

A History of the Thanksgiving Holiday

by Catherine Clinton

Cover of *Puck*, November 25, 1903. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Thanksgiving stands as one of the most American of holidays, an autumnal ritual fixed in the imagination as honoring the piety and perseverance of the nation’s earliest arrivals during colonial days. But what were the origins of this quintessentially American tradition? And how and when did the observance become an official part of our national identity and holiday calendar?



Harvest festivals have been recorded from ancient to modern times, from the Greeks honoring the goddess Demeter with a nine-day festival to the Jewish celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacles. And from ancient to modern times days of thanksgiving have followed a military triumph. But Thanksgiving celebrations on the North American continent may be more directly traced to European refugees offering prayers for survival, such as the minister who gave “God thanks for our happy metinge & safe aryval into the country,” when two ships with British colonists reached Georges Island off the Maine coast in 1607.

Perhaps the idea of an annual event to honor survival in the New World originated in Virginia, along the James River, where the Berkley Hundred colony held a religious service on December 4, 1619, to commemorate “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.” Maybe Americans would associate the first Thanksgiving with Virginia if this settlement had not been wiped out by Indian massacre. As a result of that massacre, these first practitioners of the custom literally died out before the Pilgrims landed far to the north of them near Plymouth Rock—and it was the Pilgrims who became known as the originators of Thanksgiving.

The *History of Plimoth Plantation* (which appeared in 1856) includes a colorful account of the meal shared by Pilgrims and Indians in 1621. It was described as a three-day feast of lobsters, clams, bass, corn, green vegetables, and dried fruits, as well as a “great store of Wild turkies.” Many of the New England colonists began to commemorate both their

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survival and their harvest by a religious ceremony. The Reverend John Cotton commented, “We sometimes upon extraordinary occasions . . . do set apart a day of humiliation or upon special mercies we set apart a day of Thanksgiving.”[1] For the next one hundred fifty years, Thanksgiving was celebrated in northern colonies as part of religious observance. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut all had laws against “Game, Sport, Play or Recreation . . . on pain that every Person so Offending shall for every offence Forfeit the Sum of Ten Shillings.”[2]

Certainly days of thanksgiving were also associated with military victories, and Americans along the eastern seaboard joyfully came together on December 18, 1777, for a day of “Thanksgiving and Praise” in the wake of the Continental Army’s victory over the British in October of that year. This was the first holiday officially celebrated in all thirteen states—and such a celebration would not happen again until Congress declared November 28, 1782, a day of national thanksgiving.

In 1789 Congress debated whether the federal government should establish a uniform day of thanksgiving or leave the decision up to individual states—as had been done for over a century. On October 3, 1789, President George Washington issued his own proclamation, directing Americans to celebrate and give thanks on Thursday, November 26. As a symbolic gesture, the new president sent money to supply debtors in the New York City jail with provisions, while he attended church services, thus beginning the American custom of local charity associated with Thanksgiving.

Washington’s proclamation did not transform this tradition into any official national holiday, although New England states especially maintained annual observances with a Thursday day of prayer and family homecoming each fall. But the idea of a permanent, national day of Thanksgiving became a dream of one of the most influential women in the antebellum era—Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. (Under Hale’s guidance, this popular magazine for home and family grew from a readership of roughly 40,000 into one with a circulation of over 150,000.)

Sarah Josepha Hale was born into a modest New England family at the end of the eighteenth century, and enjoyed her status as a young matron with a growing family. Every November her family gathered to celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday with a groaning sideboard of Yankee fare, often called “turkey with all the trimmings.” When her husband died and left his widow with five young children, Hale turned her talents to writing and became famous for one of her children’s verses—“Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Her first novel, *Northwood*, which appeared in 1827, included an entire chapter devoted to the significance and description of Thanksgiving traditions. When Hale later became the editor of the most influential periodical in the antebellum era, she campaigned to make the third

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Thursday in November a national holiday. She explained, “Thanksgiving, like the Fourth of July, should be considered a national festival and observed by all our people.”[3] Year after year, Hale wrote to the governor of each state, to congressmen and senators, and to the White House, urging official government recognition of this celebration. Yet Hale was unsuccessful; localities and states continued to declare thanksgiving days, but no national agreement emerged.

