

Happy Thanksgiving

A Christian Tradition

It was 400 years ago that the Mayflower landed at Plimoth* Rock in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. No doubt bringing with them their 1611 Edition of God's Word, the Pilgrims had endured 3 months of ocean travel before they set their feet on solid earth again.

The Pilgrims celebrated their very first Thanksgiving, which was in fact a harvest festival, the very next year on November 26, 1621. This was a time of joyous celebration for the plentiful bounty bestowed on them by their Creator, which they shared with the Wampanoag, who also gave their Creator thanks.

"To these people of strong Christian faith, this was not merely a revel; it was also a joyous outpouring of gratitude." ¹

The modern tradition of Thanksgiving in America is a blend of the ancient English Harvest Festivals of rejoicing after a successful harvest, and the Puritan, Calvinistic tradition which included a solemn religious observance combining prayer and feasting.

Turkeys became associated with the tradition because of a letter written by one of the Pilgrims to a friend in England. Edward Winslow writes:

"And God be praised, we had a good increase...our harvest gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling that so we might after a special manner rejoice together... These things I thought good to let you understand ...that you might on our behalf give God thanks who hath dealt so favourably with us."

Around 200 years later, Antiquarian Reverend Alexander Young wrote, "This was the first Thanksgiving, the harvest festival of New England. On this occasion they no doubt feasted on the wild turkey as well as venison."

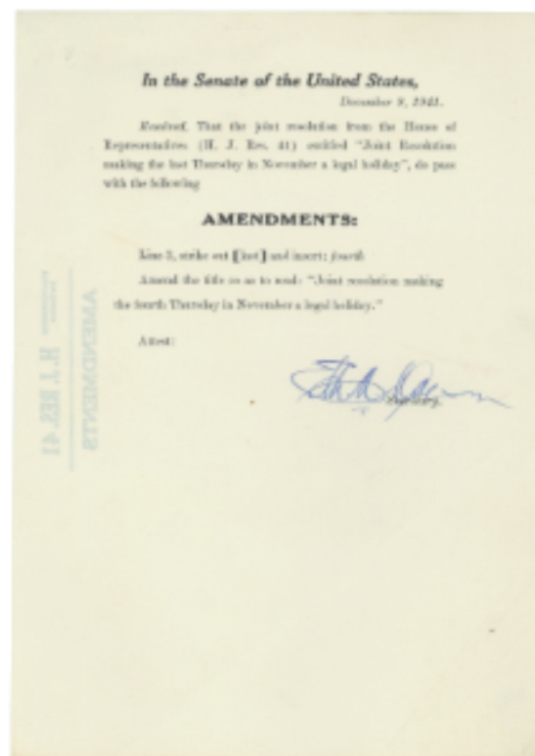
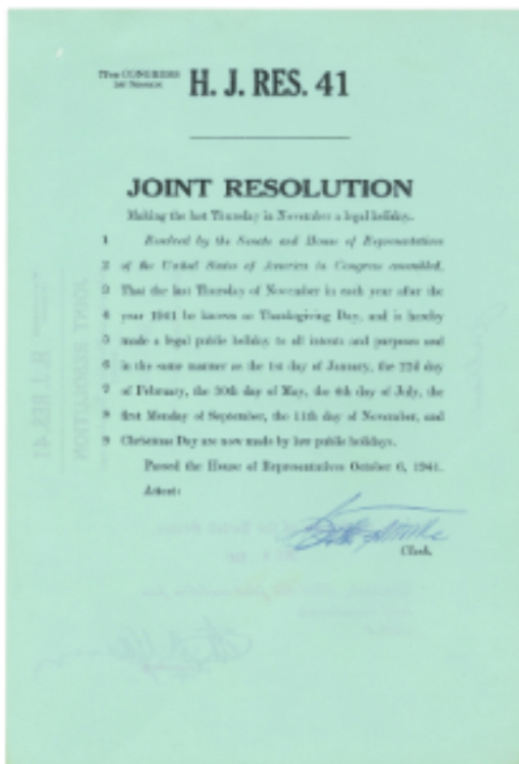
The holiday spread as emigrants travelled from New England Westward. By the 1700's the original tradition of a harvest festival was replaced by a tradition of family gathering together around a dinner table.

On September 28, 1789, the first Federal Congress passed a resolution asking that the President of the United States recommend to the nation a day of thanksgiving. A few days later, President George Washington issued a proclamation announcing November 26, 1789 as a "Day of Publick Thankgivin", the first time it was celebrated under the new Constitution.

Presidents Washington, Adams and Monroe proclaimed National Thanksgivings annually. However; Nationally, the custom fell out of use by 1815 and was observed only by individual states. Once again, people felt that Thanksgiving should be a National Holiday and in 1827, Sarah Josepha Hale began to petition several Presidents so that the Holiday could be reinstated after the model of the first Presidents.

By the 1850's nearly every state and territory was celebrating the family holiday, yet it wasn't until 1867 that President Lincoln agreed with Ms. Hale that the war torn country could be reunited through a National Festival and declared the last Thursday in November to be observed. This was a one-time observance that needed to be proclaimed annually by each successive President. The last Thursday in November became the customary day.

In 1939 Franklin Delano Roosevelt lengthened the Christmas shopping season by moving the celebration to the next to the last Thursday in November. This caused confusion and led to the holiday being celebrated on both Thursdays. In 1941 Congress settled the matter by declaring the fourth Thursday in November to be the official Thanksgiving Holiday.



Information for the above article was obtained from:
www.archives.gov and www.plimoth.org

