



PILGRIM HALL MUSEUM

BUILT IN 1824



FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA: THANKSGIVING BECOMES A NATIONAL HOLIDAY

THE 2004 ONLINE
THANKSGIVING EXHIBITION

BY PEGGY M. BAKER,
DIRECTOR & LIBRARIAN,
PILGRIM HALL MUSEUM

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

One tradition is the harvest festival such as that held in Plymouth in the autumn of 1621. The second tradition is the Puritan religious "Day of Thanksgiving" called by a religious leader in response to a special act of Divine Providence. 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.

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.



Thanksgiving Dinner. P. 36.

From *Arts, Customs and Manners of the Principal Modern Nations on the Globe*
by Charles Goodrich. Hartford, 1837.

“In New England, we may notice, first, the day of Thanksgiving. That day is dear to the heart of every son and daughter of that favored region.”

This New England custom was carried across the country as the United States expanded westward in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War.

Michigan was the first in the Midwest to proclaim an annual Thanksgiving. The territory's first proclamation was issued by New Hampshire-born governor Lewis Cass for the last Thursday in November 1824 (Michigan did not become a state until 1837) and issued annually thereafter. Ohio and Wisconsin followed with annual proclamations beginning in 1839, Illinois in 1842, Iowa in 1844, Pennsylvania in 1845 and Louisiana in 1846.

Here is an account of an Ohio Thanksgiving celebration of 1832:

THANKSGIVING IN OHIO - 1832



From:
The Happy Family: or, scenes of American life.
By William S. Cardell.
Philadelphia:
Uriah Hunt, 1853.
Originally
published in 1832.

“Soon after moving into the new houses, the settlers at Jefferson [Ohio] saw, by the newspapers, that the governor of Massachusetts had issued his proclamation, on a day of thanksgiving.

Mr. Johnson told Capt. Warner and their families, that they could thank the

same great Parent, for the same kind of mercies, as their old neighbors did...

In the forenoon there was a religious meeting in Capt. Warner's largest room. These people thought, that, though they were now far distant from their old friends, and could not meet in the same building with them, as they once did, yet it was pleasing to reflect, that they should be employed in the same exercises, at the same time; and thus be together in the worship of their God, while rivers and mountains were between them...

After conversing a while, in the evening, on different subjects, the children of the two families were called upon, one after another, beginning with the oldest, to bring forward a piece of composition, to speak a lesson, or to read one...

When the youngest child, in a large family, is very bright and good, she is generally much beloved. So it was with little Charlotte, at Mr. Johnson's. She was a sweet little girl, kind tempered, dutiful to her parents, and loved all her friends. When the rest had got through with their pieces. She came up to her mother, and said.

'Ma, will you please to let me speak?'

'Yes, my dear,' said her mother.

'Shall I speak about the planets, ma?'

'Yes,' Mrs. Johnson said. She walked to the back side of the room. One of the young lads, in a moment, had a square box, set bottom upwards, for her to stand upon. The school mistress sat near her. They lifted Charlotte upon the box: she held out her right hand, and began.

'Of all the planets in the sky,
The brightest is the sun;
Lest I should tire your patience,
Ladies and gentleman, I've done.'

By the end of 1840s, most of the other states and territories had also celebrated at least one Thanksgiving, by proclamation of the individual governors. Not all states celebrated Thanksgiving every year, however, and the date on which it was celebrated varied widely from state to state.



The California Gold Rush began in 1846. On November 29, 1849, California Governor Riley issued California's first Thanksgiving Day proclamation.

In 1847, Sarah Josepha Hale, the influential editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a monthly magazine for women, began an editorial campaign to make Thanksgiving a national holiday. Mrs. Hale was, like Michigan's Lewis Cass, a native of New Hampshire. Hale hoped that making this New England holiday a national one would strengthen family ties and bring unity and moral strength to the country.

Her 1847 editorial read simply:

THANKSGIVING DAY. -- *The Governor of New Hampshire has appointed Thursday, November 25th, as the day of annual thanksgiving in that state. We hope every governor in the twenty-nine states will appoint the same day -- 25th of November -- as the day of thanksgiving! Then the whole land would rejoice at once.*

She noted the next year that “the last Thursday of last November was kept as Thanksgiving Day in twenty-four of the twenty-nine states.”

As the nation grew, so did the number of states whose governor's issued Thanksgiving proclamations. S.W. Southard, writing to his mother in Newark New Jersey, in 1859, found it particularly worthy of note

”Dear Mother,

Today is thanksgiving day and I have been to church twice which is considerable for me; it has really seemed like Sunday to me, the streets are quiet, the stores and shops all closed and nearly all of the churches are open for service. This day is celebrated by 25 states of this union, a thing never known to such an extent before...”

By the following year, 1860, Mrs. Hale was able to list 29 states (as well as 2 territories, Kansas and Nebraska, and the District of Columbia) out of the nation's 32, as having an official governor-proclaimed Thanksgiving. Most (although not quite all) celebrated Thanksgiving on the same Thursday in November. The participating states were

Alabama, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont and Wisconsin.

