
History of Thanksgiving in American Popular Culture

The annual American holiday celebrating the Autumn harvest in the United States is modeled on the three-day harvest feast shared by the Pilgrims of Plymouth and the Wampanoag Indians in 1621 in Plymouth. Thanksgiving Day was the first holiday celebrated in America, and is today a federal holiday celebrated annually on the fourth Thursday of November. The meaning and the means of celebrating Thanksgiving has changed from generation to generation throughout history. From the time of Thanksgiving as a solemn and prayerful occasion when people expressed their gratitude to God, to the current day traditions of modern America, the connection between Thanksgiving and the Pilgrims has added to the holiday's historical importance and meaning, lending it associations with the values of perseverance, freedom, and democracy. Even if the Pilgrims did not intend to launch a national holiday, there is no doubt that their story has contributed a great deal to the modern understanding of Thanksgiving.

On September 6, 1620, 120 men, women and children boarded two English merchant ships called the Mayflower and the Speedwell, in Southampton Harbor, England. An assortment of religious separatists, known to Americans as the Pilgrims, who were seeking a new home with religious freedom, and lured by the promise of prosperity and land ownership in the New World, set off across the Atlantic Ocean to establish a new life. These pilgrims decided to risk it all by starting a new colony in the New World. Against a background of European cynicism, religious wars and despotism, America offered escape against tyranny, and even the wilderness of the New World's inhabitants seemed attractive. No one expected it to be easy, as William Bradford, the leader of Plymouth Colony wrote, the dangers were great, but not desperate, the difficulties were many, but not invincible. The dangers were perfectly clear even as the project was being discussed in Leiden (The Netherlands), where the Separatists first took refuge from religious persecution in England. They feared 'the casualties of the seas' and 'the miseries of the land'. And in their discussions, they produced a list of the problems that might affect their projects, such as the effect of the sea voyage on women and the elderly, the consequences of change in the air, the cost of the ship and the necessary supplies, as well as the difficulty of being re-supplied. But above all, they feared America's native occupants.

Two months later, they sighted land on a cold November night at Cape Cod, Massachusetts, far north of their intended destination but then turned South for Hudson River Valley, hoping to move closer to establish the colony and in search of warm weather. The original charter that the passengers had received from their sponsors had granted them the right to settle on land, near the Hudson River, in present-day New York City. But, hard winter currents forced them back to their original spot, in Massachusetts, where they set up anchor and settled down. The Pilgrims began then to work on establishing a village called Plymouth. After landing, as Bradford wrote,

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they had no friends to welcome them, nor inns or entertains to refresh their weather-beaten bodies, no houses or much fewer towns to repair to, to seek for succor. As he described in his diary, it was a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men. Although the explorers found many signs of Native American inhabitants, including an abandoned village, tilled fields and stockpiles of food and seeds, they did not make contact with many people. They searched the area for a month before finding a suitable site for their settlement, which they called Plymouth.

The pilgrims' initial problems about permission to depart meant their new colony did not have the advantage of a royal charter. Therefore, just before they landed, the settlers decided to draw up a new contract for their colony, called the Mayflower Compact, so that everyone would have to abide by the same laws and to organize them as a civil body politic. It was the New World's first written constitution, the first framework of government written and enacted in the territory of the United States of America. To protect the colony from the instability caused by rebellions, the pilgrim leaders recruited law-abiding people to settle their colony. With this in mind, they created a temporary set of laws for governing themselves. On November 11, 1620, 41 adult male colonists signed the Mayflower Compact. It was an attempt to establish a temporary, legally-binding form of self-government until the Pilgrims could get formal permission from the Council of New England. This formal permission came in the form of the Fierce Patent of 1621. The text was first published in London in 1622 in 'A Relation of the Journal of the Beginning and Proceeding of the English Plantation Settled at Plymouth in New England.' written by William Bradford and Edward Winslow. Bradford explains that the reason he wrote the manuscript was so that the descendants of the Pilgrims would know and appreciate the hardship their ancestors faced.

