

Historical Thanksgiving Proclamations to God

As we celebrate Thanksgiving today, it's good to remember that Thanksgiving is inextricably tied to our nation's founding and its times of war, as well as its Christian heritage.

In 1777, the first official Thanksgiving proclamation was issued by the Continental Congress after the American victory in the Battle of Saratoga. The proclamation asked God to "... smile upon us in the prosecution of a just and necessary war, for the defense and establishment of our unalienable rights and liberties."

On Oct.3, 1789, eight years after the surrender of the  British army at Yorktown, President George Washington issued a proclamation "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."

President Washington assigned "... 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."

It was President Abraham Lincoln who began issuing a proclamation in 1863 for a national day of thanksgiving, when it became the custom of U.S. presidents. During the Civil War, President Lincoln established a permanent observance by

calling on the American people "... 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."

In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved the holiday to the third Thursday of November (to extend the Christmas shopping season and boost the economy). After a storm of protest, Roosevelt changed the holiday again in 1941 to the fourth Thursday in November, where it stands today. It was 1941 when Thanksgiving became an official national holiday. Since then, every U.S. president has issued a proclamation calling for a national day of thanksgiving each November.

The image to the right is a copy of a 1789 newspaper that published President George Washington's proclamation of the first official Thanksgiving holiday in the United States.

Let us know your thoughts about presidential Thanksgiving proclamations by commenting below.