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Pilgrim Lore

The American Thanksgiving Holiday

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The popular perception of America's Thanksgiving holiday might be summed up as "it all began with the Pilgrims." After a successful harvest, so the story goes, Governor William Bradford declared an official thanksgiving day in November 1621 to which Massasoit, the principal sachem of the Wampanoag, was invited. The fifty-or-so Pilgrims who had survived the lethal "First Winter" of 1620/21 and Massasoit, with a royal retinue of 90 men, sat down to a huge outdoor feast prepared by the Pilgrim women. The pièce de résistance was of course turkey, but every local foodstuff imaginable was included as well, thus initiating a Thanksgiving tradition of culinary excess that has continued to this day. Like similar legends, the First Thanksgiving has a factual basis in history. The meal, or something like it, did occur, and the attending Indian guests did join the colonists at dinner and in "recreations" over a three-day

period. However, those few facts have been so embellished through art, literature and commerce that it is the symbolic connotation of Thanksgiving, not its historical particulars, that shape our understanding of the American holiday.

The "First Thanksgiving" is an etiologic tale, a story told to explain and define the holiday through an account of its alleged origins. The New England Thanksgiving is thought to have originated in 1621 with the Pilgrims, so it is fitting that the modern holiday adopt the hospitable Pilgrims and their Native American guests as its symbolic patrons. Generations of artists and writers have used their stylized images to represent the holiday. Whenever we see a be-buckled Pilgrim and his natural prey, the turkey, or a generic American Indian amid the fruits of the harvest season, we are immediately put in mind of Thanksgiving. In addition, the imagery of the harvest season – pumpkins, corn, autumn foliage, and the ubiquitous turkey indelibly marks the holiday's essential seasonality. Thanksgiving plays a significant role in our civic religion as the embodiment of the virtues attributed to the early colonists (or alternately nowadays, their Native neighbors) and as the modern equivalent to the agrarian harvest celebration.

The problem is that historically, the New England Thanksgiving evolved without any association with Pilgrim dinners, Indian guests or harvest celebrations. The Pilgrims' 1621 First Thanksgiving did not exist before 1841 when Rev. Alexander Young first identified the Plymouth harvest celebration as the "first New England thanksgiving" in his *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers* (Young 1841) The sole account of the famous three-day celebration, described in an epistle by Pilgrim Edward Winslow, was first published in a small edition in 1622, and soon forgotten. No copy was accessible to American scholars until one was discovered in Philadelphia in 1819. Until then, all that was available was an abridged version in Samuel Purchas' *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625), which omitted the harvest celebration description.

Furthermore, identifying the famous Plymouth harvest festival as a thanksgiving, let alone *the* "First Thanksgiving" is problematic in that it meets none of the qualifications for a legitimate Calvinist thanksgiving. It is only after the holiday had evolved to a sentimental secular occasion in the 19th century that the 1621 event could be seen to resemble a New England Thanksgiving in retrospect. "It was not a thanksgiving at all, judged by their Puritan customs, which they kept in 1621; but as we look back upon it after nearly three centuries, it seems so wonderfully like the day we love that we claim it as the progenitor of our harvest feasts." (DeLoss Love:1895) The successful harvest was indeed a matter for giving thanks and we may assume the colonists did so in the context of their regular Sabbaths and family devotions. There is no indication in the primary sources, however, that the participants considered the 1621 events as a formal thanksgiving. More importantly, the very nature of a celebration, extending over several days or a week with secular "recreations" and non-Christian guests, is what pious Calvinists such as the Pilgrims would be first to protest had no place in any Christian holy day.

Far from initiating a tradition or influencing the actual evolution of the New England Thanksgiving, the 1621 harvest celebration was a unique event that had no effect on history until it was recast as a myth of Victorian invention. The American Thanksgiving holiday evolved out of English Calvinist practices quite independently of Pilgrims and harvest festivals. In fact, before the Civil War, Thanksgiving was always thought of as an early winter rather than fall event and, in New England, a substitute for Christmas. The iconography of the holiday was dominated by snowy scenes of early winter in New England with contemporary family reunions, cozy indoor dinners at in ancestral homesteads, and turkey dinners. Earlier images of sleigh rides to grandfather's house and snowy farm scenes were only gradually supplanted by our familiar impression of Thanksgiving as an autumnal harvest event towards the end of the nineteenth century, at about the same time the Pilgrims cemented their association with the holiday.

Thanksgiving days originated in the turmoil of the English Reformation as the Puritans sought to eradicate the lingering practices of Catholicism in the Anglican Church. One of the many complaints the Reformation had about medieval Christianity was the inordinate number of holidays that had been introduced over the centuries. Until Henry VIII began the work of reform, there were, including Sundays, 147 religious holidays

each year. They included not only the Christological cycle of Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide, and the feasts of the Virgin, but an ever-increasing number of Saints' days. The medieval world of wakes, guild celebrations, church-ales and bride-ales (an "ale" being a sort of drinking party celebrating an event or acting as a fund-raiser in support of some cause) had become more of a burden than a blessing. These festivals also contributed to the "beery buffoonery, bawdiness, idleness and profanity" of a susceptible portion of the populace. It was pragmatism as well as piety that influenced the reformers to limit the holidays which threatened people's livelihoods, stopped craft production, endangered the food supply, and encouraged drunkenness and violent behavior.