The pilgrims came across Native Americans and started a conflict, so they decided to settle between two tall hills as defensive positions. The native inhabitants of the region around Plymouth Colony were the various tribes of the Wampanoag people, who had lived there for over 10,000 years before Europeans arrived. The Wampanoags were a confederacy of some 30 minor subtribes in what is now southeastern Massachusetts, eastern Rhode Island and offshore islands. They were already known to Europeans before the arrival of the Pilgrims. The Pilgrims moved the Mayflower to join the Wampanoag Tribe and began construction of their new colony, but without food or proper shelter, the Pilgrims began to die out and, after their first brutal winter only 42 out of 102 original pilgrims remained. The major causes of death came from exposure, scurvy and contagious diseases. Soon after the Pilgrims built their settlement, they came into contact with Squanto, a Wampanoag who was kidnapped and taken to Spain and then England, where he lived for two years before boarding a vessel with a mission to explore the Newfoundland. He agreed to stay with the Pilgrims and teach them how to survive by sharing knowledge of the land, teaching the Pilgrims how to plant corn, beans, and squash, how to avoid poisonous plants, and so on. He also helped to forge an alliance with the

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Wampanoag Tribe, and finally, he served the colonists as a guide in their contacts with the Indians.

By the end of the summer of 1621 -thanks in part to Squanto's assistance- the Pilgrims had built eleven strong houses and collected plenty of food to last through the winter. When fall came and the harvest was ready to be brought in, the pilgrims found themselves looking optimistically to the next year as they survived another year and they would have enough food to survive after a year of sickness and scarcity. Governor William Bradford organized a celebratory feast and invited the Native American allies to give thanks to the Lord for their bounty and good luck. Some men were sent into the forest to shoot a few birds (turkeys and waterfowl). Massasoit, the chief of the Wampanoag Tribe joined with 90 of his people and brought fish, crab, and lobster and freshly harvested corn, beans and more. This celebration lasted three days and was a harvest festival with games, sports, and family. They were thankful that there would be enough food and that they survived another year, they set aside their differences to give thanks for a chance at life. The exact date of the Pilgrim's feast is not known. It almost certainly took place sometime between September 21 and November 9, 1621. In many ways, the celebration that has been immortalized as the 'First Thanksgiving' marked a new kind of holiday that departed from their earlier traditions. The Pilgrims never used the word 'Thanksgiving' to describe the event. It was not a harvest festival either, because the Pilgrims did not intend to make it an annual event. Although they gave thanks to God, it was mostly a joyous celebration of the survival of their colony against long odds.

On November 10, 1621, shortly after the Pilgrims had held their famous harvest celebration, another ship arrived at Plymouth Colony. 'The Fortune' brought 37 English passengers, nearly doubling the population of the settlement. Unfortunately, it did not bring many provisions, forcing the Pilgrims to divide their hard-earned food stores in half to feed the newcomers. The first recorded instance of the Pilgrims holding a religious thanksgiving took place on July 26, 1623. That summer had been hot and dry, and the near-drought conditions threatened to destroy the colonists' corn and other crops. Governor Bradford set aside a special day of fasting and prayer in hopes of gaining God's mercy. A short time later, as he recalled in his journal, it began to 'rain with such sweet and gentle showers as gave them cause of rejoicing and blessing God's help; For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of Thanksgiving.' This Thanksgiving was a solemn, religious occasion and did not involve a feast. But, the Pilgrims were not the first to give thanks, as some native communities had regularly given thanks for nature's gifts for centuries before the arrival of Europeans on the continent.

Giving thanks for the Creator's gifts had always been a part of the Wampanoag daily life. Since ancient times, native communities have held ceremonies to give thanks for successful harvests and the prospect of a good growing season in the early Spring. After the initial problems of food and shelter had been solved, Plymouth turned out to be remarkably healthy but a backwater.

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There were few fur-bearing animals, and the soils were poor. The Pilgrims had come to America to practice religion the way God wanted. They did not extend this to others so Plymouth was not a haven for those who were persecuted for their religious beliefs. The population grew slowly, but steadily reaching seven thousand persons when the colony was absorbed by Massachusetts in 1691.