This roster of states, however, was the calm before the storm. As the country divided into North against South, Thanksgiving became seen as a “Yankee holiday.”

The Civil War ended Mrs. Hale’s hopes for a holiday celebrating a united nation.

In the second year of the Civil War, 1862, both the president of the Confederate States, Jefferson Davis, and the president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, issued “national” Thanksgiving proclamations in response to victories in battle. These were the first presidential proclamations since James Madison’s presidential proclamation of 1815.

Jeff. Davis Issues a Thanksgiving Proclamation.

Jeff. Davis has issued the following proclamation for a general thanksgiving :

To the People of the Confederate States: Once more upon the plains of Manassas have our armies been blessed by the Lord of Hosts with a triumph over our enemies. It is my privilege to invite you once more to His footstool, not now in the garb of fasting and sorrow, but with joy and gladness, to render thanks for the great mercies received at His hand. A few months since, and our enemies poured forth their invading legions upon our soil. They laid waste our fields, polluted our altars and violated the sanctity of our homes. Around our capital they gathered their forces, and with boastful threats, claimed it as already their prize. The brave troops which rallied to its defense have extinguished these vain hopes, and, under the guidance of the same Almighty hand, have scattered our enemies and driven them back in dismay. Uniting these defeated forces and the various armies which had been ravaging our coasts with the army of invasion in Northern Virginia, our enemies have renewed their attempt to subjugate us at the very place where their first effort was defeated, and the vengeance of retributive justice has overtaken the entire host in a second and complete overthrow.

To this signal success accorded to our arms in the East has been graciously added another equally brilliant in the West. On the very day on which our forces were led to victory on the Plains of Manassas, in Virginia, the same Almighty arm assisted us to overcome our enemies at Richmond, in Kentucky. Thus, at one and the same time, have two great hostile armies been stricken down, and the wicked designs of our armies been set at naught.

In such circumstances it is meet and right that, as a people, we should bow down in adoring thankfulness to that gracious God who has been our bulwark and defense, and to offer unto Him the tribute of thanksgiving and praise. In His hand is the issue of all events, and to Him should we, in an especial manner, ascribe the honor of this great deliverance.

Now, therefore, I, Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States, do issue this, my proclamation, setting apart Thursday, the 18th day of September inst., as a day of prayer and thanksgiving to Almighty God for the great mercies vouchsafed to our people, and more especially for the triumph of our arms at Richmond and Manassas; and I do hereby invite the people of the Confederate States to meet on that day at their respective places of public worship, and to unite in rendering thanks and praise to God for these great mercies, and to implore Him to conduct our country safely through the perils which surround us, to the final attainment of the blessings of peace and security.

Given under my hand and the seal of the Confederate States, at Richmond, this fourth day of September, A. D. 1862.

JEFFERSON DAVIS.

By the President :

J. P. BENJAMIN, Secretary of State.

The 1862 Thanksgiving Proclamation of Jefferson Davis, issued in response to the Confederate victory at Manassas, as reported in the October 4, 1862 issue of the *Sacramento Daily Union*:

"Now, therefore, I, Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States, do issue this, my proclamation, setting apart Thursday, the 18th day of September inst., as a day of prayer and thanksgiving to Almighty God for the great mercies vouchsafed to our people, and more especially for the triumph of our arms at Richmond and Manassas; and I do hereby invite the people of the Confederate States to meet on that day at their respective places of public worship, and to unite in rendering thanks and praise to God for these great mercies, and to implore Him to conduct our country safely through the perils which surround us, to the final attainment of the blessings of peace and security."

Abraham Lincoln's proclamation reads:

THANKSGIVING DAY 1862

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA – A PROCLAMATION

It has pleased Almighty God to vouchsafe signal victories to the land and naval forces engaged in suppressing an internal rebellion, and at the same time to avert from our country the dangers of foreign intervention and invasion.

It is therefore recommended to the people of the United States that at their next weekly assemblages in their accustomed places of public worship which shall occur after notice of this proclamation shall have been received they especially acknowledge and render thanks to our Heavenly Fathers for these inestimable blessings, that they then and there implore spiritual consolation in behalf of all who have been brought into

affliction by the casualties and calamities of sedition and civil war, and that they reverently invoke the divine guidance for our national counsels, to the end that they may speedily result in the restoration of peace, harmony, and unity throughout our borders and hasten the establishment of fraternal relations among all the countries of the earth. In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this 10th day of April A.D. 1862, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-sixth.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The following year, Abraham Lincoln issued two Thanksgiving proclamations. The first was in gratitude for the Union victory at Gettysburg.