Henry VIII's 1536 reforms reduced the number of holidays to the Sabbath and a more manageable 27 festival days a year. However, the growing Puritan movement was not satisfied. It questioned the fundamental justification for the holidays, declaring them to be "Popish inventions" that were not only unsupported by scripture but of obvious pagan origin. The Puritan faction first demanded that the number of festivals reduced to the primary celebrations of Christ's life and the Sabbath, and no more. When this did not happen, the reformers became more radical after the example of John Calvin of Geneva, who had gradually arrived at the opinion that the only Sabbath was permissible. Reformers sought to abolish all of the remaining old holidays including Christmas and Easter. However, there was another influence at work that would eventually modify this extreme constraint.

There arose a custom among the Reformed churches of declaring special days in response to God's providence whenever unexpected disasters or special benefits to society occurred. The English Church declared such days on a national basis from time to time so that appropriate observations might be held in each parish, or as was customary, people from several parishes gathered at officially sanctioned central assemblies. The assembled faithful were treated to pertinent sermons, communion and admonitions to wrongdoers, whereupon the entire company might close the day with an evening community meal (fast days officially extended from afternoon to afternoon, so an evening meal on the day itself was quite acceptable). Fasting became a regular practice not only in response to providence, but in preparation for any important decision or momentous occurrence. As good Protestants they wanted to avoid the "empty practice" or mechanical observance of the Roman Church where corporal abstinence might not be accompanied by earnest spiritual activity, so not only abstinence and prayers, but psalms, preaching and even "prophesy" (informal commenting on theological matters) soon slipped into the mix.

Fasts were declared whenever it was felt that God had visited some unusually threatening or dangerous "judgment" on His people. Similarly, thanksgivings were declared to celebrate some impressive "mercy" awarded by God to his grateful flock. Consequently, fasts were held in response to drought in 1611, floods in 1613, and the plague in 1604 and 1625, while thanksgivings were declared for the victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 and for the Queen's safe deliverance in 1605. These special observances were normally included as part of the usual church services on Sunday, Wednesday or Friday, and had appropriate services in the *Book of Common Prayer* and the orthodox Anglican liturgy. The Puritan holidays also served as a regulatory device whereby the nation, community or family adjusted its behavior so as to stay in tune with God's will and remain in divine favor. Thanksgivings praised God for his goodness and made sure that His people's gratitude was made evident. Providential "mercies" were seen as signs that He was pleased with his people while "judgments" with their attendant calamities were believed to be sent by God to mark His displeasure with the way things were going. Days of humiliation or fasts were used to identify the reasons for God's displeasure and to put the community back on track when it strayed from the path of righteousness. They served the Puritan establishment as a means of controlling the behavior of the community in God's name, and maintaining the rule of the godly against its enemies and malcontents. It was this tradition of providential holidays, in which fasts and thanksgivings were key elements in maintaining God's putative will on Earth, that the Puritan migrations carried to New England.

The Puritans brought to America the Sabbath, days of humiliation and fasting, and days of thanksgiving. The Sabbath set the basic pattern of how religious days were observed. The faithful were commanded to prepare for the Sabbath on the "eve" or

Saturday afternoon at 3:00 (the hour of Christ's death) with family devotions and prayers. "And to the end the Sabbath may be celebrated in a religious manner, we appoint that all that inhabit the Plantation, both for the general and particular employments, may surcease their labor every Saturday throughout the year at three of the clock in the afternoon; and that they spend the rest of that day in catechizing and preparation for the Sabbath, as the ministers shall direct." *The Company's Instructions to Endicott and His Council, April 17, 1629* (Young 1846). They made sure that meals and other necessary labors such as feeding livestock were so arranged as to involve the least amount of effort on the day itself. On Sunday morning, they went to church at around 8:30 AM and remained there the whole day, with a short break at midday, listening to sermons, singing psalms, listening to exhortations to live more godly lives and other uplifting spiritual exercises. Fast days and thanksgivings, which were similarly observed, were two sides of the same providential coin. Normal work was forbidden, as were sports and other worldly pastimes.

The first documented providential holiday in New England was a fast day declared during a serious drought in Plymouth Colony in the summer of 1623. When the Pilgrims began planting their fields in April, the weather was favorable and seasonable. Six weeks after the final sowing, however, drought threatened both the crops and the very existence of the little settlement.

"But it pleased God, for our further chastisement, to send a great drought; insomuch as in six weeks after the latter setting there scarce fell any rain; so that the stalk of that [which] was first set, began to send forth the ear before it came to half growth; and that which was later [set], not likely to yield us any [corn] at all, both the blade and the stalk hanging the head in such a manner as we judged it utterly dead. Our beans also ran not up, according to their wonted manner, but stood at a stay; many being parched away, as though they had been scorched before the fire. Now were our hopes overthrown; and we discouraged: our joy being turned into mourning." (Winslow: 1986)

The previous year's harvest had not been good. If the approaching harvest failed as well, Plymouth Colony might not survive another year. A day of fasting and humiliation – "appointed by public authority, and set apart from all other employments" – was held on a Wednesday, most probably July 16, 1623.

The skies were clear when they gathered for public worship. They spent eight or nine hours together in the meetinghouse, praying, singing psalms and listening to sermons and exhortations. When they came out, they were gratified to see that it had clouded over. The next morning "soft, sweet and moderate showers" began, which continued off and on for the next two weeks. The wilted corn and their drooping spirits were revived, and the crops saved. The Indians noticed the providential rescue of the crops. Hobbomock was a Wampanoag *Pinese* (superior warrior and counselor) who lived near the English settlement. He noticed that the colonists were having a religious service in mid-week only three days after their previous one and asked a boy why they were doing so. When the gentle and effective rains came the very next day, Hobbamock told the neighboring Indians about the impressive power of the white man's god who had "wrought so great a change in so short a time."

