

The Origins of Thanksgiving

The tradition introduced by European Americans of Thanksgiving as a time to focus on God and His blessings dates back well over four centuries in America. For example, such thanksgivings occurred in 1541 at Palo Duro Canyon, Texas with Coronado and 1,500 of his men; in 1564 at St. Augustine, Florida with French Huguenot (Protestant) colonists; in 1598 at El Paso, Texas with Juan de Oñate and his expedition; in 1607 at Cape Henry, Virginia with the landing of the Jamestown settlers; in 1619 at Berkeley Plantation, Virginia; and many other such celebrations. But it is primarily from the Pilgrim's Thanksgiving celebration of 1621 that we derive the current tradition of Thanksgiving Day.

The Real Story of the First Thanksgiving

The story of the Pilgrims began in the early part of the Seventeenth Century: The Church of England under King James I was persecuting anyone and everyone who did not recognize its absolute civil and spiritual authority. Those who challenged ecclesiastical authority and those who believed strongly in freedom of worship were hunted down, imprisoned, and sometimes executed for their beliefs. A group of separatists first fled to Holland and established a community. After eleven years, about forty Pilgrim men, led by William Bradford, agreed to make a perilous journey to the New World, where they would certainly face hardships, but could live and worship God according to the dictates of their consciences.

The Pilgrims set sail for America on September 6, 1620, and for two months braved the harsh elements of a storm-tossed sea. On the journey, Bradford set up a contract (the Mayflower Compact) that established just and equal laws for all members of the new community. And when the Pilgrims landed in New England in November, they found, according to Bradford's detailed journal, a cold, barren, desolate wilderness. Upon disembarking at Plymouth Rock, they held a prayer service and then hastily began building shelters; however, unprepared for such a harsh New England winter, nearly half of them died before spring. Emerging from that grueling winter, the Pilgrims were surprised when an Indian named Samoset approached them and greeted them in their own language, explaining to them that he had learned English from fishermen and traders. A week later, Samoset returned with a friend named Squanto, who lived with the Pilgrims and accepted their Christian faith. Squanto taught the Pilgrims much about how to live in the New World, and he and Samoset helped forge a long-lasting peace treaty between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians. Pilgrim Governor William Bradford described Squanto as "a special instrument sent of God for [our] good...and never left [us] till he died."

That summer, the Pilgrims, still persevering in prayer and assisted by helpful Indians, reaped a bountiful harvest. As Pilgrim Edward Winslow (later becoming the Governor) affirmed, "God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn" and "by the goodness of God, we are . . . far from want". The grateful Pilgrims therefore declared a three-day feast in December 1621 to thank God and to celebrate with their Indian friends – America's first Thanksgiving Festival. Ninety Wampanoag Indians joined the fifty Pilgrims for three days of feasting (which included shellfish, lobsters, turkey, corn bread, berries, deer, and other foods), of play (the young Pilgrim and Wampanoag men engaged in races, wrestling matches, and athletic events), and of prayer. This celebration and its accompanying activities were the origin of the holiday that Americans now celebrate each November. However, while the Pilgrims enjoyed times of prosperity for which they thanked God, they also suffered extreme hardships.

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For example, in 1623 they faced an intense and prolonged drought. Knowing that without a change in the weather there would be no harvest and the winter would be filled again with death and starvation, Governor Bradford called the Pilgrims to a time of prayer and fasting to seek God's direct intervention.

Significantly, a short time after that time of prayer – and to the great amazement of the Indians who witnessed the scene – clouds appeared in the sky and a gentle and steady rain began to fall.

As Governor Bradford explained: "It came without either wind or thunder or any violence, and by degrees in abundance, as that ye earth was thoroughly wet and soaked therewith, which did so apparently revive and quicken ye decayed corn and other fruits as was wonderful to see, and made ye Indians astonished to behold; and afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair warm weather as, through His blessing, caused a fruitful and liberal harvest, to their no small comfort and rejoicing." The drought had been broken. As a result, the fall produced an abundant harvest, and there was cause for another Thanksgiving.

The Pilgrim practice of designating an official time of Thanksgiving spread into neighboring colonies and became an annual tradition. And just as those neighboring colonies followed the Pilgrims' example of calling for days of thanksgiving, so, too, did they adopt their practice of calling for a time of prayer and fasting. The New England Colonies therefore developed a practice of calling for a day of prayer and fasting in the spring, and a day of prayer and thanksgiving in the fall.

Two aspects of the Pilgrims' story not being taught in U.S. schools today

1. The Pilgrims proved why Socialism does not work, but Capitalism does.

The original contract the Pilgrims had entered into with their merchant-sponsors in London called for everything they produced to go into a common store, and each member of the community, every pilgrim, was entitled to one common share. All of the land they cleared and the houses they built belonged to the community as well. They had planned to distribute everything they owned and everything they built equally. Nobody owned anything.

