

A Short History of Thanksgiving

The Thanksgiving holiday's history in North America is rooted in English traditions dating from the Reformation. Days of thanksgiving and special thanksgiving religious services became important during the English Reformation in the reign of Henry VIII. Though the 1536 reforms in the Church of England reduced the number of holidays in the liturgical calendar to 27, the Puritans wished to eliminate all Church holidays apart from the weekly observance. The holidays were to be replaced by specially called Days of Thanksgiving for acts of special providence. Unexpected disasters or threats of judgement from on high called for Days of Fasting.

The first Thanksgiving service known to be held by Europeans in North America occurred on May 27, 1578, in Newfoundland. For British New England, the Popham Colony in Maine conducted a Thanksgiving service in 1607. In the same year, Jamestown colonists gave thanks for their safe arrival and again held a thanksgiving in 1610 when a supply ship arrived after a harsh winter. Also in Virginia, the Berkeley Hundred colony held a service on December 4, 1619, to celebrate "the day of our ship's arrival" and proclaimed the date would be "yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to the Almighty God," but within a few years an Indian uprising ended further services.

Several celebrations were held in early New England history that have been identified as the "First Thanksgiving", including celebrations in Plymouth in 1621 and 1623. In November 1621, after the Pilgrims' first corn harvest proved successful, Governor William Bradford organized a celebratory feast and invited a group of the fledgling colony's Native American allies, including the Wampanoag chief Massasoit. Additionally, a few colonists went out "fowling," and they "in one day killed as much as...served the company almost a week."

Two colonists gave personal accounts of the 1621 feast in Plymouth:

William Bradford, in *Of Plymouth Plantation* wrote:

"They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they can be used (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl, there was a great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck a meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to the proportion. Which made many afterward write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports."

Edward Winslow, in *Mourt's Relation* wrote:

"Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruits of our labor. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company

almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which we brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you, partakers of our plenty."

Plymouth Pilgrims held their second Thanksgiving celebration in 1623 to mark the end of a long drought that had threatened the year's harvest and prompted Governor Bradford to call for a religious fast. Colonists prayed and fasted for relief; the rains came a few days later. Next, Captain Miles Standish arrived with staples and news that a Dutch supply ship was on its way. Because of all this good fortune, colonists held a second day of Thanksgiving and prayer on June 30, 1623. Days of fasting and thanksgiving on an annual or occasional basis became common practice in other New England settlements as well. By the late 1660s, the practice of holding an annual day had become a regular affair in New England.

Thanksgiving proclamations were made mostly by church leaders in New England up until 1682, and then by both state and church leaders until after the American Revolution. In 1723, British Massachusetts Bay Governor William Dummer proclaimed a day of thanksgiving on November 6. The First National Proclamation of Thanksgiving was given by the Continental Congress in 1777 from its temporary location in York, Pennsylvania, while the British occupied the national capital at Philadelphia. Delegate Samuel Adams created the first draft. Congress then adopted the final version:

"For as much as it is the indispensable Duty of all Men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with Gratitude their Obligation to him for Benefits received, and to implore such farther Blessings as they stand in Need of: And it had pleased him in his abundant Mercy, not only to continue to us the innumerable Bounties of his common Providence; but also to smile upon us in the Prosecution of a just and necessary war, for the Defense and Establishment of our unalienable Rights and Liberties; particularly in that he hath been pleased, in so great a Measure, to prosper the Means used for the Support of our Troops, and to crown our Arms with most signal success:

It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive Powers of these United States to set apart Thursday, the eighteenth Day of December next, for Solemn Thanksgiving and Praise: That at one Time and with one Voice, the good People may express the grateful Feelings of their Hearts, and consecrate themselves to the Service of their Divine Benefactor; and that, together with their sincere Acknowledgments and Offerings, they may join the penitent Confession of their manifold Sins, whereby they had forfeited every Favor; and their humble and earnest Supplication that it may please God through the Merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of Remembrance; That it may please him graciously to afford his Blessing on the Governments of these States respectively, and prosper the public Council of the whole: To inspire our Commanders, both by Land and Sea, and all under them, with that Wisdom and Fortitude which may render them fit Instruments, under the Providence of Almighty God, to secure for these United States, the greatest of all human Blessings, Independence and Peace: That it may please him, to prosper the Trade and Manufactures of the People, and the Labor of the Husbandman, that our Land may yield its Increase:

To take Schools and Seminaries of Education, so necessary for cultivating the Principles of true Liberty, Virtue and Piety, under his nurturing Hand; and to prosper the Means of Religion, for the promotion and enlargement of that Kingdom, which consisteth "in Righteousness, Peace and Joy in the Holy Ghost."

A little later, the following proclamation was published by the Continental Congress on November 5, 1782 for the observation of November 28, 1782:

"By the United States in Congress assembled, PROCLAMATION.