The Plymouth colonists were no less impressed by this providential mercy. Having so dramatic an example of God's favor and acceptance, they felt they should do something substantial to show their gratitude and not "smother up the same" or "content ourselves with private thanksgiving for that which by private prayer could not be obtained." They therefore declared that another solemn day be set apart and appointed for the glory, honor and praise, with all thankfulness, to God. This first recorded Plymouth thanksgiving probably occurred on Wednesday, July 30, the day before the *Anne* arrived in Plymouth with friends from England and Holland.

In this single two-week period we have the first examples of the Puritan providential holidays in New England. Even Puritans need some ritual in their lives. One question that might arise is "why did they wait until 1623 to declare a fast and a thanksgiving when there had been plenty of earlier events which could have justified such observations?" The simple answer is that we do not know that they didn't have earlier

fasts or thanksgivings. If they did, no reliable record of them has survived. However, the very early years are recorded in sufficient detail by Bradford and Winslow that it is quite unlikely that an official proposal for a public thanksgiving has been omitted.

The Massachusetts Bay colonists brought the same tradition of providential holidays as their Plymouth compatriots. During the 1629 emigration there were two fast days declared at sea, a thing that the sailors said that they had never heard of before. The first was close to the beginning of the voyage on Thursday, May 21. After weeks of contrary winds they had finally cleared the English Channel and were well at sea. Following the practice of having a fast to ask God to look favorably on their momentous enterprise, they observed a day of humiliation. They had a second fast for favorable winds on Tuesday, June 2, which they believed met with immediate results. After they arrived, they had a third fast on Thursday, August 6, preceding their choice and ordination of elders and deacons for the new church. The pattern was repeated with the larger Winthrop fleet in 1630 when fasts were declared for Friday, April 2, Friday, April 23 (St. George's Day), Friday, May 21 (in regards to the weather), Friday, June 4 and on Monday, June 7 (when they caught some very welcome fresh fish). They had their first thanksgiving on Thursday, July 8, 1630, following the arrival of the last straggling ship.

When colonists from Dorchester settled Connecticut in 1635 (pushing out the Plymouth men who had gotten there first) or New Haven in 1637, the common tradition of providential holidays was present in the new colonies. The first occasion for a providential holiday in Connecticut was the successful conclusion (from a colonial point of view) of the Pequot War in 1637. The war and the terrible massacre at the Mystic village was the result of events stirred up by Massachusetts Bay and its Connecticut settlements for which the unfortunate Pequots got the blame. The Puritan colonies were immensely heartened by the "victory" and declared a day of thanksgiving and praise for October 12, 1637, which was observed in Massachusetts, and in Scituate in Plymouth Colony as well. This event has sometimes been mis-identified as the "first New England thanksgiving" by modern anti-colonial partisans. It was the first Connecticut thanksgiving, however, and was followed by other fast and thanksgiving days after the manner of the other Puritan colonies.

We know about the Plymouth colony celebration of the 1637 thanksgiving at Scituate through Rev. John Lothrop's church records for Scituate and Barnstable (where Lothrop and his congregation moved in 1639). Lothrop's records begin in 1634 before the Scituate church had been formally covenanted. The potential congregation met for a fast on November 6, 1634 at James Cudworth's house, and had another fast on Christmas day before they were joined in a covenant on January 8 – during yet another fast. Altogether, the church observed 34 days of humiliation and fasting but only nine thanksgiving days between 1634 and 1653. The first Scituate thanksgiving was on December 22, 1636,

"...in ye Meetinghouse, beginning some halfe an houre before nine & continued untill after twelve a clocke, ye day beeing very cold, beginning with a short prayer, then a psalme sang, then more large in prayer, after that an other Psalme, & then the Word taught, after that prayer - & the[n] a psalme, - Then making merry to the creatures, the poorer sort beeing invited of the richer."

The next thanksgiving on October 12, 1637 was

"performed much in the same manner aforesaid, mainly for these tow particulars. 1. Ffor the victory over the pequouts, ye 2. Ffor Reconciliation betwixt Mr. Cotton and the other ministers."

The third thanksgiving was the congregation's first at Barnstable on December 11, 1639,

"att Mr. Hull's house, for Gods exceeding mercye in bringing us hither Safely keeping us healthy & well in o[u]r weake beginnings & in our church Estate. The day beeing very cold o[u]r praises to God in publicke being ended, wee devided into 3 companies to feast together, some att Mr. Hulls, some att Mr

[Mayo's], some att Brother Lumberds senior." ("Scituate and Barnstable Church Records" 1856)

These brief descriptions are the only Plymouth Colony examples of how thanksgiving feast were conducted in the early 17th century.

By 1640, the Puritan holidays were established in every New England colony except Rhode Island. Providential holidays might be declared both by the churches and by civic officials, and Plymouth, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Haven and New Hampshire passed laws determining the responsibility of civic authorities to declare public fasts and thanksgivings. There was an apparent aversion to *official* colony-wide fasts and thanksgivings in Rhode Island, and the only examples on record are those that the colony was obliged to observe during the Dominion of New England when Sir Edmund Andros commanded thanksgivings and fasts for all of the colonies, starting with a thanksgiving on Thursday, December 1, 1687. Andros's subsequent two thanksgivings were on Sundays in the Anglican tradition, which was a bitter pill for the New Englanders. After Andros was deposed in 1688, the colonies returned to their earlier practices, and Rhode Island lapsed back into avoiding colony-wide providential days altogether.

Second and third generation New Englanders, who had no personal memories of the old holiday calendar of Christmas, Easter and saint's days, grew up with fasts and thanksgivings as a familiar part of their lives, and this familiarity eventually led to a modification of the old system. By the end of the seventeenth century a new tradition of regular springtime fasts and autumnal thanksgivings existed in parallel to the original practice of declaring special holidays in response to providential events. The New Englanders took the possibility of scheduled regularity and made it the basis for seasonal celebrations. Orthodox Puritans such as Samuel Sewell objected to the liberties being taken with the old providential rules: "T'was not fit upon meer Generals as the Mercies of the year to com[m]and a thanksgiving." (DeLoss Love 1895), but they were overruled by the majority.