Governor Bradford recognized that this form of collectivism was as costly and destructive to the Pilgrims as that first harsh winter, which had taken so many lives. What Bradford and his community found out was that the most creative and industrious people had no incentive to work any harder than anyone else, because everybody had an equal share. Unless they could utilize the power of personal motivation, they were not going to be able to change anything. Bradford decided to take bold action. He allotted a plot of land to each family to work/manage.

Governor Bradford wrote: "For this community was found to breed much confusion and discontent, and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. ... For young men that were most able and fit for labor and service did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children. ... Every family was assigned its own plot of land to work, and permitted to market its own crops and products. This had very good success, for it made all hands industrious, so much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been."

2. Pilgrims valued the Indians' help, but their thankfulness was always directed to God.

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The Mayflower Compact

November 11, 1620

The Mayflower Compact was drawn up on the Mayflower, under these circumstances as described by William Bradford: "This day, before we came to harbour, observing some not well affected to unity and concord, but gave some appearance of faction, it was thought good there should be an association and agreement, that we should combine together in one body, and to submit to such government and governors as we should by common consent agree to make and choose, and set our hands to this that follows, word for word..."

IN THE name of God, Amen.

We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign Lord, King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France and Ireland king, defender of the faith, etc., having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and honor of our king and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape-Cod the 11 of November, in the year of the reign of our sovereign lord, King James, of England, France, and Ireland the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini 1620.

John Carver	Edward Tilley	Degory Priest
William Bradford	John Tilley	Thomas Williams
Edward Winslow	Francis Cooke	Gilbert Winslow
William Brewster	Thomas Rogers	Edmund Margeson
Issac Allerton	Thomas Tinker	Peter Browne
Myles Standish	John Rigdale	Richard Britteridge
John Alden	Edward Fuller	George Soule
Samuel Fuller	John Turner	Richard Clarke
Christopher Martin	Francis Eaton	Richard Gardiner
William Mullins	James Chilton	John Allerton
William White	John Crackston	Thomas English
Richard Warren	John Billington	Edward Dotey
John Howland	Moses Fletcher	Edward Leister

Stephen Hopkins

John Goodman

The First Thanksgiving Proclamation

On June 20, 1676, the governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts, held a meeting to determine how best to express thanks for the good fortune that had seen their community securely established. By unanimous vote they instructed Edward Rawson, the clerk, to proclaim June 29 as a day of Thanksgiving, our first.

Date: June 20, 1676

By: Governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts

The Holy God having by a long and Continual Series of his Afflictive dispensations in and by the present War with the Heathen Natives of this land, written and brought to pass bitter things against his own Covenant people in this wilderness, yet so that we evidently discern that in the midst of his judgements he hath remembered mercy, having remembered his Footstool in the day of his sore displeasure against us for our sins, with many singular Intimations of his Fatherly Compassion, and regard; reserving many of our Towns from Desolation Threatened, and attempted by the Enemy, and giving us especially of late with many of our Confederates many signal Advantages against them, without such Disadvantage to ourselves as formerly we have been sensible of, if it be the Lord's mercy that we are not consumed, It certainly bespeaks our positive Thankfulness, when our Enemies are in any measure disappointed or destroyed; and fearing the Lord should take notice under so many Intimations of his returning mercy, we should be found an Insensible people, as not standing before Him with Thanksgiving, as well as lading him with our Complaints in the time of pressing Afflictions:

The Council has thought meet to appoint and set apart the 29th day of this instant June, as a day of Solemn Thanksgiving and praise to God for such his Goodness and Favour, many Particulars of which mercy might be Instanced, but we doubt not those who are sensible of God's Afflictions, have been as diligent to espy him returning to us; and that the Lord may behold us as a People offering Praise and thereby glorifying Him; the Council doth commend it to the Respective Ministers, Elders and people of this Jurisdiction; Solemnly and seriously to keep the same Beseeking that being persuaded by the mercies of God we may all, even this whole people offer up our bodies and souls as a living and acceptable Service unto God by Jesus Christ.

George Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation

Issued by President George Washington, at the request of Congress, on October 3, 1789

By the President of the United States of America, a Proclamation.

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 and 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 favor, able interpositions of His providence 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 has 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 to us), and to bless them with good governments, 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

Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation

Proclamation making Thanksgiving a national day by President Abraham Lincoln on October 3, 1863

Washington, D.C.

By the President of the United States of America.

A Proclamation.

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 a 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, 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 plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has 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. 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 Most High 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 one 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.

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In testimony, 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.

By the President: Abraham Lincoln

William H. Seward, Secretary of State