	a	b	Saturday
7 14 21 28	b	c	d	e	f	g	a	Sunday
18th Century from 1753	1753 1759 1764 1770	1754 1765 1771 1776	1755 1760 1766 1772	1761 1767 1773	1756 1762 1768 1774	1757 1763 1769 1775	1758 1764 1770 1776	
	1781 1787 1792 1798	1782 1788 1793 1799	1783 1788 1794 1800	1789 1795	1784 1790 1796	1785 1791 1797	1786 1792 1798	
19th Century	1804 1810 1821 1827 1832 1838	1805 1811 1816 1822 1833 1839	1806 1812 1817 1823 1834 1840	1801 1807 1813 1818 1824 1830	1802 1808 1814 1819 1825 1831	1803 1809 1815 1820 1826 1832	1804 1810 1816 1822 1828 1834	
	1849 1855 1860 1866	1850 1856 1861 1867	1851 1857 1862 1868	1846 1852 1858 1864	1847 1853 1859 1865	1848 1854 1860 1866	1849 1855 1861 1867	
	1877 1883 1888 1894 1900	1878 1884 1889 1895	1879 1885 1890	1874 1880 1886 1891 1897	1875 1881 1887 1892 1898	1876 1882 1888 1893 1899	1877 1883 1889 1894 1900	
20th Century	1906 1917 1923 1928 1934	1901 1907 1912 1918 1923	1902 1913 1919 1924 1930	1903 1908 1914 1925 1931	1904 1909 1915 1920 1926	1905 1911 1916 1922 1927	1906 1912 1917 1923 1928	
	1934 1945 1951 1956 1962	1935 1946 1952 1957 1963	1941 1947 1953 1958 1964	1942 1948 1954 1959 1965	1943 1949 1955 1960 1966	1944 1950 1956 1961 1967	1945 1951 1956 1962 1968	
	1973 1979 1984 1990	1974 1985 1991 1996	1975 1986 1992 1997	1976 1981 1987 1993 1998	1977 1982 1988 1994 1999	1978 1983 1989 1995 2000	1979 1984 1990 1996 2001	

PERPETUAL CALENDAR

(1) *To find the year when the day of the month and the week is given, say Friday, April 16:* In the small-letter table at the top of the calendar, find the letter that lies at the conjunction of the column under "April" and the line running horizontally to the right from "16" in the day-of-the-month table at the left. That letter is "a." Then in the line running horizontally to the left of "Friday" in the day-of-the-week table at the right, locate the column in which "a" appears. In this column will be found the appropriate year date.

(2) *To find the day of the week for any given date, say March 12, 1917:* Proceed as above to locate the small letter representing March 12. It is "a" in the fifth small-letter column from the left. Then locate the column in which "1917" is listed. It is the first column from the left. At the top of this column find the letter "a." Follow the "a" horizontally to the right and you will come to "Monday" in the day-of-the-week table. March 12, 1917, fell on a Monday.

Someone Pinched It

. . . The original [surrender document signed by the Germans on May 4, 1945] is typed on an ordinary sheet of army foolscap. I was asked to forward it to Supreme Headquarters. Instead I sent photostatic copies. The original is in my possession and I will never part with it; it is a historic document. I do not know what happened to the pen we all used; I suppose someone pinched it.

— *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K. G.*, p. 303 (World Publishing Co., Cleveland, Ohio). Quoted by permission of the publisher.

This Great and Complex Government

Now, what I do believe is this: there have been often in this great and complex Government studies made one place, buried in the shelves, go into the dusty archives, and no one ever hears about them; and then someone gets an idea—say I get an idea and I want a study, and so I start a completely new one.

— Dwight D. Eisenhower, News Conference of October 21, 1953, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States; Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953*, p. 702 (Washington, 1960).

Abstrusity

Diary kept since January 1, 1898. Is this a record?

— Personal column of the *Times* (London), June 16, 1960, as reported by UPI.