The new regular thanksgivings and fast days did not begin in one colony and spread to the others but rather evolved simultaneously throughout the region. There was no single "First Annual Thanksgiving" or "First Annual Fast Day" which started an unbroken tradition for succeeding generations. According to DeLoss Love (who pushes the evidence to some extent), the fall thanksgiving became standard practice first in Connecticut by 1650 and in the other colonies by the end of the century, while spring fasts were regularized about a decade later in the same fashion.

Eighteenth-century practice combined the old occasional holidays with the new seasonal ones in such a manner as to make it seem that it had always been done that way. By the middle of the century, New Englanders were so used to annual days that they tended to believe that such days had been customary throughout the history of the colonies. The oral tradition smoothed over the doctrinal disputes and irregular observances that the holidays had undergone in becoming annual, and presented an idealized past that contributed to later belief that there had always been a November thanksgiving.

Providential holidays were not limited to the more puritanical colonies. During the eighteenth century, Rhode Island and Vermont also appointed fasts and thanksgivings, while New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and even Virginia had their own occasional fasts or thanksgivings. The American Revolution brought the observance of the providential holidays to a national level when fasts and thanksgivings were declared for the entire thirteen colonies. The first was on June 12, 1775, when the President of the Continental Congress, John Hancock, declared a fast day in the United Colonies for Thursday, July 20th. Hancock declared another pan-colonial fast for Friday, May 17, 1776. Henry Laurens, the President of the Continental Congress, proclaimed the first national thanksgiving for Thursday, December 18, 1777. There were twelve additional national providential holidays declared by the Continental Congress. This thanksgiving followed the New England model with its Thursday date and an admonition in the proclamation,

"And it is further recommended, That servile Labor, and such Recreation, as, though at

other Times innocent, may be unbecoming the Purpose of this Appointment, be omitted on so solemn an Occasion."

George Washington declared his first thanksgiving as President on October 3 for Thursday, November 11, 1789, and a second national thanksgiving for Thursday, February 19, 1795. John Adams declared no thanksgivings during his term, but he had two fast days; Wednesday May 9, 1798, and Thursday April 25, 1799. James Madison proclaimed wartime fast days for Thursday August 20, 1812; Thursday September 9, 1813; and Thursday, January 12, 1815. Madison also declared the last national providential holiday before the Civil War, a thanksgiving for the conclusion of the War of 1812 on Thursday April 13, 1815. In between the national holidays, the New England states continued holding their regular spring, fall and occasional providential days. In the years that followed 1815, all of the New England states including Rhode Island, Vermont (after 1777) and Maine (after 1820) maintained the spring fast and fall thanksgiving tradition.

In the early nineteenth century, the annual fast day receded in importance even as the autumn thanksgiving gained in popularity. As the New England Puritans devolved into Yankees during the eighteenth century, the rigors of daylong services and four or five-hour sermons diminished until a single two-hour morning service sufficed in many churches. In Massachusetts, the annual fast was traditionally held on or about the 19th of April before it was abolished in 1894, and April 19 became Patriot's Day. Maine replaced Fast Day with Patriot's day in 1907. The New Hampshire annual fast day lasted until 1991 when it became "Civil Rights Day." In 1999, this compromise holiday was joined with Martin Luther King Day on the third Monday in January, with the stipulation that the new holiday has "the same status as Fast Day." The annual fast was combined with the observance of Good Friday in Connecticut in 1795, where it is still observed today in the last of the New England states to do so. After the national thanksgivings ceased in 1815, annual thanksgivings proclaimed by the individual states maintained the holiday tradition. There was still no fixed date for these annual events, a holdover from Puritan providentialism, but most were scheduled in late November or early December. Each year, the date was announced by civil authority. The state governor would "advise" the churches by official proclamation that this was when they should observe the holiday. By the 1850s virtually every state and territory was observing an annual thanksgiving.

The inhabitants of the states of course anticipated the announcement of their particular Thursday in November or December (the dates varied from state to state). Once the proclamation had been published and read in the churches, the flurry of preparation began. Housewives made pies days – even weeks – in advance, depending on cool seasonal temperatures for their safe preservation. On the evening before the day itself, all chores that could be done in advance were taken care of to clear the slate for a day of leisure. On the farm (and the majority of New Englanders were still farmers) animals were foddered, the house cleaned and fowls plucked for tomorrow's cooking. In town, householders visited the market to bargain for over the necessary ingredients of the feast.

A brief supper ("a sort of 'picked-up' dinner") was provided the evening before for the family and guests who had arrived earlier. The holiday was a time of gathering together as family, friends and neighbors met at church and in the homes of the community, just as they had in Scituate almost two centuries earlier. However, there was seldom any discouragement of secular entertainment, especially if it did not occur during the morning of the day itself. Thanksgiving balls were quite a popular addition to the holiday.

Thanksgiving Day itself began with the household getting up at dawn, which at that time of year meant they arrived for breakfast rather later than they would on a work day. After breakfast, the cooking of the dinner was begun and family members prepared for meeting (one went to "meeting," not to "church," in New England). Not everyone went to meeting, however, as someone had to oversee the preparations for the feast, and the youngest children were not expected to attend the service. The sheer amount of labor involved in preparing the huge dinner for family and assorted guests was a burden to housewives and servants alike, as Mrs. Anne Lyman noted in a rare departure from the generally rosy reminiscences of the old-time holiday in 1840:

"We got through Thanksgiving as usual, – after a great struggle on my part – with fifteen at the table, who seemed to enjoy themselves highly – I did not. I am sure, however, that I have much to rejoice in ... But the reflections connected with the past most always make these annual festivals, to people who are as advanced as I am, to be days of sad retrospection."

