

# THANKSGIVING

Throughout history, people have given thanks – sometimes in joyful celebration, often in solemn, even prayerful, ceremony. The United States, over hundreds of years, has come to observe a national holiday for giving thanks, one that has taken many forms and has been observed in different ways throughout the nation's history.



Thanksgiving, 1919.  
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/npcc.00888/>

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Early Thanksgiving Celebrations

Today's Thanksgiving holiday has roots in a number of celebrations that occurred centuries ago in different regions of North America. Native communities had regularly given thanks for nature's gifts for centuries before the arrival of Europeans on the continent. In May 1541, Spanish explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado led 1,500 men in a thanksgiving celebration in what is today the Texas Panhandle. Two decades later, French Huguenot colonists gave solemn praise and thanksgiving at a settlement near what is now Jacksonville, Florida. In August 1607, English colonists joined Abnaki people along Maine's Kennebec River for a harvest feast and prayer meeting. In the spring of 1610, in what some consider the "first American Thanksgiving," colonists in Jamestown, Virginia, held a thanksgiving prayer service after English supply ships arrived with much-needed food.

Eleven years later, Pilgrims at Plymouth Colony celebrated the autumn harvest with a three-day feast. Governor William Bradford and the colonists

joined the Wampanoag leader they knew as Massasoit and 90 other Wampanoag to feast on wild turkeys, duck, geese, venison, lobsters, clams, bass, corn, green vegetables, and dried fruits. The celebration included athletic contests and military exercises. This 1621 harvest celebration is given the distinction of shaping many of the United States' Thanksgiving traditions and fueling many of the popular stories surrounding Thanksgiving's history. There are few firsthand accounts of this feast and no eyewitness images, but it has been depicted in many different ways in the centuries since, in paintings, drawings, statues, stories, and performances. These depictions can provide helpful insights into the eras in which they were created, and into the ways in which perceptions of the holiday's--and the nation's--origins have shifted throughout U.S. history.

### Thanksgiving Proclamations

In October 1678, a general court in Boston issued a proclamation declaring "Thursday, the one and twentieth day of November next" to be "a day of

fasting and prayer." More than a century later, in 1789, the president of the newborn United States, George Washington, proclaimed Thursday, November 26, a day of national thanksgiving and prayer. Four days later, the Gazette of the United States published the text of the proclamation. However, Thanksgiving did not become an annual tradition at this time. Presidents John Adams and James Madison also declared national days of thanks, but no other president did until Abraham Lincoln.



Sarah Josepha (Buell) Hale  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2005687170/>

By the beginning of the Civil War most northern and mid-western states, as well as many in the South, had adopted the Thanksgiving celebration. The holiday was vigorously promoted by magazine editor Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, with editorials and Thanksgiving recipes for turkey, oysters, potatoes, cranberries, and pie.

Hale's September 1863 letter to President Lincoln helped persuade him to proclaim the last Thursday of November as a national day of thanksgiving and praise. All presidents since have issued annual Thanksgiving holiday proclamations.

### Thanksgiving Traditions

Thanksgiving traditions have come and gone through the years, but one tradition that has long played a central role in Thanksgiving celebrations is the enjoyment of a hearty meal, as can be seen in articles, recipes, and advertisements in magazines and newspapers throughout the 1800s and 1900s. Masking was another tradition that was popular for several decades in cities such as New York, where on Thanksgiving Day would be seen costumed "processions of lads and children blowing on tin horns, beating tin drums and whooping as recklessly as so



Thanksgiving dinner menus, 1901  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1901-11-24/ed-1/seq-17/>

many young savages" and squads of "apparently well to do men marching in irregular order and conducting themselves like tramps," according to one newspaper of the time. Football, shopping, and parades have come into prominence in recent years, and it is likely that new Thanksgiving traditions are being developed even now.

### Thanksgiving Finds a Permanent Home on the Calendar

In 1939, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared November 23, the next-to-last Thursday of the month, to be Thanksgiving Day, prompted by requests from the National Retail Dry Goods Association to extend the Christmas shopping season by one week. However, the proclamation applied only to the District of Columbia and to federal employees. While governors usually followed the president's lead with state proclamations for the same day, in that year 23 states observed Thanksgiving Day on November 23; 23 states celebrated on November 30; and Texas and Colorado declared both Thursdays to be holidays. Football coaches scrambled to reschedule games set for November 30, and people weren't sure when to start their holiday shopping. After two years of confusion and complaint, President Roosevelt signed legislation establishing Thanksgiving Day as the fourth Thursday in November, where it remains to this day.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Students might examine two or more Thanksgiving-related primary sources that include depictions of food. Ask them to create a list of foods they see. Why do students think those foods were bought, advertised, or served at Thanksgiving? Which of these foods are the same or different than the food at their own family celebrations? (Students may make the same comparisons to the past using images of school children from the set.)

Distribute or project *The First Thanksgiving 1621* and facilitate an analysis, selecting questions from the Teacher's Guide: Analyzing Photographs and Prints to focus and deepen students' thinking. Ask students to jot down what year, roughly, they think the events depicted in this image took place, and what clues they see in the picture to guide their answers. Then ask them to jot down what year they think the image was created, and why. Present students with the image's bibliographic information, ask them to focus on the title and creation date, and compare this information to their hypotheses. Focus on the 300-year gap between the year the image was created and the events it depicts; ask students to explain whether or not the painting should be considered an accurate source of information about Thanksgiving in 1621, and why.

