

An Evolution of a National Tradition: The History of Thanksgiving in the United States

Introduction

Thanksgiving is a cornerstone of American civil life, a holiday fixed in the national imagination as a day of family homecoming, feasting, and gratitude. This document provides a formal historical analysis of the holiday's complex evolution, tracing its path from scattered colonial observances to its codification as a federal holiday. The modern Thanksgiving is not, as popular myth suggests, a linear descendant of a single 1621 feast. Rather, it is a cultural synthesis forged through the distinct pressures of regional custom, deliberate cultural engineering, political exigency, and national myth-making.

1.0 Antecedents and Early Observances in Colonial America

Long before the establishment of a national Thanksgiving holiday, the practice of giving thanks was rooted in both ancient European harvest traditions and a variety of observances by early colonists in North America. The historical record reveals multiple "firsts," complicating the traditional origin story centered on the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony. These early events, sponsored by different European powers and colonial ventures, underscore that the impulse to commemorate survival and express gratitude was a common feature of the colonial experience, not the exclusive province of one group.

Early Thanksgiving Observances in North America

Several documented observances of thanksgiving predate the Pilgrims' famous 1621 feast, each with a unique context.

- **1565: St. Augustine, Florida.** Spanish colonists, upon founding the city of St. Augustine on September 8, 1565, held a shared thanksgiving meal.
- **1578: Newfoundland.** The first Thanksgiving service known to be held by Europeans in North America was conducted by a British expedition in what would become Canada.
- **1607 & 1610: Jamestown, Virginia.** Thanksgiving services were a routine part of life in the Virginia Colony. Settlers at Jamestown gave thanks for their safe arrival in 1607 and held another service in 1610 to celebrate the arrival of a supply ship after a devastating winter.
- **1619: Berkeley Hundred, Virginia.** On December 4, 1619, a group of 38 English settlers landed at Berkeley Hundred and immediately observed a day of thanksgiving as mandated by their charter.

The Competing Claims of Virginia and Massachusetts

The 1619 celebration at Berkeley Hundred in Virginia holds a particularly strong claim as an antecedent to an annual holiday. The London Company charter that sponsored the settlement specifically required "that the day of our ships arrival at the place assigned for plantation in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God." This pre-

planned, perpetual observance stands in contrast to the more spontaneous celebrations held elsewhere. The competing claims of Virginia and Massachusetts were formally acknowledged by President John F. Kennedy in his 1963 Thanksgiving proclamation, which stated, "Over three centuries ago, our forefathers in Virginia and in Massachusetts, far from home in a lonely wilderness, set aside a time of thanksgiving."

Despite these earlier events, historian James Baker characterizes the debates over the "first Thanksgiving" as a "tempest in a beanpot." He argues that the holiday's "true origin was the New England Thanksgiving," a distinct regional tradition that provided the cultural blueprint for the national celebration. The New England model was not an anniversary of arrival but a special day set aside during the week for praise in direct response to God's providence, a distinction that proved more influential than the Virginian model.

While these disparate events highlight a widespread colonial practice of giving thanks, it was the specific traditions forged in New England, and the later mythologizing of the Plymouth events, that would provide the direct cultural DNA for the national holiday.

2.0 The Plymouth Colony and the Genesis of a Regional Tradition

To understand the modern Thanksgiving, one must deconstruct the popular myth surrounding the Plymouth colonists by examining two distinct events—the 1621 harvest celebration and the 1623 day of religious thanks—and differentiating both from the broader New England tradition that was the true forerunner of the national holiday. While the Plymouth story was strategically important to the holiday's later narrative, its historical reality is far more complex than the simplified origin story suggests.

The 1621 Harvest Celebration

In the autumn of 1621, following a successful harvest, the Plymouth colonists held a three-day feast. The historical accounts of Governor William Bradford and colonist Edward Winslow describe a secular celebration of plenty, not a formal religious "thanksgiving" in the Puritan sense. The event occurred after a brutal first winter had killed half the colonists. Historical accounts correct several common misconceptions about the feast. The Wampanoag, led by Massasoit, were not formally invited guests; rather, he and some ninety men arrived after the colonists "exercised our arms" with celebratory gunfire. As allies in a mutual protection pact, they were welcomed and contributed five deer to the meal, significantly outnumbering their colonial counterparts.

The meal itself, a stark testament to the harsh realities of colonial life, was cooked by the four adult Pilgrim women who survived their first winter, along with young daughters and servants. The menu featured fowl, venison, and boiled cornmeal, but lacked modern staples like potatoes or pie, as ingredients like wheat flour and sugar were unavailable.

The 1623 Day of Thanksgiving

Two years later, in 1623, the Plymouth Colony held a very different kind of observance. Following a prolonged drought, the colonists prayed for relief. When rain finally came, followed by the arrival of a supply ship, they held a formal day of thanksgiving. Consequently, some historians argue that the 1623 observance, which fused religious gratitude with communal celebration, represents a more direct progenitor of the modern holiday than the secular 1621 feast. The modern holiday is thus a hybrid: it borrows the powerful imagery of the 1621 harvest feast but derives its pious purpose from the 1623 day of thanks.

