



How Will You Mark Thanksgiving?

How will you spend your Thanksgiving Day this year? Sleep in because you have extra days off? Settle down to watch football? Pull up a chair at four o'clock to eat a huge feast? Make plans for Black Friday, plotting with the multitudes to storm the stores and "shop-until-you-drop?"

Why not consider another tradition? The tradition of the Pilgrims, honored nationally since the days of George Washington.

President Washington established the first national day of thanksgiving in 1789 with a proclamation. Lincoln added gravitas to the tradition with his proclamation of 1863. Both presidents invited Americans to give thanks to "Almighty God" for the blessings bestowed on the nation. Lincoln noted that God blessed America even though He was "dealing with us in anger for our sins."

In 2009 and 2010, President Obama's proclamations included quotations from Washington and Lincoln about God's place in our Thanksgiving Day celebrations. In both his proclamations, Obama commented on the natives who helped the Pilgrims. They surely did help in an important way, but it was the Pilgrims who proclaimed it a day of thanksgiving to God for his blessings. It was not the natives who invited the Pilgrims to dinner and proclaimed a Thanksgiving Day in 1623.

That aside, consider Franklin Delano Roosevelt's dramatic move regarding Thanksgiving: In 1939 and 1940, FDR changed the date of celebration from the last Thursday in November—as it had been since Washington—to the fourth Thursday in November, allowing another week for shopping before Christmas. An uproar followed. Half of the states literally refused to follow FDR's proclamation.

Congress put an end to the matter on October 6, 1941, passing "H.J. RES. 41." This resolution made the last Thursday of November "a legal holiday to all intents and purposes." Congress titled it "Thanksgiving Day," providing the same standing as other legal holidays, such as Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

This resolution effectively eliminated the need for presidential proclamations, but presidents continued to issue them. One of the more interesting ones was issued by President Kennedy during his first year in office. He began with a quotation from Scripture: "It is a good thing to

give thanks to the Lord.” He went on to request that “each head of a family take time to tell the children about New England’s first thanksgiving day,” the Pilgrim one in 1623.

Some Americans may wish to learn more about that first Thanksgiving Day. Or they may wish to, as Kennedy asked, tell “the story of the first New England thanksgiving to their children.” Here is a brief summary of how that event came to pass:

William Bradford (1590-1647) wrote a journal that traced the history of his fellow English dissenters, known as “Pilgrims.” The published version was titled “Of Plymouth Plantation.” Written over several years in the 1640s, it recounts the group’s start with a migration in 1607 from East England to Holland, where they enjoyed religious freedom.

Leaving Holland in 1620, the Pilgrims went to the New England coast, landing at Plymouth Rock. Life was grim. Half of the original group died in the first year, but none returned to England. By 1623, conditions were better. Neighboring natives had befriended them and taught them how to produce food more abundantly using native techniques—such as fish for fertilizer.

Matters had improved so much by the fall of 1623 that Governor William Bradford did two important things: He invited his native neighbors to a several-days-long feast—a continuation, no doubt, of the centuries-old English “harvest festival” tradition—and then, probably with the Leiden Thanksgiving Day in mind, issued the following proclamation:

Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, peas, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forest to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as he has protected us from the ravages of the savages, has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience.

Now I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims ... do gather at ye meeting house ... on Thursday, November 29th, of the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and twenty-three ... there to listen to ye pastor and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all his blessings.

The natives came and the Pilgrims gave thanks to God. Can it be doubted that the Pilgrims told their native neighbors about the God to whom they gave thanks? I think not. Significantly, most of our school textbooks do not discuss Bradford’s proclamation at all.

How will you spend your Thanksgiving Day this year? I suggest some time to ponder Pilgrim practices and a few moments of thanks to God.

<http://www.visionandvalues.org/2011/11/how-will-you-mark-thanksgiving/>