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.' On October 3, 1789, George Washington issued his Thanksgiving proclamation, designating for a day of thanksgiving to the people of the United States on Thursday the 26th day of November. He called upon the Americans to express their gratitude for the happy conclusion to the country's war of independence and the successful ratification of the US Constitution. He states that: 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. However, Thanksgiving did not become an annual tradition at this time. Presidents John Adams and James Madison also declared national days of thanks during their presidencies, but no other president did until Abraham Lincoln. President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation in 1863, calling on Americans to set aside their differences and observe the last Thursday of November as a day of Thanksgiving. Proclaiming it a national Thanksgiving Day, to be held each November. This was also partly to celebrate the victories in the then raging Civil War. The holiday was vigorously promoted by Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, an American writer and influential editor with editorials and Thanksgiving recipes for turkey, oysters, potatoes, cranberries, and pie. She continued her letter-writing campaign during war years, and one letter finally succeeded in convincing President Abraham Lincoln to adopt her recommendation. Hale's September 1863 letter to President Abraham Lincoln helped persuade him to proclaim the last Thursday of November as a national day of thanksgiving and praise. Urging him to have the 'day of our annual Thanksgiving made a National and fixed Union Festival.' She explained, You may have observed that, for some years past, there has been an increasing interest felt in our land to have Thanksgiving held on the same day, in all the States; it now needs National recognition and authoritative fixation, only, to become permanently, an American custom and institution. She established a campaign to help launch Thanksgiving as a national holiday. For 36 years she published numerous editorials and sent letters to governors, senators, presidents, and other politicians. From 1863 onward, every U.S. president has respected Lincoln's precedent and proclaimed a national Thanksgiving holiday in November of each year.

Throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries, the story of the Pilgrims and their 1621 harvest celebration was largely forgotten and did not play a role in popular celebrations of Thanksgiving. Instead, most Americans simply observed the holiday in the New England Lejeune del Castillo 8 tradition, with church services, family reunions, and large meals. The only place where the Pilgrims received much attention was in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The Pilgrims first began

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claiming a place in the public imagination in 1820, when the famous orator, Daniel Webster presented a moving tribute at a bicentennial celebration of their arrival in the New World. Webster's speech helped elevate the Pilgrims to iconic status as 'forefathers of the nation' in the eyes of many Americans. Although the English colony at Jamestown, Virginia, had been established earlier, Webster helped draw people's attention toward the founders of Plymouth Colony instead. The Pilgrim's reputation grew following the bicentennial celebration and Webster's speech, but their connection with the Thanksgiving holiday remained distant for another two decades. In 1841, historian Alexander Young published a book called 'Chronicles of the Pilgrims Forefathers.' He clarified and identified the feast as the predecessor of New England's Thanksgiving holiday tradition. In an explanatory footnote, YOUNG referred to the Pilgrims' celebration as the 'first Thanksgiving' and speculated that their feast had included turkey. Historians have since determined that this marked the earliest scholarly reference to any event as the 'first Thanksgiving.' The arrival of the Pilgrims brought new Thanksgiving traditions to the American culture.

Today's national Thanksgiving celebration is a blend of two traditions: the New England custom of rejoicing after a successful harvest, and the Puritan Thanksgiving, a solemn religious observance combining prayer and feasting. Other explorers and colonists celebrated religious services of Thanksgiving years before The Mayflower arrived. However, few people knew about these events and they played no role in the evolution of Thanksgiving. But as James W. Baker states in his book 'Thanksgiving: The Biography of an American Holiday' despite some disagreements over the details the three-day event in Plymouth in the fall of 1621 was the historical birth of the American Thanksgiving holiday. Despite all the changes that have taken place throughout history, the Thanksgiving feast has retained its vital place in American culture for more than 300 years. Food remains at the center of the holiday tradition, but the exact components of the meal are less important than the fact that it is shared with family and friends.

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