The meetinghouse bell began to ring at ten o'clock and soon after the congregation arrived and sorted themselves into family pews. Attendance varied from year to year depending on the weather and the enthusiasm of the meeting-goers. In 1800, although meeting attendance was still expected of any respectable citizen, only one in fifteen Americans was an actual member of a congregation. Most churches had only a "forenoon" meeting, with the standard order of service. Thanksgiving sermons were often political or topical in nature; the sermon's length being determined by the aspirations of the minister and the expectations of his audience. An important part of the Thanksgiving service was the collection for the poor – which might have been begun the week before – with the proceeds given to the less well-off families to insure that they too would have a proper dinner. The conventional charity of the season also included gifts of prepared food sent to poor relations and neighbors not included in the household gathering.



Samuel Goodrich *Thanksgiving Dinner* (1836)

When the morning service was over at noon or one o'clock, families and guests returned to their homes to await dinner, which was usually served at two or three o'clock. Predictably, turkey was the foundation of the feast, but it also included chicken pie, roast beef, the various vegetables available to New Englanders in November or December, pies and puddings, and ended with dried fruits and nuts. Cider (which was always alcoholic) and wine were commonly served before the temperance movement organized its challenge to this custom. Children in some families might eat separately from the adults. Thanksgiving was not a child's holiday, as much as they might enjoy it, but one in which adult activities such as games and dancing included the younger members of the family. After dinner, the company gathered for various pastimes such as games, conversation, songs, story telling or visits to other households. There was a supper later on, if desired. The more pious households kept up the older tradition of a discussion of the sermon followed by fireside prayers, and most families had some sort of prayer at the end of the short late-autumn evening. Schools were often closed for the entire week, and the following Friday was sometimes enjoyed as a day off work as well.

The most significant characteristic of Thanksgiving at the beginning of the 19th century, however, was that it was still an unselfconscious part of contemporary life. Holiday traditions were simple and unpretentious, focusing on the immediate basics of New England life: church, household, food and domestic leisure. It was a time to review the current year, reminisce about one's personal past, and recall family members and friends who were no longer among the guests by reason of distance or death. Most importantly, it carried no suggestion of commemoration. The holiday was not perceived as an evocation of olden times or invested with sentimental significance

beyond its gathering of clans and family reminiscences, when "conversations run backwards" as Plymouth author Abby Morton Diaz said. It was rather simply unquestioned tradition, the accepted thing to do at each year's end.

The adoption of these Thanksgiving customs outside of New England was in part a result of the great Yankee exodus that occurred after the American Revolution. The war had brought debilitating debt and inflation to the small New England farmers and shopkeepers, a burden compounded by high state taxes by which local governments tried to recover from the same problems. A steady flow of Yankee emigrants passed into northern New York, the Northwest Territory and beyond, bringing with them all of the particular attitudes and traditions of their old home. In new states with large numbers of Yankee expatriates (such as Michigan or Wisconsin), annual Thanksgivings were soon introduced. By mid-century the Thanksgiving holiday was observed in most states and territories, even southern ones, although the south might follow the older Anglican practice of Sunday thanksgiving services instead of the Yankee custom of the Thursday observation.

The revival of national Thanksgivings may have even begun in the Confederacy. The heartening victory at Bull Run in 1861 was celebrated with a Thanksgiving appointed by President Davis and the Confederate Congress throughout the south on Sunday, July 28. The northern states had little celebrate in 1861 although the individual states and territories declared customary November Thanksgivings. The Union had its turn when President Lincoln declared a national Thanksgiving on Sunday, April 13, 1862 (on the 47th anniversary of the 1815 event) for the victories at Forts Henry and Donelson and at Shiloh. The South had a second and final Thanksgiving on Sunday, September 28, 1862 after the second battle of Bull Run. In 1863, the Union celebrated *two* national Thanksgivings, one on Thursday, August 6 following the victory at Gettysburg, and on October 3 Lincoln declared a second, general New England-style holiday for last Thursday in November. It is this second Thanksgiving that initiated our modern series of national Thanksgivings.



Perhaps the 1863 November Thanksgiving was due in part to the efforts of Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the influential *Godey's Ladies' Book* magazine. Mrs. Hale, a loyal New Englander despite having moved to Philadelphia, had lobbied hard for an annual national thanksgiving since 1837. She wrote editorials and other notices in favor of this idea (sometimes twice in a year) and tried to rally all the states to observe the holiday. Although Mrs. Hale continued to extol the annual appearance of the holiday tradition, she also wanted Thanksgiving to be established once and for all by the U. S. Government, a dream best expressed by her editorial in *Godey's* in 1871:

We have long endeavored to secure the celebration of this great festival upon the same day in every American State and Territory, so that it might be a National Holiday. In 1863 the Southern States could not be reached. Application was made to President Lincoln, who issued a proclamation, the first since that of Washington from the representative of the nation, and

appointing the same day, the last Thursday of November. His example has been yearly followed by his successors. But one thing is wanting. It is eminently fit that this National Holiday shall rest upon the same legal basis as its companions, the Twenty-second of February and the Fourth of July. As things now stand, our Thanksgiving is exposed to the chances of the time. Unless the President or the Governor of the State in office happens to see fit, no day is appointed for its observance. Is not this a state of things which calls for instant remedy? Should not our festival be assured to us by law?

