

The History of America's Thanksgiving Day

The Pilgrims thanked God during the first thanksgiving—a harvest festival in 1621—for a safe voyage to the New World, their resulting religious freedom, survival of half of their number through a brutal and deadly winter, and a bountiful first crop. They also thanked God for sending them the Native American chief, Squanto, who taught them how to survive in the New World, including what crops to plant and how and when to do it.



“ 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. ”

—Edward Winslow, Plymouth Colony Governor, Fall 1621

Our first government, the Continental Congress, regularly acknowledged God as the Founding Father of this nation. That group was America's first national authority to set aside a nationwide day of thanksgiving—in 1777—to seek God's direction and blessing on America, its government, and its people.

“ It is the indispensable Duty of all Men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God. ”

—Continental Congress, Thanksgiving 1777

George Washington had so miraculously survived war that he often was referred to as Bullet Proof. It was widely accepted that he was appointed by God to the role of our first President. His 1789 thanksgiving proclamation was a one-time event that was repeated as the need arose.

“ 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,

continued...

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. ”

—George Washington, Thanksgiving 1789

Abraham Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving as an annual national holiday during the Civil War. Few celebrated that year—when our nation was divided like no other time before or since. Union soldiers received their meager rations and were asked to thank God for our nation's blessings and ask for peace, harmony, tranquility, and unity.



“ The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies ... 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 ... fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purpose, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union. ”

—Abraham Lincoln, Thanksgiving 1863

Every President since has proclaimed a national day of praise and thanksgiving, although the date has been changed. President Franklin Roosevelt asked Congress to move the date back a week to extend the Christmas shopping season, and Congress sanctioned the fourth Thursday in November as our national annual Thanksgiving holiday in 1941.