

Where Did The Thanksgiving Holiday Come From?

Scripturally, we find things related to the issue of thanksgiving nearly from cover to cover. Individuals offered up sacrifices out of gratitude in the book of Genesis. The Israelites sang a song of thanksgiving as they were delivered from Pharaoh's army after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15). Later, the Mosaic Law set aside three times each year when the Israelites were to gather together. All three of these times [Unleavened Bread (also called the Feast of the Passover) (Exodus 12:15-20), Harvest or Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15-21), and the Feast of Ingathering or Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-36)] involved remembering God's provision and grace. Harvest and Tabernacles took place specifically in relation to God's provision in the harvest of various fruit trees and crops. The book of Psalms is packed full of songs of thanksgiving, both for God's grace to the Israelite people as a whole through His mighty deeds, as well as for His individual graces to each of us.

In the New Testament, there are repeated admonitions to give thanks to God. Thanksgiving is to always be a part of our prayers. Some of the most remembered passages on the giving of thanks are the following:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 16 Rejoice evermore. 17 Pray without ceasing. 18 In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

Philippians 4:6 Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

1 Timothy 2:1 I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;

Of all of God's gifts, the greatest one He has given is the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. On the cross of Calvary, Jesus paid our sin debt, so a holy and just Judge could forgive us our sins and give us eternal life as a free gift. This gift is available to those who will call on Christ to save them from their sin in simple but sincere faith (John 3:16; Romans 3:19-26; Romans 6:23; Romans 10:13; Ephesians 2:8-10). For this gift of His Son, the gift which meets our greatest need, the Apostle Paul says, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15).

But what about it America? Where and how did we come to celebrate this holiday? The answer is one of North vs. South.....

MOST of us think of America's first Thanksgiving as the feast that took place in the autumn of 1621 at Plymouth Colony. That's the one where the Pilgrims and 90 friendly Indians celebrated together - eating turkey, venison, corn, beans, berries, nuts and furmenty (a wheat pudding). But there are other claimants for America's "first Thanksgiving."

1. Sept. 8, 1565, when Spanish explorer Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles, founder of St. Augustine, Florida, held a service, including a large feast, to give thanks for the blessings of God on their venture.
2. In 1586, the first thanksgiving held by Englishmen on the North American continent took place on Roanoke Island, North Carolina. This celebration was by the company of 100 men from Cornwall, England that Sir Walter Raleigh had brought to America to found a colony. After a year when the relief ship arrived, they held a thanksgiving dinner, and fed-up with the hardships and perils, they all went home.
3. Juan de Onate, a gallant conquistador, was the first successful colonizer of the Southwest. He took an expedition into what is now New Mexico in 1598. This expedition consisted of

600 people of all types -- families, soldiers, priests, Africans and Indians. Onate's caravan was four miles with 83 wagons, and 7000 animals. Three long weary months later they were greeted by friendly Manso Indians of the southwest region. These indigenous people guided them across the desert to the river crossing. Juan Onate and his procession arrived at the Rio Grande on April 20, 1598. To celebrate their safe arrival, they held a huge feast and mass. Some claim this is the first Thanksgiving in America.

4. In 1609, at Jamestown, Virginia, the starving remnants of the first settlers held a thanksgiving dinner while awaiting the arrival of their relief ship.
5. In 1612, also at Jamestown, Virginia, a dinner was held after the arrival of Governor Dale with a ship-load of girls intended to become the wives of the settlers.
6. In 1619, a dinner of thanks was held at Berkley Plantation on the James River in Virginia.
7. In 1621, at Plymouth Plantation, a great dinner of thanks was held. Their first winter (the previous year) had killed 44 of the original 102 colonists. At one point their daily food ration was down to five kernels of corn apiece, but then an unexpected trading vessel arrived, swapping them beaver pelts for corn, providing for their severe need. The next summer's crop brought hope, and Governor William Bradford decreed that December 13, 1621, be set aside as a day of feasting and prayer to show the gratitude of the colonists that they were still alive. These Pilgrims, seeking religious freedom and opportunity in America, gave thanks to God for His provision for them in helping them find 20 acres of cleared land, for the fact that there were no hostile Indians in that area, for their newfound religious freedom, and for God's provision of an interpreter to the Indians in Squanto. Along with the feasting and games involving the colonists and more than 80 friendly Indians (who added to the feast by bringing wild turkeys and venison), prayers, sermons, and songs of praise were important in the celebration. Three days were spent in feasting and prayer.