By the end of the century, the custom of holding Thanksgiving on the last Thursday in November was well established, but the legal mandate that Mrs. Hale so desired did not arrive until long after her death. In 1939, the last Thursday in November was also the last day of the month. A Thanksgiving this close to Christmas would considerably reduce the customary shopping season. President Roosevelt was petitioned by the Association to declare an earlier date for Thanksgiving to insure the commercial success of the crucial holiday shopping season. On October 31, the President proclaimed Thursday, November 23, as the national day of Thanksgiving. The result was a storm of protest.

A majority of Americans were dismayed by the apparent victory of commerce over tradition – not to mention the confusion that this change had on college football schedules. Some governors and mayors followed Washington while others chose to keep the 30th as Thanksgiving in protest. In the end, 23 states had Thanksgiving on the 23rd, 23 held out for the 30th, and two (Texas and Colorado) had two Thanksgivings that year. A similar division happened in 1940 when many states kept their holiday on November 28 despite the fact that Roosevelt had declared the 21st as Thanksgiving. In the spring of 1941, the President admitted that the effort had been a mistake (and a failure as well – there had been no improvement in Christmas sales, perhaps due to the confusion) and announced that Thanksgiving would revert to its traditional date in 1942. It was too late for 1941, calendars and schedules already having been prepared. In November 1941, Congress passed a law mandating the fourth Thursday in November as the permanent date for the Thanksgiving holiday. This was a compromise between the old “last Thursday” custom and the recent “Franksgiving” observances. After the few holdouts gave up their attempts to observe the day on the last Thursday regardless, the Thanksgiving holiday quietly assumed its place in the regular round of American holidays. The holiday was at last as Mrs. Hale had wished, nationally guaranteed and legally sanctified.

While the firm hand of tradition kept the basic essentials of the holiday true to their nostalgic roots, new elements were introduced as well, the most important being the annual college football game. The “annual Thanksgiving Day game between the previous year’s two leading college football teams [was] an idea hatched in 1876 by the student-run Intercollegiate Football Association” which was founded in that year. (Pope 1997) Colleges had played casual soccer-style football from the 1860s until Harvard adopted rugby football rules in games against McGill in 1876, which was the beginning of the modern American game.

The next important holiday event emerged in the 1920s – the Thanksgiving Day parade. Strictly speaking, Thanksgiving parades aren’t about Thanksgiving at all but Christmas, but they do provide a Thanksgiving Day activity that is enjoyed by millions of Americans in person or on TV. Initiated by downtown department stores to signal the “official” start of the Xmas shopping season, the parades became a family-oriented event that were very popular in those cities that supported them. The first modern Thanksgiving parade was put on by Gimbel Brother’s Department Store in Philadelphia on November 25, 1920. It consisted of 50 people, fifteen cars and a fireman dressed as Santa Claus who marched in the parade and then entered Gimbel’s toy department by a ladder. The central feature of the Gimbel’s Thanksgiving Parade was the “official arrival of Santa Claus” in his most marketable guise as patron saint of holiday commerce. The theme of children and toys was central to the early Thanksgiving parades, with many of the floats and costumed characters designed to represent nursery rhyme and fairy tale settings. The most famous Thanksgiving parade of all also began in 1924, when the employees of Macy’s Department Store volunteered to conduct a parade of costumed characters in New York. Now billed as “America’s

Parade," the Macy's parade has grown over the years into a spectacular media event and a continually changing mirror of popular culture.

The way in which Americans observed the Thanksgiving holiday changed little after the Civil War except for the inclusion of football and parades. What did change was the way in which the holiday's symbolic significance was interpreted in popular culture. Thanksgiving was joined with other holidays in the school-year cycle in the 1890s. The Progressive movement seized the opportunity to use holidays as a means to inculcate American values in the socialization of the young and immigrants.

How do the Pilgrims fit in all this? For a century and a half following the 1620 landing, the Plymouth colonists were not recognized as anything more than the first wave in the great New England Puritan emigration. They were honored by New England historians such as Nathaniel Morton, Cotton Mather and Thomas Prince for their role in establishing the Puritan commonwealth, but the anniversary of their arrival in 1720 passed unobserved. The first effort at commemoration did not occur until 1769, when the Old Colony Club of Plymouth instituted a celebration (Old Colony Day, subsequently Forefathers' Day) on the anniversary of the date the exploratory expedition from the *Mayflower* first set foot on the shore of Plymouth harbor. By a tradition dating to 1741, the mainland landing had taken place on or near a singular boulder on the Plymouth waterfront on December 11, 1620, Old Style. As the old Julian calendar had been discarded in favor of the Gregorian model only seventeen years earlier, the clubmen decided to adjust the anniversary by the eleven extra days that had been added to the calendar in 1752. This made the anniversary December 22, which became the established date for "Forefathers' Day", the original Pilgrim holiday.

In 1774, the rock identified with the Forefathers' landing was levered from its bed, and, the upper half splitting off, that was dragged up to the Town Square and placed at the foot of a liberty pole. Thus began the process by which the humble Plymouth colonists became the symbolic founders of New England, and by extension the new United States as well. Their voluntary separation from the Old World to establish a new Christian commonwealth in America was seized on as historical sanction for the American separation from England, and their high ideals and simple way of life extolled as a model for all Americans. In contrast to the sordid history of early Virginia or the authoritarian nature of Massachusetts Bay, the Plymouth story was refreshingly virtuous and unexceptionable.

