



THE EVOLUTION OF



Today's Thanksgiving is an offshoot of 3 separate traditions.



One tradition is the harvest festival.

The event we call the "First Thanksgiving" at Plymouth, held by the Pilgrims and their Native American neighbors in 1621, was an informal harvest festival. While both the Pilgrims and the Native Americans would have expressed their thanks to God on a daily basis, this festival was a secular celebration. It was, however, deeply influenced - as was every aspect of Pilgrim life - by their deep knowledge of, and regard for, Scripture.

The celebration was a one-time event. The colonists did not intend to establish an annual holiday and there was no official "Thanksgiving proclamation."

The 1621 celebration is described in a contemporary source known as *Mourt's Relation*:

"... our harvest being gotten in, our Governour sent foure men on fowling, that so we might after a more speciall manner rejoyce together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labours the foure in one day killed as much fowle, as with a little helpe beside, served the Company almost a weeke, at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Armes, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest King Massasoyt, with some nintie men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deere, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governour, and upon the Captaine, and others. And although it be not always so plentifull, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so farre from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plentie."

A relation or jounnall of the beginning & proceedings of the English plantation settled at Plimoth in New England
(known as "*Mourt's Relation*"). London: 1622.

The second tradition from which our modern Thanksgiving has evolved is the Puritan religious "Day of Thanksgiving" called by a religious leader in response to a special act of Divine Providence.

These Days of Thanksgiving were purely religious and the entire day would have been spent in church, with no feasting or amusements.

The third tradition is a special day of thanksgiving, called by a civic (not a religious) authority, to celebrate a specific event, such as victory in battle or the end of a war.

King William and Queen Mary of England proclaimed a Thanksgiving for victory over the French. Their Thanksgiving was celebrated (like our modern Thanksgivings) on the 4th Thursday in November, November 26, 1691.



By the King and Queen,

A PROCLAMATION

For a Publick THANKSGIVING.

WILLIAM R.

WHereas Their Majesties, in serious Consideration of the War in which Their Majesties (together with most of the Princes and States of Europe) were (and still are) Engaged against the French King, did, by Their Royal Proclamation bearing Date the Ninth day of April last, Appoint a General Monthly Fast to be kept throughout this Kingdom, by Solemn Humiliation and Repentance of Our Sins, and by humble Supplications to Almighty GOD for the Preservation of Their Majesties Sacred Persons, and the Prosperous Success of Their Arms, which hath been Religiously kept and observed accordingly. And forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty GOD of his Infinite Goodness, in answer to the Prayers offered up on that Occasion, to Protect His Majesty from great and manifold Dangers in His late Expedition beyond the Seas, and bring Him back in Safety, and to Preserve Their Majesties and Their Government against all the wicked Machinations and Designs of Open and Secret Enemies, and by a Wonderful Success of Their Arms to Reduce the Kingdom of Ireland entirely to Their Obedience, whereby Their Majesties are now Established in the full Possession of Their Other Kingdoms, and in a Condition, with the Blessing of GOD, to settle the same in a firm and lasting state of Safety, Honour, and Prosperity. Their Majesties therefore with all Humility Adoring the Mercy of the Divine Providence manifested to them and Their People, and duly considering that Publick and Signal Blessings do call for Publick and Solemn Acknowledgments, Have thought fit, and by, and with the Advice of Their Privy-Council do hereby Appoint and Command, That a General and Publick Thanksgiving to Almighty GOD for these Great Blessings be Observed throughout this Realm of England, Dominion of Wales, and Town of Berwick upon Tweed, in most Devout and Solemn manner, on Thursday the Six and twentieth Day of November next ensuing. And for the better and more orderly Solemnizing of the same, Their Majesties have given Direction to the Most Reverend the Arch-bishops, and the Right Reverend Bishops of this Kingdom, to Compose a Form of Prayer suitable to this Occasion, to be Used in all Churches and Chapels, and other Places of Publick Worship, and so take Care for the timely dispersing of the same through their respective Diocesses. And Their Majesties do strictly Charge and Command, That the said Day of Publick Thanksgiving be Religiously Observed by all Their Loving Subjects, as they tender the Favour of Almighty GOD, and upon Pain of such Punishments as Their Majesties can justly inflict for the Contempt or Neglect thereof.

Given at Our Court at Whitehall the Two and twentieth Day of October, 1691. In the Third Year of Our Reign.

These three traditions gradually combined in colonial New England. A new custom was born: a special day of both prayer and of feasting, celebrated in family groups, and proclaimed annually by the Governor in thanks for general well-being and a successful harvest.

This New England custom was carried across the country as the United States expanded westward.

The tradition of a "civic Thanksgiving" for a special event continued, however. In some years, particularly if there was a victory in battle as well as a successful harvest, there would be two Thanksgivings!



By the 1840s, most states and territories celebrated Thanksgiving, by proclamation of the individual Governors. Not all states celebrated Thanksgiving every year, however, and the dates on which it was celebrated varied widely from state to state.

In 1846, Sarah Josepha Hale, the influential editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, **began an editorial campaign to make Thanksgiving a national holiday**. Mrs. Hale was a native New Englander. She hoped that a national Thanksgiving would bring strength to family ties and bring unity and moral strength to the country.

Mrs. Hale's hopes for national unity were not realized. She continued her Thanksgiving campaign, however, and in 1863, in the midst of America's Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the first annual national Thanksgiving. **Every President since has issued an annual Thanksgiving Proclamation.**



THANKSGIVING AS AN ANNUAL HOLIDAY A CHRONOLOGY

1621 First "Thanksgiving" (a secular harvest feast, not a religious Thanksgiving) at Plymouth. (Other "Thanksgivings" were held in Texas in 1541, St. Augustine in 1564, Maine in 1607 and Virginia in 1610 and 1619).

1623 Bradford proclaims Plymouth's first religious Day of Thanksgiving as drought ends & the ship *Anne* is sighted.

1631 Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay proclaims a religious Day of Thanksgiving as a ship (thought lost at sea) arrives with food for the starving colony.

1668 Plymouth Colony proclaims its first Thanksgiving in gratitude for general blessings of the year: "The Court taking notice of the goodnes of God to us in the continuance of our civill and religious liberties, the generall health that wee have enjoyed, and that it hath pleased God in some comfortable measure to blesse us in the fruites of the earth" asked the several religious congregations within Plymouth Colony to celebrate Thanksgiving jointly on the 25th of November 1668.

1777 First Thanksgiving proclaimed by national authority (Continental Congress) for all 13 states on December 18 (many states had individual Days of Thanksgiving earlier that year). The national Thanksgivings continued until 1784 and then stopped; the other states were resisting a "New England holiday."

1789 A national Thanksgiving (but not an annual Thanksgiving) is proclaimed by President Washington. Of the early Presidents, only Washington, Adams and Madison declare individual Days of Thanksgiving. Annual Days of Thanksgiving are

celebrated in individual New England states and begin to spread (to New York in 1817, Michigan in 1824, and Ohio in 1839).

1846 Sarah Josepha Hale begins her campaign in Godey's Lady's Book for a national annual Thanksgiving.

1863 Abraham Lincoln declares national Thanksgiving on last Thursday of November. There has been a national annual Thanksgiving Day ever since. It is still up to the state governors to also declare a Day of Thanksgiving. Not all have done so, and some have proclaimed their state's Day of Thanksgiving on a different day than the national Thanksgiving.