The South focused upon WORSHIPING GOD, While the North took to having a Meal coupled with Thanking God – sounds like a Southern or Baptist thing now don't it? Well, leave it to the Yankees to steal our Southern-born-Thanksgiving and “invent it.” Over the course of the 18th century (1700s), as New England became more densely settled and the good farmland all locked up, its residents started heading west, and they took their social traditions with them, including their annual Thanksgiving holiday. First in upstate New York then the newly-opened Michigan territories and Ohio's Western Reserve, Yankee settlers on the expanding frontier kept the harvest feast tradition alive. This would ride a wave of popular support during the Great Awakening (1730s-1740s).

By the 1840s, Thanksgiving was widely celebrated across the Northeast and Midwest, and what we today consider the traditional Thanksgiving Day menu had largely been canonized: roasted turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, creamed onions, and mince, apple, and pumpkin pies. (Curiously, chicken pie, an almost universal part of the antebellum Thanksgiving menu, disappeared from the tradition during the 20th century.)

In those days, there was no fixed date for Thanksgiving. Instead, the holiday was declared each year by a special proclamation from the governor of each state, and the day selected could vary wildly year to year depending upon the whim of the officeholder. Most governors chose a Thursday in late November or early December, but some selected a Saturday or set the event as early as September or as late as January.

Finally, a group of Yankee editors, teachers, and ministers decided that enough was enough, and they began agitating to make Thanksgiving a uniform national holiday. Remember, during the 1840s the “religious movement” in the North, was largely Unitarian, UnChristian and was essentially nothing but agitating groups of people that espoused some form of -ism wrapped up within a Church Congregation. Southerners were wary of the heathen agitating Yankee -isms. The

strongest agitating voice was found in a woman named Sarah Josepha Hale.

Widowed in her mid-30s with five children to raise, the New Hampshire-born Hale had turned to writing to support her family. *Northwood; or Life North and South*, her first novel, espoused [New England](#) virtues as the model to follow for national prosperity, and was an immediate success, which bashed the South and contrasted life in New England. In it she dedicated an entire chapter to describing Thanksgiving Day on a New Hampshire farm, declaring that the occasion "should be the same as the Fourth of July, a national holiday."

The novel launched Hale's literary career, and in 1841 she became editor of Godey's Lady's Book, the country's most widely-distributed magazine. She took full advantage of that powerful platform to intensify her campaign for a national Thanksgiving Day. Each November issue of the magazine brimmed with Thanksgiving stories and poems along with detailed instructions for stuffing turkeys and making mince pies, and Hale penned passionate editorials advocating the importance of the holiday, too.

In 1846, Hale launched the first of what would become an annual letter-writing campaign to the nation's governors, in which she urged them to declare a day of Thanksgiving in their states on a uniform day—namely, the last Thursday in November. Her lobbying proved quite successful, not only in the North, but in the South as well. Governors Albert G. Brown of Mississippi and Thomas Drew of Arkansas declared their states' first ever Thanksgiving Days in 1847. Governor P. Hansboro Bell did the same for Texas in 1850, and within a few years most Southern governors fell in line, too.

Sarah Josepha Hale's campaign coincided with a resurgence of religious fervor in all parts of the country in the 1840s and 1850s, and the idea of an national day of Thanksgiving was championed in particular by the Presbyterian church. The nation was being egged on to disunity over Constitutional systems of Government and Economics – the large part of which was over the issue of slavery.

For her part, Hale hoped a national Thanksgiving holiday would foster national unity and encourage compromise. But the same evangelical Protestant denominations who most strongly advocated for Thanksgiving were also among the most ardent abolitionists. As Diana Karter Appelbaum puts it in her book *Thanksgiving: An American Holiday, an American History*, more and more Southerners were beginning to view Thanksgiving as a "Yankee abolitionist holiday." Again, Southerners leargely distrusted the National, Yankee-controlled policultural rudiments and cajoling due to the Politicization of the Northern Heathen Church-folks and the increasing fervor of the Abolitionists who wanted not merely to "abolish" slavery (that's all we're ever told) but that they wanted Southerners to be murdered, lands confiscated and turned over immediately to freed-slaves. Murder, Thievery and Chaos were the Southern watchwords against the "intrusion" of the Yankees into Southern social, religious and political life.