The Pilgrims' legend blossomed despite (or perhaps because of) the relative lack of original accounts. Governor Bradford's manuscript history of the colony had disappeared during the British occupation of Boston, leaving historians dependant on Nathaniel Morton's *New Englands Memorial* (1669), a simplified version of his uncle William Bradford's chronicle. The detailed account of Plymouth's first year, familiarly known as "*Mourt's Relation*" (1622), was only available in the abridged version published by Samuel Purchase in 1625 before 1841, and Bradford's history was only rediscovered in 1856. However, the basic liniments of the of the Plymouth Pilgrims' history were sufficiently well known to support the central story of courage, suffering and perseverance without these additional resources.

Just as the American thanksgiving tradition had its own well-developed associations and customs, the Pilgrim Story was firmly focused on the 1620 landing and Longfellow's *Courtship of Myles Standish* (1858). That the Thanksgiving holiday had originated among the New England Puritans was widely acknowledged, but it was usually represented in a generic and diffused manner as one of the many legacies from the colonial era along with blue laws, excessive sobriety and humorlessness. There were isolated references to the Pilgrims' First Thanksgiving after 1841, but none of any significance. There are few references to the Pilgrim event in Mrs. Hale's *Godey's* editorials, even after 1865 when she expressly credited the Pilgrim event as initiating the holiday.



Thomas Nast *Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner* (1869)

Thanksgiving was most commonly presented from a contemporary rather than historic perspective in stories and verse during the nineteenth century. Thanksgiving meant attendance at church, return to the old homestead and the reunion of the extended family in a private communion with tradition. The turkey, the New England homestead, soldiers or cowboys in camp and occasionally insulting representations of African-Americans dominated Victorian representations of the holiday. An interesting Thanksgiving cartoon by Thomas Nast that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on November 20, 1869 entitled "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner" shows an optimistic view of the Thanksgiving holiday as a metaphor for the peaceful diversity of the nation. Beneath the portraits of Lincoln, Washington and President Grant and a view of Castle Garden (Ellis Island), Uncle Sam carves a fat turkey for his assembled guests representing the many nationalities that made up America. Seated between Chinese and African-American families at the far end of the table, Columbia (the United States) acts as hostess.



Edwin White *The Pilgrims' First Thanksgiving* (ca.1850)

A survey of Thanksgiving illustrations and articles in the popular *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* newspapers turns up only a few isolated references to the 1621 event. An engraving entitled "Thanksgiving Day Among the Puritan Fathers in New England" that appeared in the December 3, 1870 issue of *Harper's Weekly* presents a unique representation of the 1621 celebration. The scene is an interior where a group of colonists are arrayed around a dinner table and six Indians stand on the sidelines before the meal begins. A similar interior representation painted at about the same time by Edwin White (who was also responsible for other Pilgrim scenes) depicts a New England household interior with a single Indian standing as a witness.



THE FIRST THANKSGIVING DINNER
WITH PORTRAITS OF THE PILGRIM FATHERS
 IN THE DARKEST DAYS OF OUR COUNTRY'S HISTORY
 A LONE STAR SHINE THAT CALLED WILDERNESS MEN ONLY
 WROTE WHOSE FOOT PRINTS REMAIN TO GUIDE US TO THE
 GREAT NORTH

"The First Thanksgiving Dinner with Portraits of the Pilgrim Fathers" by W. L. Taylor

In 1889, Jane G. Austin (the American author, not her more famous English namesake) published *Standish of Standish: A Story of the Pilgrims*, the first and most popular of several titles dealing with the Pilgrim saga. It was an immediate success, going through at least 28 imprints, and a dramatization in 1919. In *Standish of Standish*, Austin includes a fictional and sentimental account of the "First Thanksgiving" which appears to have had an important influence on the Thanksgiving myth. Austin's embellishment of the 1621 harvest celebration led to a new appreciation of the origins of the Thanksgiving holiday. In the 1897 November issue of the *Ladies Home Journal*, Clifford Howard drew heavily on Austin's fictional account for an ostensibly historical description of the First Thanksgiving. Accompanying Howard's article was "The First Thanksgiving Dinner with Portraits of the Pilgrim Fathers" by W. L. Taylor. This is the first recognizable illustration of the now familiar autumnal outdoor feast commonly associated in popular culture with the Pilgrim Thanksgiving.

The new version of the First Thanksgiving story struck a resonate chord with the American public. It fulfilled the cultural desire for a romantic origin for the holiday, and also provided the Pilgrims with a new role as tolerant American peacemakers. The cessation of the Indian Wars in the West and a widespread sentimental interest in Native American culture made it possible for a reassessment of Thanksgiving's colonial roots. Another factor was the Progressive mindset at the turn of the Twentieth century that sought to bring reform and a rational order to American society. It was now time to create unity out of diversity and invite others to join together at the national table, as Thomas Nast's prescient cartoon had suggested in 1869.



Jennie Brownscombe *The First Thanksgiving* (1914) Pilgrim Hall Museum

The image of the Pilgrims and their Native neighbors dining in irenic harmony was an apposite symbol of the peaceful assimilation and Americanization the reformers sought. Two influential historical paintings depicting the 1621 feast, J. L. G. Ferris' "The First Thanksgiving" (ca. 1912) and Jennie A. Brownscombe's "The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth" (1914) established the dominant tone for future depictions of the event.

Both show an open-air feast derived from the Austin description in which Pilgrim hosts and Native guests dine together in a dignified manner on the autumnal bounty. Despite various inaccuracies such as log cabins and western Native costumes, these images faithfully reflected the brief moment in 1621 when the two cultures met in harmony as described by Edward Winslow.

