

Thanksgiving Traditions
By
Toby A. Echelberry

When you hear Thanksgiving what comes to mind first, the turkey with the fixings, family gathering or the Macy's Day Parade? Even though we as Americans tend to think of this as a traditional celebrated American Holiday, Thanksgiving is celebrated in several countries but not necessarily the same day or purpose.

In 1863 as the United States entered its third year of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln began the year by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation declaring slaves of the secessionist states are free. On October 3 of the same year, President Lincoln made a proclamation that the last Thursday of November be a day every citizen at home or abroad should set the day aside and celebrate it as a day of Thanksgiving. But what is Thanksgiving? Is it about Pilgrims, a festive meal, or even about a turkey or who is the best football team that day?

If you were to look up the word "Thanksgiving" in the Webster Dictionary, you see the definition is the act of giving thanks, a prayer of gratitude or a public acknowledgement or celebration of divine goodness. The history of the showing Thanksgiving is truly a festival of celebrating the end of successful harvest season. This can be seen throughout history and has traces back through many cultures. The celebration of harvest can be seen with the Greeks as they celebrated Demeter (sister of Zeus and mother of Persephone), who was the god of Harvest. Demeter was the Greek goddess of harvest, fertility, seasons, and sacred law. Each year Greeks would celebrate the beginning of harvest with Thesmophoria, a pre-harvest ritual celebrated by women that lasted three to five days baking honey cakes, fasting, singing hymns, and committing sacrifice to promote fertility for themselves and the crops of the season.

In ancient Egypt, the harvest season was celebrated with three festivals, Sham en-Nassim (Shemu), the beginning of the harvest season where offerings were made of salted fish, lettuce, and onions to the gods. In the second month of Shemu, The Beautiful Festival of the Valley celebrated the god Amun by floating flowers in the image of Amun down the Nile from Karnak to the funerary temples. At the end of the season, The Min Festival, was celebrated with parades, feasts, dance, and sports to Min, the Egyptian god of vegetation and fertility.

Every year since the Shang dynasty, the Chinese have been celebrating the Mid-Autumn festival or known as the Mooncake Festival. This festival is celebrated on the 15th day of the 8th month of the Chinese lunar calendar. This festival is one of the most important holidays of the year for the Chinese culture that celebrate the Gathering, Giving Thanks and Praying. Ancient Chinese believed that rejuvenation is associated with the marriage of the moon and water. The Zhuang believed the phases of the moon represent the pregnancy of a woman where at its fullest is a sign of full pregnancy and birth happens with the crescent moon. The festival is celebrated with lantern lighting, sharing of mooncakes, dragon dances, family gatherings, gift giving and prayer.

Since medieval England, the start of the harvest season was marked with Lammas Day which was the celebration of the start of harvest by taking the first grains harvested and baking them into loaves of bread. At the end of the harvest season, they would celebrate Harvest Home

where everyone gathered for a generous meal, dance, and fellowship with friends. In more recent years, Harvest Home was even more of a community event and often hosted by the Church.

In July 1565, Spain's King Phillip II on fear of the French colonization in the New World, sent Pedro Mendez de Aviles with eleven ships and about 2,000 men and their families to establish a colony and deal with the French. On September 8th, he entered the bay of St. Augustine and waded ashore with eight hundred colonists. Father Francisco Lopez, the fleet's captain, held up a cross and declared Florida in the name of God and Spain. Father Francisco Lopez erected a makeshift altar and held the first mass for the colonists. From the tree line emerged members of the Timucua tribe and curiously watched the foreigners. Pedro Mendez de Aviles then chose to have a feast to celebrate the arrival and declaring Florida in the name of Spain. Aviles then went on to invite the Indigenous Timucua tribe, and they joined in the communal meal. Shortly afterwards they worked side by side and built a fort.

In 1607, close to Portland, Maine once stood a colony by the name of Popham. The Popham Colony was led by Captain George Popham. The Popham Colony was the second colony in modern day New England settled in 1604 in originally St. Croix Island but moved to the Bay of Fundy after the death of several patrons and their first colony President fourteen months later. The move was successful, and the colonists found better land to develop crops and lush gardens of herbs. In September of 1607, the colonists met and engaged with the Abenaki tribe when nine canoes arrived near their settlement led by Skidwarres, a member of the tribe who had two years ago had a run in with another group of colonists led by Captain George Weymouth. The colonists met them with open arms and invited them to eat and stay with them, which Skidwarres and one other did. In October of the same year Skidwarres returned with four other tribe members and they feasted for two days, which the second day was Sunday, so the settlers shared the day with morning and evening prayers.

