

# The Julian Calendar/The Gregorian Calendar

## *Old Style/New Style*

What do these two calendars mean for understanding historic dates?

The Julian calendar is the name given to the revised Roman calendar that was introduced by Julius Caesar (with the advice of an astronomer) in 46 BCE and took effect in 45 BCE. The calendar fixed the length of a year at 365 days, divided into twelve months, with a leap day added to February every fourth year. On average, a Julian year is 365.25 days long. The calendar, and the month of July, were both named after Julius Caesar, who governed the Roman republic from 49 to 44 BCE. The Emperor Augustus (27 BCE to 14 CE), who named the month of August after himself, took one day from February in both ordinary and leap years to make it equal in length with July.

Although the Julian calendar year overstates the length of a year by a slight error of eleven minutes and fourteen seconds, by the sixteenth century, the accumulated error amount to about ten days. To correct the error, a new calendar went into effect through a papal bull issued by Pope Gregory XIII and dated 24 February 1582. Thursday, 4 October 1582, would be followed by Friday, 15 October 1582. The adjusted calendar was intended to bring the date for celebrating Easter (an astronomical calculation) back to the relationship with the vernal equinox that existed in the early Christian church. To prevent any future accumulated error, leap year would not be celebrated in centurial years (1600, 1700, etc.) unless they were divisible by 400. And February would revert to its original 28 days, with an additional day only in a recognized leap year.

Because this calendar revision was issued under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church, many Protestant countries initially objected to adopting the new calendar, fearing it was part of a plot to return their national churches back under the umbrella of the papacy. Britain and its empire did not adopt

the Gregorian calendar until 1752. A second idiosyncrasy of the Julian calendar had been that not every country using it started its new year on January 1<sup>st</sup>. For Maryland, as an English colony, a new year started on March 25<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Assumption. Events from January 1<sup>st</sup> to March 24<sup>th</sup> occurred in one year; events from March 25<sup>th</sup> to March 24<sup>th</sup> occurred in the following year. The Ark and the Dove left England in 1633, arriving in Maryland in March 1633, and celebrated the Mass of Thanksgiving on 25 March 25.

Dates for events occurring between January 1<sup>st</sup> and March 24<sup>th</sup> would be written, for example, as 2 February 1733/34 or 2 February 1733 OS (old style). Events occurring between March 25<sup>th</sup> and December 31<sup>st</sup> would be written, for example, as 25 March 1734, and could be designated as NS (new style).

It should be obvious, for any date in seventeenth and much of eighteenth century, whether it be political, civic, or personal, that it is critical to be aware of the dating convention in use at the time in order to calculate correctly the passage of time from one event to another (birth to death, adoption of a law to an event affected by it, a term of service, etc.).

England did not accept the Gregorian calendar until late in 1752, by which time the discrepancy between the two calendars (Julian and Gregorian) was eleven days. A 1750 Act of Parliament designated the day after Wednesday, 2 September 1752, as Thursday, 14 September 1752, and moved the first day of the year to 1 January, thus bringing England into alignment with the rest of Europe.

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