

THANKSGIVING

The State of Virginia claims that the first Thanksgiving occurred on December 4, 1619, when Captain John Woodlief led newly-arrived English colonists to a grassy slope along the James River and instructed them to kneel and thank God for a safe arrival to the New World. Their vow can still be seen carved on a brick gazebo marking the location believed to be where Woodlief and his 38 men knelt to pray:

"Wee ordaine that the day of our ships arrival at the place assigned for plantacon in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God."

Thanksgiving in Massachusetts, in the Autumn of 1621 (likely October):

William Bradford, in "Of Plymouth Plantation" wrote (modern spelling), "Thus they found the Lord to be with them in all their ways, and to bless their outgoings and incomings, for which let His holy name have the praise forever, to all posterity. They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports."

Edward Winslow in Mourt's Relation wrote (modern spelling), "Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruits of our labor ... And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

William Hilton, passenger on the ship *Fortune*, arrived after this event and wrote in November 1621: "At our arrival in New Plymouth, in New England, we found all our friends and planters in good health, though they were left sick and weak, with very small means; the Indians round about us peaceable and friendly; the country very pleasant and temperate, yielding naturally, of itself, great store of fruits, as vines of divers sorts in great abundance ... Our company are, for most part, very religious, honest people; the Word of God sincerely taught us every Sabbath; so that I know not anything a contented mind can here want. I desire your friendly care to send my wife and children to me, where I wish all the friends I have in England; and so I rest."

During the 1600s: With John Winthrop as governor, the Massachusetts Bay Colony (consisting mainly of Puritan Christians) celebrated Thanksgiving for the first time in 1630, and frequently thereafter until about 1680, when it became an annual festival in that colony; and in Connecticut as early as 1639.

During the 1700s, it was common practice for individual colonies to observe days of thanksgiving throughout each year. A Thanksgiving Day two hundred years ago was a day set aside for prayer and fasting, not food and football! Later on, each of the states periodically would designate a day of thanksgiving in honor of a military victory, an adoption of a state constitution or an exceptionally bountiful crop. Such a Thanksgiving Day celebration was held in December of 1777 by the colonies nationwide, commemorating the surrender of British General Burgoyne at Saratoga.

On October 3, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for the observance of the fourth Tuesday of November as a national holiday.

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.

Thanksgiving Proclamations

JUNE 20, 1676: In what is called The “**First**” Thanksgiving Proclamation, the governing council of Charlestown, MA, held a meeting to determine how best to express thanks to God, 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. That proclamation is reproduced here in the same language and spelling as the original.

“The Holy God having by a long and Continual Series of his Afflictive dispensations in and by the present Warr 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 Beseeching that being perswaded 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.*”

“**In 1777:** One hundred and one years later, during the American Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress appointed one or more thanksgiving days each year, each time recommending to the executives of the various states the observance of these days in their states. The First National Proclamation of Thanksgiving was given by the Continental Congress in 1777

FOR AS MUCH as it is the indispensable Duty of all Men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with Gratitude their Obligation to him for Benefits received, and to implore such farther Blessings as they stand in Need of: And it having pleased him in his abundant Mercy, not only to continue to us the innumerable Bounties of his common Providence; but also to smile upon us in the Prosecution of a just and necessary War, for the Defense and Establishment of our unalienable Rights and Liberties; particularly in that he hath been pleased, in so great a Measure, to prosper the Means used for the Support of our Troops, and to crown our Arms with most signal success:

It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive Powers of these UNITED STATES to set apart THURSDAY, the eighteenth Day of December next, for SOLEMN THANKSGIVING and PRAISE:

That at one Time and with one Voice, the good People may express the grateful Feelings of their Hearts, and consecrate themselves to the Service of their Divine Benefactor; and that, together with their sincere Acknowledgments and Offerings, they may join the penitent Confession of their manifold Sins, whereby they had forfeited every Favor; and their humble and earnest Supplication that it may please GOD *through the Merits of JESUS CHRIST*, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of Remembrance; That it may please him graciously to afford his Blessing on the Governments of these States respectively, and prosper the public Council of the whole: To inspire our Commanders, both by Land and Sea, and all under them, with that Wisdom and Fortitude which may render them fit Instruments, under the Providence of Almighty GOD, to secure for these United States, the greatest of all human Blessings, INDEPENDENCE and PEACE: That it may please him, to prosper the Trade and Manufactures of the People, and the Labor of the Husbandman, that our Land may yield its Increase: To take Schools and Seminaries of Education, so necessary for cultivating the Principles of true Liberty, Virtue and Piety, under his nurturing Hand; and to prosper the Means of Religion, for the promotion and enlargement of that Kingdom, which consisteth “in Righteousness, Peace and Joy in the Holy Ghost.

And it is further recommended, That servile Labor, and such Recreation, as, though at other Times innocent, may be unbecoming the Purpose of this Appointment, be omitted on so solemn an Occasion.



General Thanksgiving.

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 favour: And whereas both Houses have, by their joint committee, requested me "to recommend to the people of the United States, a DAY of PUBLICK THANKSGIVING and PRAYER, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favours 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 TWENTY-SIXTH 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 favourable 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 favours which he hath 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 publick 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 shewn kindness unto us); and to bless them with good government, 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, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-nine.

George Washington.