The Broader New England Tradition

The story of the 1621 feast was largely forgotten for over a century; William Bradford's manuscript detailing the event was not published until the 1850s. The modern holiday's customs evolved not from this singular event but from the gradual homogenization of separate, regional Calvinist thanksgiving days celebrated throughout New England. By the 1660s, these autumn thanksgivings had become a regular occurrence, characterized by family homecomings, church services, and large meals—the core tenets of the celebration we know today.

The development of this robust regional tradition in New England laid the cultural groundwork for subsequent efforts to establish a unified, national holiday.

3.0 The Path to a National Holiday

The 19th century was the pivotal era when Thanksgiving transitioned from a regional, sporadic custom into a formalized national institution. This transformation was not accidental but was driven by key political proclamations during the nation's formative years and, most significantly, by the tireless advocacy of one of the most influential cultural figures of the antebellum period.

Thanksgiving Proclamations of the New Republic

Early political leaders recognized the value of a national day of thanks, though its observance remained inconsistent for decades.

- **Continental Congress (1777, 1782):** The first national proclamation of thanksgiving was issued in 1777 to celebrate the pivotal victory of the Continental Army over the British at Saratoga.
- **George Washington (1789, 1795):** In 1789, President Washington issued the first Thanksgiving proclamation under the Constitution, designating Thursday, November 26, as a day for the American people to acknowledge "the many signal favors of Almighty God."
- **John Adams (1798, 1799):** President Adams continued the practice, declaring thanksgivings during his term.
- **Thomas Jefferson:** Citing his firm belief in the "wall of separation between Church & State," President Jefferson refused to issue any thanksgiving proclamations.
- **James Madison (1814, 1815):** President Madison renewed the tradition at the conclusion of the War of 1812.

The Architect of a National Holiday: Sarah Josepha Hale

The primary architect of the national Thanksgiving holiday was Sarah Josepha Hale, the influential editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Beginning with her 1827 novel *Northwood*, which contained an entire chapter on Thanksgiving traditions, Hale embarked on a 36-year campaign to make the celebration a national institution. She envisioned a patriotic holiday that could unite a nation increasingly divided by factionalism. Her vision was rooted in an idealized domesticity and rural simplicity, which she promoted as an antidote to the era's anxieties over urbanization and industrialization. Through magazine columns and scores of letters to governors and presidents, she standardized the celebration around the values of hearth and home, tirelessly advocating for a fixed, annual date.

Lincoln's 1863 National Proclamation

Hale's campaign finally succeeded in the midst of the Civil War. Prompted by her advocacy and buoyed by Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation on October 3, 1863. This act established the regular, annual national observance of Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November. The proclamation, penned by Secretary of State William H. Seward, called upon Americans to give thanks even in the midst of devastating conflict.

"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."

Lincoln's proclamation transformed a regional tradition into an official American holiday intended to heal a wounded nation, and while his successors continued the practice, further action was required to fully cement its place in law and culture.

4.0 Codification and Modernization of the American Tradition

After President Lincoln's proclamation, the final steps in creating the modern Thanksgiving involved cementing its date in federal law and attaching a powerful, unifying origin story to the celebration. This process reflects how the holiday was adapted to serve the changing social and commercial needs of the nation.

Forging a National Myth

The 1621 Plymouth story was consciously grafted onto the national Thanksgiving holiday in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as part of a deliberate effort to "Americanize" the massive influx of immigrants. This narrative was particularly effective because it offered a non-denominational, colonial theme that, as a patriotic origin story of perseverance and welcome, "immigrant children could easily understand and share." Schools became the primary vehicle for this cultural indoctrination, using classroom activities and pageants to reinforce the simplified tale of Pilgrims and Native Americans sharing a peaceful feast.

Legislative Formalization

While Lincoln established the annual proclamation, Thanksgiving's status as a legal holiday required legislative action. The *Holidays Act* of 1870, signed by President Ulysses S. Grant, made Thanksgiving a federal holiday in Washington D.C., institutionalizing it alongside New Year's Day, Christmas, and the Fourth of July. An 1885 act expanded this to apply to all federal employees, ensuring they received pay for the day.

The "Franksgiving" Controversy

This tradition was disrupted in 1939 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt, hoping to extend the Christmas shopping season and bolster the economy during the Great Depression, moved the holiday to the next-to-last Thursday of November. The decision provoked considerable public and political controversy, with opponents deriding the new date as "Franksgiving." For two years, the country was divided, celebrating on two different dates. To end the confusion, Congress passed a Joint Resolution, which Roosevelt signed in 1941, officially and permanently fixing the date of Thanksgiving as the fourth Thursday of November, where it has remained ever since.

The formalization of the holiday's date and its association with a foundational myth completed its journey from a pious colonial custom to a fully integrated American civil holiday.

5.0 Conclusion

The American Thanksgiving is not a simple continuation of the 1621 Plymouth feast but a tradition with a complex, layered history. Its evolution demonstrates how the holiday has been repeatedly instrumentalized to serve the needs of the nation. It began as disparate colonial observances for survival and a distinct Calvinist tradition in New England for giving thanks. It was then culturally engineered through the 36-year campaign of Sarah Josepha Hale, who saw it as a tool for promoting national unity through domestic values. It was wielded by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War to foster morale and by educators in the 20th century to assimilate immigrants. Ultimately, it was codified by Congress to serve commercial interests. The modern holiday is a complex tapestry woven from historical fact, political action, national myth, and commercial influence—a tradition continuously reshaped to reflect the nation's evolving identity and values.