The 1621 First Thanksgiving had yet to achieve hegemonic status. The postcard fad that flourished between 1905 and 1912 produced a large number of Thanksgiving Day images, many of which employed colonists, Indians and turkeys in various combinations, but illustrations of the famous dinner are noticeably absent. A survey of standard primary school textbooks from 1900 to 1940 shows that references to the Pilgrims often omitted any mention of the 1621 Thanksgiving. Nevertheless, there was sufficient awareness of the 1621 myth among the American public to prepare the nation for a widespread acceptance of the "First Thanksgiving" by World War Two. Samuel Eliot Morison captured the prevailing consensus when he observed that "the Pilgrims in a sense have become the spiritual ancestors of all Americans, whatever their stock, race or creed." (Morison 1937) The First Thanksgiving began to edge out the *Mayflower*, Plymouth Rock and the "Courtship" as their fundamental contribution to the American Way of Life. The Pilgrim Story now had a romantic happy ending, with all parties gathered together on an eternal golden autumn afternoon around a table laden with the fruits of the first New England harvest. The 1621 feast found its way onto calendars and into magazine advertising and cover art. An increasing number of children's books brought the story to younger generations, each adding its own fictional gloss to the picture. Greeting cards and schoolroom decorations left no uncertainty that the Pilgrims were at the core of the Thanksgiving tradition.

By the post-World War II period, Thanksgiving was the primary focus of the Pilgrim story in popular culture. The association of the popular holiday with its supposed Pilgrim origin had become a self-evident historical truth – the world had been sold on the "Pilgrim" brand of Thanksgiving. The First Thanksgiving myth was supported by the social consensus that reigned from the late 19th century to the mid-1960s because it effectively mirrored the values and beliefs of that society. It was only after the turmoil of the 1960s brought traditional authority and its beliefs into question that the questionable canonical status of Thanksgiving (and a lot of other cultural icons) became generally apparent. The recognition that something was wrong with the way in which American society portrayed its own past became clear, but identifying exactly where the truth lay amid the fallacies and myths was far more difficult.

Conscientious scholars sought to exorcise the First Thanksgiving myth by painstakingly exposing its various historical inaccuracies and anachronisms. The American public was told repeatedly that there were flaws in their conception of the First Thanksgiving, that the Pilgrim did not eat cranberry sauce, that buckles and huge white collars were not a Plymouth fashion, and that turkeys are not mentioned in the more important of the two references to the event. Yet these very iconic elements continued to turn up in classrooms and popular culture every November, regardless. To attempt to explode a myth by carping about the minute details of its narrative is to attack the symptoms, not the disease. Myth is not a rational but an expressive understanding of history, a matter of unconscious belief rather than intellectual conviction, and is all but immune to objective criticism.

On one hand, the conservative evangelical community has waged a spirited defense of the classic First Thanksgiving story and the traditional significance of the Pilgrims in American society. At the other extreme, the Native American community and its allies understood that the optimistic portrayal of Native-Colonial relations embodied in the holiday stereotype has obscured the tragedies that had afflicted their culture for over three hundred years. In 1970, the United American Indians of New England and the local Wampanoag community instituted the National Day of Mourning, an annual "counter-holiday" in answer to Thanksgiving to reasonably enough address the other side of the symbolic coin. Turning Morison's observation on its head, the new perspective proposed that it was the Native Peoples who are the true "spiritual ancestors" of the American people, and that the American Thanksgiving holiday should rightly celebrate Native American traditions of giving thanks rather than continue to focus on what is portrayed as a dishonest and unworthy Puritan Thanksgiving tradition. The 1621 Plymouth celebration was recast as an event at which the local Wampanoag

were the hosts and suppliers of most of the food to an inept and treacherous colonial community whose survival depended solely on the aid as well as the forbearance of the Native population. As historical interpretation, this is largely rhetorical nonsense, but it is a potent basis for new myth.

Neither the conservative defenders nor the reformist opposition have had much influence beyond their own partisans and sympathizers. The general public remains unconcerned with the failings of the traditional Thanksgiving story. They continue to enjoy their decorative be-buckled Pilgrims and war-bonneted Indians while consuming turkey and cranberry sauce in the perfect confidence that they are maintaining a tradition that began in 1620. They may be aware of the cultural battles surrounding Thanksgiving and give intellectual allegiance to one version or the other, but as with the contest between Santa Claus and Christ's Nativity, this cognitive dissonance has no effect on habitual practices and tastes.

The current effort to substitute a more satisfying myth for the older tradition is no answer to the problem. It simply puts the injustice on a different footing, and does not honestly confront the real problem, which is that popular history continues to oversimplify the American past in all of its lights and shadows. As permanent residents in Thanksgiving Land, the Native Americans, be they aboriginal heroes or mere straight men for the Pilgrims, can never transcend the limitations that stereotypes impose. The ideal solution might be to institute an entirely separate holiday that is focused on their real heroes and escape as far as possible from the confines of the Thanksgiving table. After all, if the First Thanksgiving wasn't one at all, why should they accept a Phyrnic victory that mythically binds them to this event?

The benefit of a release from the Thanksgiving table would perhaps be even greater for the Plymouth colonists. It is not always appreciated that the burden of a favorable stereotype can have even more harmful consequences than a negative one. In the case of the Pilgrims, they have been essentially turned into mythical figures, the Ghosts of Thanksgiving Past. Their predetermined role is restricted to a brief, strictly scripted appearance each fall before lapsing into irrelevancy during the rest of the year, at least outside of Plymouth, Massachusetts. The Plymouth colonists would greatly benefit if they could once again be seen as real people rather than historical May[flower] flies who sprang to life, had their brief bright moment of glory before disappearing off the stage of history in an autumnal haze. If Thanksgiving's potential has squandered over the years, its message is still one that all Americans can share, that through a respect for diversity and cooperation, the cooperation the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag prefigured can thrive and grow.

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