

Thanksgiving History



Thanksgiving Day, celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November, has officially been an annual tradition in the United States since 1863. But most stories of Thanksgiving history start with the harvest celebration of the Plymouth colonists and Wampanoag Indians that took place in the autumn of 1621.

The group that set sail for this country in 1620 were originally members of the English Separatist Church. They had earlier fled their home in England and sailed to Holland to escape religious persecution. There, they enjoyed more religious tolerance, but they eventually became disenchanted with the Dutch way of life. Due to economic difficulties, as well as fears that they would lose their English language and heritage, they began to make plans to settle in the New World. The Separatists negotiated with a London stock company to finance a pilgrimage to America aboard the Mayflower. Their intended destination was the Hudson River region.

Rough seas and storms prevented the Mayflower from reaching their initial destination. The settlers finally set ground at what they would call Plymouth Harbor in mid-December 1620.



Their first winter was devastating. More than half of the English settlers died during that first winter, as a result of poor nutrition and housing that proved inadequate in the harsh weather.



The event that Americans commonly call the "First Thanksgiving" was celebrated to give thanks to Native Americans for helping the remaining colonists survive that first brutal winter in New England.

Early on the Pilgrims came into contact with Squanto, a member of the Pawtuxet tribe. Having been seized by the explorer John Smith's men in 1614-15, Squanto learned English while enslaved in England. He somehow managed to escape return to his native land. He served as interpreter between the colonists and the Wampanoag tribe with whom he lived. Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn, where to catch fish, and how to hunt beaver. Also, during that first winter Massasoit, the Wampanoag leader, donated food supplies to the colony when their stores began to run low.

The harvest of 1621 was a bountiful one. The colonists decided to celebrate with a feast - including 91 natives who had helped the Pilgrims survive their first year. The feast was more of a traditional English harvest festival than a true "thanksgiving" observance. It lasted three days. The meal consisted of deer, corn, wild fowl, beans, fish and shell fish, vegetables, fruits, and cranberries.

Irregular thanksgivings continued after favorable events, such as a good harvest or the end of a drought. In the Plymouth tradition Thanksgiving was originally a religious observance for all the members of the community to give thanks to God for a common purpose, rather than a feast day. Gradually, an annual Thanksgiving after the harvest developed in the mid-17th century. This did not occur on any set day or necessarily on the same day in different colonies in America.

The first National day of Thanksgiving was proclaimed by George Washington in 1777 to commemorate the patriotic victory over the British at Saratoga. All 13 colonies joined in a thanksgiving celebration. But it was a one-time affair.



George Washington again proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving in 1789. In the years following other presidents also proclaimed days of Thanksgiving, but they were sporadic and never at the same time of year.

It was Sarah Josepha Hale, a magazine editor, whose efforts eventually led to what we recognize as Thanksgiving. She began her campaign in 1846 writing many editorials championing her cause in her Boston Ladies' Magazine. She also wrote letters to governors and presidents. It wasn't until 1863, that President Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as a national day of Thanksgiving.

Lincoln successors continued the tradition of proclaiming the last day in November to be Thanksgiving. In 1939 Franklin Roosevelt broke this tradition and moved it up one week to the next-to-last Thursday in order to create a longer Christmas shopping season during the depression. Public uproar against this decision caused the president to move Thanksgiving back to its original date two years later. However, in December of 1941, Thanksgiving was finally sanctioned by Congress as a legal holiday, as the fourth Thursday in November, which sometimes coincides as the last Thursday in November.