

Strawbery Banke Museum's Brief History of Thanksgiving in America



The following is a short summary of the evolution of the American holiday of Thanksgiving. This summary was written primarily to educate teachers about the Strawbery Banke interpretation of Thanksgiving history. Excerpts of this text are taken from the *Sourcebook on the History of Thanksgiving* that was produced by the Education Department of Strawbery Banke Museum.

17th Century

In the 1600s, European settlers from Virginia to New Hampshire celebrated fast days and days of thanksgiving throughout the year. The days were proclaimed irregularly by the various colonial governors in response to specific events like bounteous harvests, drought, peace or wars. Colonial governors, councils or assemblies chose the days and announced them through written proclamation. Clergymen then read the notices from pulpits on the Sunday preceding the day itself.

On thanksgiving and fast days, families went to both morning and afternoon church services. On thanksgiving days, families had dinner between services and meals were shaped by local and seasonal harvests.

Today, popular culture perpetuates the myth that modern Thanksgiving traditions began with the 1621 gathering of Plymouth colonists and members of the Wampanoag Nation, which has come to be known as "The First Thanksgiving." It is important to remember that long before European settlers came to America, Native Americans were celebrating their own thanksgiving days throughout the year. In addition, the 1621 celebration was not considered to be a thanksgiving by the Plymouth colonists. Rather, it was a celebration similar to the ancient British festival called Harvest Home. Back in England, this secular holiday marked the return of the last harvest wagon from the fields and was a festive celebration filled with family gatherings, music, dance and bountiful food. When the Native Americans happened to make a visit to the settlers during this celebration, they were invited to join the festivities. This gathering occurred in 1621, and Thanksgiving would not be made an annual national holiday for 242 years.

18th Century

In the 1700s, both thanksgiving and fast days began to change in New England. Rather than celebrating several thanksgiving days throughout the year, most colonies began consolidating the holidays into one religious thanksgiving day, usually declared after the harvest some time between September and December. The colonial governor declared thanksgiving proclamations. The date changed each year and varied between colonies. As the century moved on, the celebrations of thanksgiving became more secular and less religious in nature. By the late 18th century, there is evidence that afternoon church services were no longer held by some congregations, which meant the noon dinner could continue into the afternoon.

The 18th century brought other changes to the celebration of thanksgiving days such as dancing and music. These features may have been borrowed from the British Harvest Home festival. Puritans formerly frowned upon dancing and music. As the Puritan influence in New England decreased, the revival of these activities increased. In addition, competitive turkey shoots and the bustle of preparing foods enlivened the week proceeding a thanksgiving day. People wore their new winter clothes at thanksgiving church services and families gathered together for the day and reminisced.

19th Century

In the 1800s, the popularity and festivity of thanksgiving days increased, and most communities counted on celebrating the holiday every fall. Although the dates still varied from year to year and state to state, by 1825, the holiday of Thanksgiving had become a firm ritual of family life in New England.

During the mid-nineteenth century, New Hampshire native Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Ladies Magazine*, led a campaign for the national adoption of Thanksgiving. After years of pleading with several presidents, Abraham Lincoln finally took Mrs. Hale's request seriously and proclaimed a national Thanksgiving Day in 1863. It was to be celebrated annually on the last Thursday of November. Although from this point on, it was a national holiday, it took years before it was recognized by many communities in the South. Still to this day, Thanksgiving is a much stronger holiday here in New England than in many other parts of America.

For most of the 19th century, Thanksgiving was about family gatherings and charity. The more fortunate were expected to provide for the less fortunate who often went door to door asking for food and handouts. The association of Thanksgiving with the Pilgrims and the Indians did not occur until the late-19th and early 20th centuries.

20th Century

By the early 1900s, many Americans were enamored of the country's colonial past. Waves of immigration were changing the face of America and many people took a nostalgic look back, romanticizing America's colonial past. In doing so, historians came across written accounts of the 1621 harvest celebration and began calling the gathering "The First Thanksgiving," without a full understanding of the history of the holiday. As a result, people began to associate Thanksgiving primarily with Pilgrims and Indians rather than the secular harvest celebrations and the religious days of thanksgiving that actually evolved into our modern holiday. Today many historians and Native American nations are trying to help people understand the true history of the holiday.

Thanksgiving was celebrated on the last Thursday in November until 1941, when Congress moved Thanksgiving to its current date celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November to make more time for Christmas shopping.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THANKSGIVING



1. When and where was the first Thanksgiving celebrated?

- Because Europeans and Native Americans had been celebrating thanksgiving days for centuries as a way of giving thanks to God when good events happened, no one really knows when the very first thanksgiving was celebrated in the New World. The Virginia colonists celebrated a thanksgiving in the early 1600s. The Pilgrims of Plymouth also celebrated a religious thanksgiving in 1623.

2. Who “invented” Thanksgiving in America?

- Thanksgiving in America today is a combination of the religious thanksgivings that the Puritans and other Europeans observed and harvest festivals, which are traditions of many cultures and religions. The myth about the Pilgrims inviting the Native Americans to a Thanksgiving Day in 1621 was created and perpetuated during the Colonial Revival of the mid-19th century. This romanticized version of the event has become the basis for the modern day Thanksgiving when in fact, the holiday evolved throughout the 18th century without any reference to the Pilgrims and Indians.

3. Were there any Pilgrims in Portsmouth, NH? Will we see any Pilgrims on our visit to Strawberry Banke Museum?

- There were no Pilgrims in Portsmouth, NH, and you will not meet any during your visit to Strawberry Banke Museum. The Pilgrims, also known as Separatists, lived in Plymouth, Massachusetts. You can visit Plimoth Plantation, another outdoor history museum, and see how they lived.

4. Was Thanksgiving always celebrated during the last week in November?

- No, in the 1600s, 1700s, and early 1800s religious and secular thanksgivings were celebrated whenever government officials (governors, Presidents, Congress) decided to issue a proclamation, usually sometime in autumn. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln was responsible for making Thanksgiving an annual national holiday and set the date as the last Thursday in November. In 1941, Congress moved Thanksgiving to its current date: the fourth Thursday in November.

5. Did everyone in the United States always celebrate Thanksgiving?

- Thanksgiving has not always been celebrated everywhere in the U.S. The Thanksgiving holiday as we know it today was much more popular in New England than other places in America. It became a national holiday in 1863. Today, there are still religious groups and other cultural groups who choose not to celebrate the national holiday of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is still a bigger holiday in New England than in other parts of the United States.

6. Do other cultures celebrate Thanksgiving?

- Some other cultures do celebrate a day of thanksgiving. For example, Canadians celebrate theirs in October. Many more cultures celebrate harvest festivals when staple crops are ripe.