It being the indispensable duty of all nations, not only to offer up their supplications to Almighty God, the giver of all good, for His gracious assistance in a time of distress, but also in a solemn and public manner, to give Him praise for His goodness in general, and especially for great and signal interpositions of His Providence in their behalf; therefore, the United States in Congress assembled, taking into their consideration the many instances of Divine goodness to these States in the course of the important conflict, in which they have been so long engaged; the present happy and promising state of public affairs, and the events of the war in the course of the year now drawing to a close; particularly the harmony of the public Councils which is so necessary to the success of the public cause; the perfect union and good understanding which has hitherto subsisted between them and their allies, notwithstanding the artful and unwearied attempts of the common enemy to divide them; the success of the arms of the United States and those of their allies; and the acknowledgment of their Independence by another European power, whose friendship and commerce must be of great and lasting advantage to these States; Do hereby recommend it to the inhabitants of these States in general, to observe and request the several states to interpose their authority, in appointing and commanding the observation of THURSDAY the TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY OF NOVEMBER next as a day of SOLEMN THANKSGIVING to GOD for all His mercies; and they do further recommend to all ranks to testify their gratitude to God for His goodness by a cheerful obedience to His laws and by promoting, each in his station, and by his influence, the practice of true and undefiled religion, which is the great foundation of public prosperity and national happiness.

Done in Congress at Philadelphia, the eleventh day of October, in the year of our LORD, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-two, and of our Sovereignty and Independence, the seventh.

JOHN HANSON, President. CHARLES THOMSON, Secretary."

The National Thanksgiving Proclamation was the first presidential proclamation of Thanksgiving in the United States. At the request of Congress, President George Washington declared Thursday, November 26, 1789, "as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favours of Almighty God", calling on Americans to "unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions, " and to "be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be." President George Washington made this proclamation on October 3, 1789 in New York City. On the day of thanksgiving, Washington attended services at St. Paul's Chapel in New York City, and donated beer and food to imprisoned debtors in the city.

“Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor, and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me "to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness. Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks, for His kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation, for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of His providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war, for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed, for the peaceable and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted, for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and in general for all the great and various favors which He hath been pleased to confer upon us. And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually, to render our national government a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed, to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord. To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and Us, and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best. Given under my hand at the City of New York the third day of October in the year of our Lord 1789.

—George Washington”

He proclaimed a second day of Thanksgiving in 1795, and his successors John Adams and James Madison also designated national days of thanksgiving during their presidencies. Notably, Thomas Jefferson, a deist, did not.

After this period, Thanksgiving was celebrated at the local, regional level. Sarah Hale, a native of New Hampshire was the longtime editor of Godey's Ladies Book, the most widely circulated periodical in the antebellum U.S. Hale was the chief promoter of the holiday in the 19th century. Every November, Hale would focus her monthly magazine column on Thanksgiving, positioning the celebration as a pious, patriotic holiday that lived on in the memory as a check against temptation, or as a comfort in times of trial. Her efforts sought to expand the holiday from a regional celebration to a national one not only through advocacy in her magazine but also in direct appeals to several U.S. presidents, including Abraham Lincoln.

In the midst of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln began the regular practice of proclaiming a national Thanksgiving. His first proclamation, in April 1862 after the Union victories at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, the fall of Nashville, and another victory at Shiloh, recommended that Americans give thanks for these victories "at their next weekly assemblages." It was the first federal Thanksgiving declaration since John Madison's in 1815. The next year, after victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Lincoln proclaimed a national Thanksgiving Day, to be celebrated on the 26th, the final Thursday of November 1863. The document, written by Secretary of State William H. Seward, reads as follows:

"The year that is drawing towards its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, the order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax had enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. The population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years, with large increase of freedom.

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Highest God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

Proclamation of President Abraham Lincoln, October 3, 1863"

Lincoln issued another proclamation of thanksgiving in October 1864, again for the last Thursday in November, after Union victories that included the fall of Atlanta and the capture of Mobile Bay.

The holiday was annually proclaimed by every president thereafter, and the date chosen, with few exceptions, was the last Thursday in November. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, however, attempted to extend the Christmas shopping season, which generally begins with the Thanksgiving holiday, and to boost the economy by moving the date back a week, to the third week in November. But not all states complied, and, after a joint resolution of Congress in 1941, Roosevelt issued a proclamation in 1942 designating the fourth Thursday in November (which is not always the last Thursday) as Thanksgiving Day.

In the early part of the 20th century, the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism (4A) opposed the celebration of Thanksgiving Day, offering an alternative observance called Blamegiving Day, which was in their eyes, "a protest against Divine negligence, to be observed each year on Thanksgiving Day, on the assumption, for the day only, that God exists". Citing their view of the separation of church and state, some atheists in recent times have particularly criticized the annual recitation of Thanksgiving proclamations by the President of the United States, because these proclamations often revolve around the theme of giving thanks to God.

Sources:

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