On December 4, 1619, 38 English settlers arrived about twenty miles north of Jamestown at Berkeley Hundred an area the size of about 8,000 acres just off the north bank of the James River after a tedious and stormy three-month voyage from Bristol, England. As part of the group's charter, it was required that the colony would celebrate the day of arrival as a day of thanksgiving. On the very first day, Captain John Woodlief held the daily prayers, and they celebrated with a feast.

The most popular date in history of North American origins for Thanksgiving was a three-day event held in the late autumn of 1621 at the Plymouth Colony and was not called a Thanksgiving but was a harvest celebration. The celebration was with a little over fifty colonists (half of the charter that sailed the prior year where many perished in the first year) and ninety members of the Pokanoket Wampanoag tribe to include their King Ousemequin (known as Massasoit to the pilgrims). Giving thanks was an important part of both cultures where prayer was a part of every meal and especially on this joyous occasion celebrating the harvest and for the indigenous people it was equally important as giving thanks was a daily part of their lives and this occasion was especially important to share in their joy of the land and the acknowledgement for the great feast of the hunt.

Approximately 150 years pass before the next great occurrence of Thanksgiving being recorded in North America. There were brief mentions in various diaries and journals from various individuals over the years but none as important as in November of 1775 printed in the Boston

Gazette and the Country Journal as a proclamation from King George III asking for a public thanksgiving where everyone should offer up humble and fervent Prayers to Almighty God and the whole British Empire. In 1777, a second proclamation was posted but this one from the Continental Congress requesting a Thanksgiving Day for the American victory at Saratoga.

After becoming a nation, as first Congress was ending its session in New York City, they passed a resolution asking that President George Washington to recommend a day of thanksgiving. On October 3, President Washington issued a proclamation stating on Thursday, November 26, 1789, the nation should take a day of thanksgiving and prayer to recognize the creation of the United States and the new federal Constitution. Six years later, President Washington called for the second proclamation when he called for another thanksgiving and prayer be conducted on Thursday, February 19, 1795. Both Washington and Adams as President continued the tradition each year with recognizing and asking the nation as well to recognize a day of thanksgiving and prayer. In 1801, Thomas Jefferson refused to mark the occasion as he believed in separation of church and state as well, he opposed it as it was in his mind a remnant of Britain's reign over the colonies. If he stood behind recognizing it, then he felt it would have been a state-sponsored religion. This event marked Jefferson as the only anti-Thanksgiving President.

On July 9th, 1812, with request from Congress, President James Madison issued a proclamation requesting the third Thursday of August be held as a day of thanksgiving as the nation engaged in the war of 1812. A year later, July 23rd, President Madison addressed the nation again with another proclamation asking the nation to spend the second Thursday of September to give thanks and prayer for the nation as it continues its war and political strife. On March 4, 1815, President Madison would issue Proclamation 20 which recommended a day of public thanksgiving for peace and that day should be the second Thursday in April after receiving joint resolution from Congress.

An author of a book titled Godey's Lady Book named Sarah Josepha Hale petitioned Congress and five sitting Presidents for seventeen long years trying to get someone to establish Thanksgiving as a national annual holiday. President Zachary Taylor issued a proclamation instead for the first Friday of August be observed as a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer in 1849. In 1859 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Richardson vs. Goddard that presidential proclamations of thanksgiving didn't exempt any individuals from fulfilling any contractual agreements on declared days of thanksgiving. In 1862, President Lincoln issued the first of two proclamations for thanksgiving, the first was in April on the 10th where he stated that citizens should after victories in the Civil War, should the next day of public worship should give thanks to God for the victory and remember those who had perished.

On June 28, 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant signs the Holidays Act (HR 2224) from the 41st Congress which called official recognition of holidays New Years Day, July 4th (Independence Day), Christmas Day and any day the President calls for a day of thanksgiving and declare them as paid holidays for federal works in the Washington D.C. area. For the next three decades each sitting President each year in autumn would announce the last Thursday of each November as a day of prayer and Thanksgiving.

On July 6, 1898, President William McKinley issued a second proclamation in response to the flawless victory of the United States navy victory against Spain at the Battle of Manila Bay in the

Spanish-American War and the victories on land with the Rough Riders led by Theodore Roosevelt at San Juan Hill asked the nation to provide thanksgiving and prayer.