THANKSGIVING DAY 1863

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA – A PROCLAMATION

It has pleased Almighty God to hearken to the supplications and prayers of an afflicted people and to vouchsafe to the Army and the Navy of the United States victories on land and on the sea so signal and so effective as to furnish reasonable grounds for augmented confidence that the Union of these States will be maintained, their Constitution preserved, and their peace and prosperity permanently restored. But these victories have been accorded not without sacrifices of life, limb, health, and liberty, incurred by brave, loyal, and patriotic citizens. Domestic affliction in every part of the country follows in the train of these fearful bereavements. It is meet and right to recognize and confess the presence of the Almighty Father and the power of His hand equally in these triumphs and in these sorrows:

Now, therefore, be it known that I do set apart Thursday, the 6th day of August next, to be observed as a day for national thanksgiving, praise, and prayer, and I invite the people of the United States to assemble on that occasion in their customary places of worship and in the forms approved by their own consciences render the homage due to the Divine Majesty for the wonderful things He has done in the nation's behalf and invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit to subdue the anger which has produced and so long sustained a needless and cruel rebellion, to change the hearts of the insurgents, to guide the counsels of the Government with wisdom adequate to so great a national emergency, and to visit with tender care and consolation throughout the length and breadth of our land all those who, through the vicissitudes of marches, voyages, battles, and sieges, have been brought to suffer in mind, body, or estate, and finally to lead the whole nation through the paths of repentance and submission to the divine will back to the perfect enjoyment of union and fraternal peace.

In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this 15th day of July A.D. 1863, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Abraham Lincoln's second proclamation of 1863 was a Thanksgiving proclamation in the true New England sense, in gratitude for the general blessings of the year.

THANKSGIVING DAY 1863

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA – A PROCLAMATION

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they can not fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict, while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield, and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

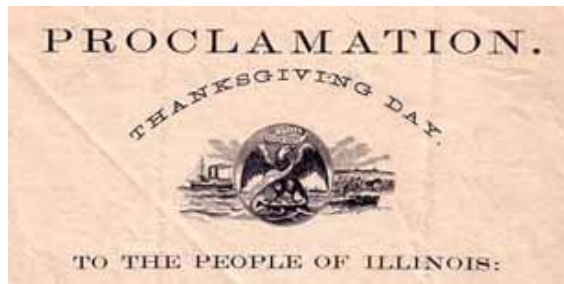
No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purpose, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union. In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this 3d day of October A.D. 1863, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

During the Civil War, governors had not hesitated to use their Thanksgiving proclamations to show their advocacy for the Union or the Confederacy. Illinois Governor Richard Yates' 1864 proclamation stated:



"Let us praise Him that He has crowned our armies with victory, and pray our Heavenly Father that He will shield our soldiers in all their perils, lighten their sufferings on the march, in hospital and in battle – and console the hearts of their bereaved families at home – and that He may deliver our country from her enemies, and so direct the administration of our national affairs as to give all the blessings of permanent prosperity and lasting peace to our nation."

It is no surprise that, after the war ended, a divided country found no unity in the new national holiday.

Perceived – and now hated - as a "Yankee holiday," Thanksgiving provoked strong feelings of resentment among many southerners. The Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation issued by Andrew Johnson in 1868 expressed a wistful and modest wish: "We are permitted to hope that long-protracted political and sectional dissensions are at no distant day to give place to returning harmony and fraternal affection throughout the Republic."

It took many years to restore harmony and fraternal affection. Thanksgiving only gradually regained its popularity in the South. The original prewar national recognition of the Thanksgiving holiday was largely due to the influence of Sarah Josepha Hale and her widely-read *Godey's Lady's Book*. Domestic magazines, which proliferated greatly in the 1870s and 1880s, played a similar role after the Civil War. Often published in the Northeast and fond of featuring Thanksgiving menus and decorations as a theme for November, these new "lady's magazines" gradually softened the feelings of Southern women.



1882 North Carolina Proclamation by Governor Thomas J. Jarvis

It was not until 1897 and a threat of international conflict, a threat which developed the next year into the Spanish American War, that President William McKinley was able to proclaim that

“Respect for law and order has been strengthened, love of free institutions cherished, and all sections of our beloved country brought into closer bonds of fraternal regard and generous cooperation.”

Thanksgiving became once again a true national holiday.

As the 19th century drew to a close, popular imagination was caught by life in the North and West. Just as New Englanders had brought Thanksgiving to the Midwest and South before the Civil War, so now Thanksgiving was brought to the newest and last American frontiers.

The United States of America had purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867 for \$7,200,000. In 1868, 70 U.S. military, under the command of First Lieutenant John McGilvray, established the first American fort in Alaska.



The elements depicted in "Frontier Thanksgivings" mirror the elements of the quintessential New England Thanksgiving:

A special celebratory meal



1888 "With the Cowboys – Preparing for Thanksgiving: Making Pies."

and a gathering of family and friends, giving thanks for the bounty of the year.



From *The Youth's Companion* November 5, 1925

“The pioneer, following the long trail into the west, carried with him the tradition and the observance of Thanksgiving. Here in the wilderness, his new home still half-built, he gathered his family to prayer and feasting in the sight of the God in whom he trusted.”

Artists such as Frederic Remington, who - as the frontier closed - created a mythic and heroic image of the cowboy, found inspiration in the Western Thanksgiving.

“Thanksgiving Dinner for the Ranch.”

Frederic Remington.
Harper's Weekly. November 24, 1888.

