

Giving Thanks for America's Christian Roots

America's national "Thanksgiving" holiday is rooted in the nation's overt Christian origins and the custom of its first immigrants to set aside special days for giving thanks to God for His goodness and blessings. This custom was continued by succeeding generations and eventually found its way into the national consciousness and calendar.

The Pilgrims Maintained an Attitude of Gratitude Even During Great Loss

The Pilgrims who landed on Cape Cod in November of 1620 were devout followers of Christ who had left the comforts of home, family, and friends to pursue their vision of a renewed and reformed Christianity. Although facing insurmountable challenges and much suffering they maintained an attitude of gratitude through every trial.

They were a thankful people. They never wavered in their faith even during their first winter in the New World (1620-21) when sickness ravaged their community and half of them, about fifty in number, were taken away in death.

The first Thanksgiving was celebrated by the Pilgrims the following fall of 1621 after they had gathered in their fall harvest. Although their hearts were still heavy from the losses suffered the previous winter, there were at least three areas for which they felt particularly grateful to God: 1) With the arrival of spring the sickness that had immobilized the community and taken many of them in death had lifted; 2) their new Native American friends who were such a blessing, serving as guides and interpreters; and 3) the abundant harvests they had experienced during the summer and fall of 1621.

The Pilgrims were not whiners. They were not complainers. They were the ultimate optimists because of their faith in God and their firm belief that He had called them to this New World.

The First Thanksgiving Day

An approximate equal number of English Pilgrims and Native Americans attended the first Thanksgiving. In addition to the natives who lived with them, such as Squanto, Samoset and Hobomok, Massasoit, chief of the Wampanoag, arrived with 90 of his people and five dressed deer to add to the meals the Pilgrims had prepared.

The Pilgrims did not seek to force their faith on the Indians, but neither did they hide their faith. After all, in the Mayflower Compact they had stated that they had come to the New World “for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith.” Their approach was what some modern missiologists would call “friendship evangelism.”

One can only imagine the emotions that filled their hearts as, in the presence of their new Native American friends, they joined their spiritual leader, Elder William Brewster, in lifting their hearts in praise and thanksgiving to God.

The day turned out to be more than they could have imagined. Not only did they enjoy meals together with thankful hearts, but they engaged in shooting matches and other friendly forms of competition. It was such an enjoyable time that the one Day of Thanksgiving was extended for three full days.

And yes, it is almost certain that there was turkey at the first Thanksgiving. According to the account of an unknown Pilgrim, Governor Bradford sent out four men to hunt for “fowl” who returned with enough “fowl” to last them an entire week.

“Fowl” probably refers to ducks, which were plentiful at that time of the year. Bradford’s account, however, specifically

mentions turkeys in addition to the fowl. He wrote,

And besides waterfowl there was a great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. (Hyatt, *The Pilgrims*, 47).

A Day of Thanksgiving During the Revolutionary War

Special days of Thanksgiving continued to be observed by the Pilgrims and new immigrants, especially those who settled in New England. As the colonies began to form themselves into a nation, these days of Thanksgiving began to be nationalized and made part of the national consciousness and calendar.

For example, during the fall of 1776, when the morale of the Revolutionary Army and the American populace had sunk to an all-time low because of poor harvests and hardship on the battlefield, Congress proclaimed Dec. 11, 1776, as a Day of Prayer, Fasting and Repentance.

After this National Day of Prayer, there was an amazing turnaround, that in 1779 Congress issued a proclamation setting aside a Day of Thanksgiving because "it hath pleased Almighty God, the father of mercies, remarkably to assist and support the United States of America in their important struggle for liberty" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 124).

This Day of Thanksgiving was observed throughout the newly formed nation with people gathering in churches and other public venues to give thanks to God for His mercy and help in their time of need.

George Washington Continues the Tradition

Shortly after being sworn in as president, George Washington issued a proclamation designating Nov. 26, 1789, as a Day of Thanksgiving, which was the first Thanksgiving Day designated by the new national government of the United States. The proclamation reads in part:

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.

Given under my hand at the City of New York the third day of October in the year of our Lord 1789.

Abraham Lincoln Proclaims a Day of Thanksgiving

A Day of Thanksgiving to be observed on the last Thursday in November 1863 was proclaimed by Abraham Lincoln in the midst of the Civil War. As in the Revolutionary War, this Day of Thanksgiving came on the heels of a remarkable turnaround in favor of the Union after a designated Day of Prayer and Repentance on April 30, 1863.

Although still at war, Lincoln enumerated the many reasons the inhabitants of America had for being thankful to God and then said:

It has seemed to me fit and proper that these blessings 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.

The final Thursday in November, set by President Lincoln, continued to be the observed "Thanksgiving" until Dec. 26, 1941, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a joint resolution of Congress changing the national Thanksgiving Day from the last Thursday in November to the fourth Thursday.

Concluding Thoughts

This national holiday that we know as Thanksgiving was brought forth by people of faith who knew the importance of nurturing a thankful heart in every situation. It was their faith in God that enabled them to be thankful even during the greatest of trials. They maintained an attitude of gratitude through it all.

This Thanksgiving, let us remember our heritage and determine that we too will be a thankful people, as were the spiritual foremothers and forefathers who brought this nation into existence. Let's follow them and the words of the old hymn that says:

"Count your blessings/ name them one by one,

"And it will surprise you what the Lord has done." {eo}

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