In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson during his normal proclamation for fall thanksgiving, asked the nation, even though we were not apart of the war, to honor those who are and acknowledge how we are aiding those who are at war. He also went on to ask for thanks for the new commerce at the opening of the Panama Canal as well. In the years to follow, 1915 through 1918, the message of thanksgiving continued to focus on the Great War. In the 1917 proclamation, President Wilson even commented on the short supply of goods as these essentials and harvests are being used in the war effort. In the 1918 proclamation, President Wilson expressed gratitude for the peace that had finally become as the end of the war to end all wars. In 1919 and 1920, President Wilson praises the healing from the peace of war.

In 1939, November had five Thursdays and as a result President Franklin D. Roosevelt with advisement and suggestions coming from individuals like Fred Lazarus, Jr. (founder of the Federated Department Stores (aka Macy's) moved the observation of Thanksgiving one week earlier to boost the economy and try to get more retail holiday spending. The response felt it was controversial and started calling it Franksgiving as a result. Proclamation 2373 addressed by President Roosevelt acknowledged that it has been three centuries of celebration for this day of thanksgiving after a season of harvest and acknowledged to Pilgrim's effort to this day. After two years of calling for thanksgiving a week earlier than normal, on October 6, 1941, the United States Congress passed a joint resolution requiring that Thanksgiving be observed annually on the fourth Thursday of November and that it is a federal holiday.

There are several modern traditions that are associated with Thanksgiving to contain eating a large turkey dinner and pumpkin pie after watching the parade. The oldest Thanksgiving Day parade was not in New York but Philadelphia, which started in 1920 created by Ellis Gimbel the founder of Gimbels Department Store. Much like the New York parade the first Philadelphia parade included 50 Gimbels employees, floats, balloons, marching bands, and Santa Claus. The parade route would start at Philadelphia Metropolitan Museum and ends at Gimbels where Santa Claus would disembark his float and make his way to the eighth floor in the middle of the toy department where he would take pictures with children and families.

In New York starting in 1870 until the mid-1950s the tradition for around Thanksgiving time was to celebrate Ragamuffin Day in late October to early November where children would typically dress in costumes (in the first few year's costumes were met to be in the style of the homeless) and would go door to door asking for candy or money. This holiday was a precursor to Halloween trick-or-treating. In the mid to late 1930s, several organizations were trying to stop the celebration of Ragamuffin and in its place Thanksgiving parades were chosen for the more common celebration.

On November 27, 1924, after seeing the success in Philadelphia, R. H. Macy started up a Christmas Parade to kickstart start the holiday shopping season at their new store's location. The parade featured floats with employees dressed up as characters from nursery rhymes and animals from the Central Park Zoo along with Santa Claus at the end unveiling the Christmas displays in the store's windows. In 1927, the signature of the large helium filled balloons began with the first balloon being Felix the Cat. At the end of the parade, the balloons would all be released, a tradition

that stopped in 1932. Also, in 1927 the name of the parade changed from being a Christmas parade to that being a Thanksgiving Day Parade.

However, the largest parade in America was not found in either Philadelphia or New York, but in Detroit. In 1924, the head of the J. L. Hudson Company department store, director Charles Wendel modeled a parade after the Eaton's Santa Claus Parade in Toronto, Canada. What set this parade apart from the rest was accompanying the normal floats and marching bands was large papier-mâché heads. In 1924 the prominent float was that of Mother Goose with four paper mâché heads of beloved characters. At the end of the parade the "real Santa Claus" would step down off the float and accept the key to the city from the mayor and the hearts of all good children everywhere.

One last tradition that is synonymous with Thanksgiving was the pardoning of a turkey on Thanksgiving Day. The origin of this story goes back to 1863, where Abraham Lincoln had received a live turkey as a gift for the family to feast upon for the upcoming Christmas. Tad, a lover of animals quickly adopted the turkey, named him Jack, and added him to his corral of ponies and goats. On Christmas Eve, President Lincoln told Tad Jack can no longer be a pet and reminded him that the turkey was sent as a gift for a meal. Tad wept, begged, and pleaded for the life of Jack. President Lincoln laughed and finally gave in and wrote a reprieve for Jack. In the 1870s the tradition started of sending turkeys annually to the White House. Sporadically over the years each sitting President would accept the turkeys and at times make mention of the birds being saved until Christmas time or donating the birds to farms or zoos. Papers would write either words to describe the event as a reprieve or a pardon, but it was not until 1989 in response to animal rights activists did President George H. W. Bush sign a formal pardon for the gifted fowl.