Virginia was the hotbed of anti-Thanksgiving sentiment. In 1853, Governor Joseph Johnson declined to declare a day of Thanksgiving for his state, citing Thomas Jefferson's firm doctrine of separating church and state. Johnson's successor, the slave-owning fire-brand Henry A. Wise, was even more intransigent. In 1856, he received the same annual letter from Sarah Josepha Hale that every other governor did, encouraging him to declare a general day of Thanksgiving. Wise not only declined to make the proclamation, but fired back a testy refusal.

"This theatrical national claptrap of Thanksgiving," he declared, "has aided other causes in setting thousands of pulpits to preaching 'Christian politics' instead of humbly letting the carnal Kingdom alone and preaching singly Christ crucified." By "other causes," of course, he meant abolitionism.

That same year, the Richmond Whig elaborated the Southern case against Thanksgiving, excoriating the carnality of the holiday, which the editors felt should instead be spent in divine worship. In the District of Columbia, they noted, where all federal offices would be closed, "an astonishing quantity of execrable liquor will be guzzled" and the holiday would be "little more than an occasion for indulgence in dissipation at the cost of character. While we are content," the editors continued, "to buy our cotton spools and wooden ware from New England, because hers are the cheapest, we are by no means content to receive her notions of religion, morals, the duties of citizenship, &c, as being the best."

Anti-Thanksgiving sentiment wasn't confined to Virginia. In 1855, William H. Holcomb, a homeopathic physician in Natchez, Mississippi, recorded in his diary, "This was Thanksgiving day...I am sorry that the Yankee custom has crept in among us. I object to it because it makes gratitude to God a matter of civil ordinance, and limits to a single day the exhibition of feelings which should be a portion of our daily life."

Other commentators noted that the South already had a holiday of feasting and celebration late in the calendar year: Christmas. In New England, which inherited a legacy of Puritan dogma that considered Christmas a secular abomination, Christmas was not observed as a celebratory occasion until the 1870s. To Southern eyes, a day of feasting in late November was redundant and a loss of a day's income for its workers and merchants.

On the eve of the War for Southern Independence, the adoption of Thanksgiving in the South remained inconsistent at best, and those who chose to observe the holiday treated it more as a religious occasion and a day of relaxation than a time of feasting and homecoming.

In 1858, the governors of Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and North and South Carolina all followed Mrs. Hale's recommendations and declared Thursday, November 25th to be a day of Thanksgiving. That day, the Charleston Courier reported, "Our city presented a Sunday appearance. Business rested. The stones answered only to the wheels of light vehicles. The church-bells discoursed sweet music, and crowds flocked to the houses of worship."

In Augusta, Georgia, the Chronicle reported that "Thursday was more generally observed as a day of Thanksgiving in this city—more generally, we believe, than on any former occasion." That wasn't the case in Montgomery, Alabama, where the Daily Confederation reported that church services were well attended, but "the streets were almost unusually crowded with wagons, and that business houses had to work 'whether they would or not.' Our country friends overlooked the day, and came to town to trade, in great numbers. Cotton is King, and every thing has to give way before his pale-faced majesty."

The South's tentative steps toward celebrating Thanksgiving in the States ground to a halt during the Civil War, whereupon the Confederate Government and President Jefferson Davis

Sarah Josepha Hale continued her crusade to make Thanksgiving a uniform national holiday. In 1863, she wrote to Abraham Lincoln encouraging him "to have the day of our annual Thanksgiving made a National and fixed Union Festival." Lincoln complied, and proclaimed a nationwide Thanksgiving Day to occur on the last Thursday in November.

He issued a similar proclamation in 1864, setting a precedent that was followed by each succeeding president, who consistently proclaimed the last Thursday in November to be Thanksgiving Day. (In 1939, Franklin Delano Roosevelt moved the holiday permanently to the fourth Thursday in November to ensure retailers had more pre-Christmas shopping days.)

Most hail Lincoln as the “Establisher of Thanksgiving” in the US, but TWO Southerners beat Lincoln to it. The first was the first US President, Virginia-born, George Washington. In 1789, President George Washington proclaimed the first National Day of Thanksgiving. He wrote: "Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to obey His will... I do recommend... Thursday, the twenty-sixth day of November... to be devoted by the People of these United States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be." Washington continued: "that we may... humbly offer our prayers... to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national... transgressions."