Ask students to turn and talk about what they know about the ways in which Thanksgiving is celebrated today. Record answers or direct students to keep notes. Distribute or project *The First Thanksgiving 1621* and allow students time to examine it. Ask them to describe what they see. Encourage close observation by focusing on one quadrant of the image at a time. If needed, prompt students to talk about food, clothing, etc. Ask them what they think is happening, responding with "Tell me what you see that makes you say that." Support students in comparing what they know about Thanksgiving today to how the painting depicts one Thanksgiving celebration of long ago, creating a list for "Past" and one for "Present."

Allow time for students to read and analyze Sarah Hale's letter to Abraham Lincoln. Ask them to write a diary entry as if they were Sarah Hale, explaining their efforts to approach and influence Lincoln to declare a national day of thanks.

Ask students to compare Lincoln's Thanksgiving proclamation with George Washington's to explore the purpose and characteristics of each.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



### Primary Sources and the Thanksgiving Holiday

<http://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2013/11/blog-roundup-primary-sources-and-the-thanksgiving-holiday/>



### Topics in Chronicling America – Thanksgiving

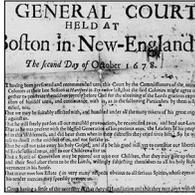
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/thanksgiving.html>



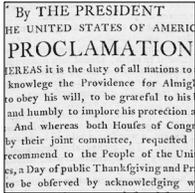
### Unmasking a Thanksgiving Tradition Through Photos and Newspapers

<http://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2015/11/unmasking-a-thanksgiving-tradition-through-photos-and-newspapers/>

## PRIMARY SOURCES WITH CITATIONS

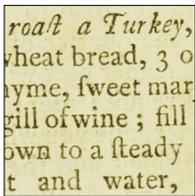


Massachusetts General Court. *At a General Court held at Boston in New England the second day of October 1678. [A proclamation for a day of fasting and prayer November 21, 1678].* Cambridge, 1678. Broadside. From Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division. <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.03301000/>



"By the President of the United States of America. A Proclamation." *Gazette of the United-States. (New-York [N.Y.]), 07 Oct. 1789. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.* From Library of Congress.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030483/1789-10-07/ed-1/seq-1/>



"To stuff and roast a Turkey, or Fowl." Simmons, Amelia. *American cookery, or, The art of dressing viands, fish, poultry, and vegetables...* Hartford: Printed by Hudson & Goodwin for the Author, 1796. Book. From Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division. <https://www.loc.gov/item/96126967/>



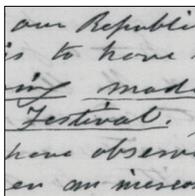
N. Currier. *Landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth 11th Dec. 1620.* [New York, between 1838 and 1856]. Lithograph. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/95503144/>



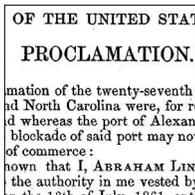
Waud, Alfred R., artist. *Thanksgiving in camp sketched Thursday 28th 1861.* [1861]. Drawing. From Library of Congress, *Morgan Collection of Civil War Drawings.*

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2004660226/>



Sarah J. Hale to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, September 28, 1863 (Thanksgiving). From Library of Congress, *The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress.*

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal1/266/2669900/malpage.db&recNum=0>



United States. *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America by Authority of Congress.* 3 October 1863. Pages 735-736. From Library of Congress, *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875.*

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=013/llsl013.db&recNum=764>



Rhead, Louis, artist. *Harper's Bazaar--Thanksgiving 1894* / Louis J. Rhead. [New York, 1894]. Periodical illustration. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/93511351/>



Johnston, Frances Benjamin, photographer. "Thanksgiving Day lesson at Whittier." [1899 or 1900]. Photograph. From Library of Congress, *Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection*.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/97507246/>



The Saint Paul Globe. "Thanksgiving An Inspiration Peculiar to the Nation." Nov. 22, 1903. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress.  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90059523/1903-11-22/ed-1/seq-12/>



Glackens, L. M., artist. *Puck Thanksgiving 1903* / L.M. Glackens. N.Y.: J. Ottmann Lith. Co., Puck Bldg, 1903. Illustration. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2010652321/>



Bain News Service, publisher. "School children's Thanksgiving Games, 11/27/11." Photograph. From Library of Congress, *George Grantham Bain Collection*.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/ggb2004010001/>



*The Princeton union*. (Princeton, Minn.), Nov. 26, 1914. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress.  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016758/1914-11-26/ed-1/seq-7/>



Bain News Service, publisher. *Thanksgiving Maskers*. [between and Ca. 1915, ca. 1910] Image. From Library of Congress, *George Grantham Bain Collection*.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/ggb2004010002/>



"Thanksgiving, 1919." 1919. Photograph. From Library of Congress, *National Photo Company Collection*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/npc2007000835/>



*El Nuevo mexicano*. "Programa escolar de Dia de Gracias en Maxwell, NM." Dec. 2, 1920. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn94056869/1920-12-02/ed-1/seq-4/>



Ferris, Jean Leon Gerome, artist. *The first Thanksgiving 1621 / J.L.G. Ferris*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Foundation Press, Inc, ca. 1932. Image. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2001699850/>



Parks, Gordon, photographer. Washington, D.C. "Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, serving portions of Thanksgiving turkey to members of his family." Nov. 1942. Photograph. From Library of Congress, *Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information Photograph Collection*. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/fsa.8d10908/>