During this period, state-decreed days of thanksgiving were most common in the territories and new states. For settlers on the way west, the recollection of holidays past might invoke homesickness, but they might also prompt local celebration. In California, Oregon, and other territories, Thanksgiving holidays were proclaimed even before statehood. On the first Thanksgiving Day in Nebraska (in 1854) a local paper reported, “Although we have, as in all new countries, comparatively little to be thankful for, we have sufficient to inspire our gratitude and blessing.”[4]

By 1855, the fourth Thursday of November was observed as Thanksgiving by fourteen states (while two others selected the third Thursday for celebration).[5] In 1858 one contemporary estimated that upwards of 10,000 people had left New York City to spend the holiday in New England with kin.[6] This special day braided together a number of family and cultural customs—perhaps even the first traffic jams.

With Lincoln’s election and the outbreak of war in 1861, the appeal of an annual homecoming, when a family might gather together, became even more poignant. In September 1863, Sarah Josepha Hale penned an editorial in which she wrote, “Would it not be better that the proclamation that appoints Thursday the 26th of November (1863) as the day of Thanksgiving for the people of the United States of America, should, in the first instance, emanate from the President of the Republic?” Hale appealed directly to President Lincoln; yet when Secretary of State William Seward replied on September 29 that her letter was receiving official attention, Hale perhaps did not become overly hopeful. She had, after all, thus far written to six presidents, to no avail.

But with hundreds of thousands of soldiers away from home, and with a president attuned to the mood of the nation, Lincoln issued a proclamation in 1863 that Thanksgiving would be celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November. In a nod to historic precedent, he made the proclamation on the very same October 3 date on which Washington had proffered his own proclamation more than seventy years before. Lincoln put on his bravest face when he suggested in the middle of a war “of unequalled magnitude and severity” that “harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict.”[7] The President stressed abundance and unity, invoking memories of holidays past, and striking a chord with the war-torn Union.

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From its somber origins during Civil War days, Thanksgiving evolved into a multi-faceted celebration. Certainly the neighborhood revelry, which began in New York City in the 1840s, transformed the holiday into an elaborate commercial gala. As a witness described it in 1881: “About 150 persons were in coaches or on horseback, all in fancy costumes and many of them such as to create much merriment among the crowds that flocked to see them.”[8] The festivities began to rival Mardi Gras or Mummer’s parades on New Year’s Day, and in 1921, Gimbel’s Department Store in Philadelphia sponsored its first Thanksgiving parade. Macy’s of Manhattan transformed the day’s events into a patriotic extravaganza in which Uncle Sam first appeared in balloon form (several feet high) in 1938.

College footballers often chose Thanksgiving Day for the Big Game. Families attended games and—once television was available, viewed games without attending—before gathering round their turkey dinners. The holiday was secularized during the last decades of the century, and by the twentieth century, costumed festivals honoring the Pilgrims became themes of elaborate grade-school pageants—an effective way to “Americanize” immigrants. These annual activities showcased Puritan values and Yankee customs, promoting civic folk rituals.

During the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt a controversy developed over when to date the holiday, which presidential proclamation had traditionally set as the last Thursday of the month. In 1939 business interests lobbied successfully to shift the holiday to an earlier date. FDR selected November 23 to cater to demands for a longer Christmas shopping season.[9] Protests raged, as satirist Ogden Nash quipped: “Thanksgiving, like Ambassadors, Cabinet officers and others smeared with political ointment, depends for its existence on Presidential appointment.” To squelch ongoing battles, Roosevelt signed a bill in 1941 designating that ever after, the fourth Thursday in November would be America’s official Thanksgiving.

[1] Diana Karter Appelbaum, *Thanksgiving* (New York: Facts on File, 1984), 31.

[2] Appelbaum, 36.

[3] Ruth E. Finley, *The Lady of Godey’s: Sarah Josepha Hale* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1931), 196.

[4] Appelbaum, 122.

[5] Isabella Webb Entrikin, *Sarah Josepha Hale and Godey’s Lady Book* (Lancaster, PA: Lancaster Press, 1946), 115. Thanksgiving was recognized in twenty-one states by 1846—but not always held on a Thursday in November.

[6] Appelbaum, p. 76.

[7] Finley, 202–203.

[8] Appelbaum, 188.

[9] Appelbaum, 235.

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