Then in 1862, the first Confederate President, Kentucky-born Jefferson F. Davis issued the following Proclamation, a portion of which reads as follows:

THANKSGIVING DAY 1862 for victory in battle BY JEFFERSON DAVIS 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. ... 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

As Lincoln issued his proclamations in 1863 and then 1864, followed by Andrew Johnston and so forth, Southerners overlooked our own historic original contributions to the holiday and viewed it as an encroachment upon our defeated Republic.

Nominally, as the states of the former Confederacy returned to the Union during Reconstruction, the annual presidential proclamation applied to them, too. The president's authority extended only to closing federal offices on that day, but with Southern statehouses firmly in Republican hands, most governors declared state holidays from 1865 onward, too.

But, that didn't mean residents had to celebrate the occasion. In 1868, the *Weekly Advocate of Baton Rouge* reported that, "Thanksgiving was kept by a portion of the community." Public offices were closed, the courts adjourned, and services held at two churches. But, the paper noted, "Very little preparation had been made for big dinners. Turkeys are scarce, pumpkins are not fashionable eating in these latitudes." Instead, most of those who did observe the occasion merely took a day off from work and went hunting or sought out sunny street corners to chat with friends about politics and personal reminiscences.

Similarly, in 1873, the *Alexandria Gazette* noted, "The President's Thanksgiving Day was observed here only partially, all the grafts of New England custom upon a Virginia stock having so far found but moderate growth." Banks and federal offices were closed, so those Alexandrians working in the District of Columbia were idle, and a few churches held services, but that was about it.

It wasn't until the end of Republican rule and the return of home rule to Southern statehouses that the region fully embraced Thanksgiving. And, once it did, Southerners quickly adopted all the Yankee trappings of the day part and parcel, including the menu of the traditional Thanksgiving dinner.

As Diana Karter Appelbaum puts it in her history of the holiday, presidents and governors could declare days of Thanksgiving, but "family reunions, pumpkin pies, and turkey dinners were customs that Southerners had to be taught." The editors of newly-popular national magazines, most of which were produced in the northeast, happily stepped up. Each November, publications like Harper's Bazaar, Good Housekeeping, and, of course, Godey's Lady's Book, ran countless "Recipes for Thanksgiving" features, and Southern newspapers were filled with similar columns—many of them nationally syndicated—providing detailed instructions on how to prepare the traditional holiday feast.

Nothing signifies the full adoption of the Yankee mode of Thanksgiving more than Southerners' adoption of the cranberry as a staple of their feasting table. A fruit not cultivated south of New Jersey, the cranberry was by its very nature an import, arriving by the barrelful on freight cars and steamships, but it is omnipresent in descriptions late 19th century Thanksgiving dinners in the South—and it was rarely seen at any other time.

By 1882, the Augusta Chronicle was commenting, "We dare say most of the Thanksgiving will take the form of gastronomic pleasure. Every person who can afford turkey or procure it will sacrifice the noble American fowl to-day." In 1883, the Macon Telegraph grumbled that, "not one out of every thousand people drops on bended knees and offers up thanks in accordance with the proclamation." Instead, "As a general rule, the day is parted in the middle by a turkey and cranberry feast, and those who can afford it may draw the cork from a bottle of claret." The very next year the same newspaper ran a recipe column, originally from the New York Commercial Advertiser, that provided instructions on how to make turkey with oyster stuffing, cranberry jelly, and pumpkin pie.

In 1890, the Charlotte News observed that, "With each succeeding year, the observance of this day has grown more general until now it is second, as a holiday, only to Christmas....The Thanksgiving dinner, around which the happy household gathers with perhaps a few particular friends as guests, has become typical of the day." Its recommended menu for that meal included oysters, roast turkey with cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, and celery, a formerly exotic vegetable that was then at its height of fashion.

Thus the twin undergirding foundations of Faith and Food intertwined so that by the early 20th century the South was heartily reclaiming Thanksgiving as OUR holiday.

Over time, as Southern families created their own Thanksgiving traditions, their favorite regional dishes began sneaking their way onto the holiday table. But the core structure of the meal remained defined by the New England tradition. A visitor from Boston or Hartford would quite likely have felt quite comfortable with the fare at almost any Southern Thanksgiving dinner.

As our society becomes increasingly secular, the actual "giving of thanks to God" during our annual Thanksgiving holiday is being overlooked, leaving only the feasting. May God grant that He may find us grateful every day for all of His gifts, spiritual and material. God is good, and every good gift comes from Him (James 1:17). For those who know Christ, God also works everything together for good, even events we would not necessarily consider good (Romans 8:28-30). May He find us to be His grateful children.