

Thanksgiving Day – Origins and Significance

by Catherine Millard ©1990.

The first Thanksgiving Day service in what was to become the United States of America was held on **August 9, 1607**, by colonists en route to found the short-lived **Popham Colony** at what is now Phippsburg, Maine. After the two ships reached one of the Georges Islands off the Maine Coast, the Reverend Richard Seymour led a group in “giving God thanks for our happy meeting and safe arrival into the country.”

The First permanent English settlement in America was founded in **Jamestown**, on the James River in **Virginia, in 1607**. The first thing they did after landing on these brand new shores was to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and thank God for a safe trip across the seas, as evidenced by the famous stained-glass window called the “Patriot’s Window” in Christ Church, Philadelphia – now “the nation’s church.”

On **December 4, 1619**, a band of stalwart Englishmen landed in Virginia at a site on the James River, near **Berkeley**. The weary travelers disembarked and immediately fell to their knees to thank God for their safe arrival. The event is commemorated yearly, as directed in the group’s original “Instructions” from England: “We ordained that the day of our ship’s arrival at the place assigned for plantation in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God.”

In 1607, a group of English Bible-believing Christians, having undergone tremendous persecution for their faith in Christ and return to the Bible as their way of life, started a colony in Holland. The hardships and difficulties they encountered forced them to leave from Delft Haven, on a ship called the “Speedwell,” on July 22nd, 1620. The painting of this occurrence is a masterpiece. Painted by Robert W. Weir, it hangs in the Main Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol and shows these Pilgrims deep in prayer on board ship, giving forth praise and thanksgiving to Almighty God. The central part of this touching scene depicts an open Bible – opened at the first book of the New Testament, Matthew’s account of Christ’s life. On the top left-hand sail, just above the hemline, are the words: “God with Us,” taken from Matthew’s gospel, Chapter 1, verse 23, the name that the angel gave Joseph for the coming Messiah.

Upon their arrival in England, this Pilgrim band embarked on the Mayflower, risking their lives for the faith, in coming to an unknown new world. After landing on the **New England** coast on **November 11th, 1620**, the first thing they did was to kneel down and give thanks to Almighty God for bringing them safely thus far. Around the inner dome of the Rotunda in the U.S. Capitol, there is a 300-foot frieze painted by an Italian artist, Constantino Brumidi, the most talented artist the Capitol has ever known. It depicts 15 landmarks of American history through 400 years. The seventh landmark is the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts. There you see the Mayflower settlers kneeling in prayer and thanksgiving to Almighty God.

The famed **Mayflower Compact**, drawn up and signed by these Pilgrims in the cabin of the ship, reads as follows:

“In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten...by the Grace of God, having undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and the honor of our king and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia: do by these presents and mutually in the presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation, and furtherance of the ends aforesaid;...Anno Dom. 1620.”

This Pilgrim band endured tremendous hardships. During the bleak winter of 1620, about half of the 101 passengers of the Mayflower died. Gathering a rich harvest in **the Fall of 1621**, **Governor William Bradford** proclaimed a day of **Thanksgiving to Almighty God** for His entire colony of Christians.

By the time of the Pilgrim’s third summer in America, they had lost almost half their colony due to

sickness, starvation, persecution and attacks from unfriendly Indians. That third summer a drought hit the colony and continued for twelve weeks, completely drying up the Pilgrim's corn and beans – their sole source of sustenance in the harsh winter months.

Governor Bradford wrote in his diary that even the oldest Indians couldn't remember such a severe drought. The entire colony was in great fear recalling the previous winter when every man, woman and child had miraculously survived on a ration of only five kernels of corn per day! Consequently, the entire colony set aside a day to fast and pray for rain.

On the day of the fast, clouds began to gather. History records there was no thunder or wind, but that night a soft rain began to fall and continued for fourteen days. As a result, even the unbelieving Indians who had been doing rain dances, glorified God because the dead corn which had been laying flat on the ground literally came back to life, saving the colony from starvation and death!

So we see that fasting and prayer have played a powerful role in the birthing of America. In November of that year, after the crops were gathered in abundance, Governor Bradford ordered that "all ye Pilgrims, with ye wives and little ones, do gather at the meetinghouse, on the hill...there to listen to the pastor, and render thanksgiving to the Almighty God for all His blessings."

The Pilgrims and Indians then came together for a feast of celebration to thank God for His supernatural provision. But unbeknownst to most Americans, the Pilgrims held a meal of fasting before each feast: each person received five kernels of corn on an empty plate – a vivid reminder of God's everlasting goodness and grace.

In the Old Testament days, the Jews, God's chosen people, have given thanks for abundant harvests with the eight-day Feast of Tabernacles, which continues in October of each year to this day.

Thanksgiving to Almighty God stems from Old Testament times. God delivered His people, the Israelites, out of the hand of Egypt and out of the house of bondage and fed them "manna," which literally translated from the Hebrew, means: "what is it?" It was a form of bread that fell out of heaven on a daily basis, as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness before crossing over the Jordan into the promised land. He then exhorted them and admonished them to love, worship and thank Him with all their hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to serve Him alone. This He did through the famed Ten Commandments, which were written, as the biblical narrative tells us, by the finger of God on two tablets of stone and handed to his servant Moses on Mount Sinai, to carry down to the people. (Exodus 20).

Paul, the great **apostle to the Gentiles** as he is called, planted most of the New Testament churches in Asia and Asia Minor during the first century after Christ ascended into heaven. To the young church in Philippi, he writes:

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6, 7).

In his first letter to the newly-established Thessalonian church, Paul writes: (Chapter 5, verses 16-18):

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, **in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.**"

We now see how the origins of Thanksgiving stem from the Bible, the Word of God. The Pilgrims, as Christians, were instructed by God Himself to thank Him for all their blessings which He had bestowed upon them.

Although the early Pilgrims never set a regular Thanksgiving day, they held such observances at various times. A law of November 15, 1636 established that: "solemn days of humiliation by fasting, prayer and

thanksgiving as occasion, shall be offered,” and these would be commanded by the Governor.

Appropriately, the **War of Independence**, during which time the thirteen colonies joined in a common effort for the first time, also caused the first Thanksgiving Day to be observed, giving thanks to Almighty God simultaneously throughout all the colonies, the occasion being the celebration of the patriot **victory over the British at Saratoga in October of 1777**. Whilst you are visiting the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, the second famous oil painting from left to right, as you enter, graphically depicts this surrender. It was painted by John Trumbull, George Washington’s Aide-de-Camp. So important to the Revolution was this battle that Samuel Adams called upon the Continental Congress to declare a National Day of Thanksgiving.

On November 1, 1777, the Congress approved John Adams proclamation, setting **December 18, 1777 as a day of “Thanksgiving and Praise,”** and the residents of the colonies enthusiastically observed the day with prayers to Almighty God and feasts.

In the course of the American Revolution, the Continental Congress called for a number of days of Thanksgiving. A number of local thanksgiving celebrations took place, the most notable of which was at the headquarters of the Continental Army at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, after General George Washington received news that **France had allied with the colonies**.

To **celebrate** the alliance, **Washington** ordered his troops to assemble on **May 7, 1778**. Ceremonies began with the army chaplains offering **prayers of gratitude to Almighty God**, then the General reviewed the troops; thirteen cannons fired a salute, after which a hearty dinner was enjoyed and an outdoor banquet was given for the French officers and other guests.

The end of the American Revolution in 1783 secured independence for the thirteen American colonies, and the adoption of the Constitution established a viable government that began to function in 1789. Both the Revolutionary War and the formation of the Constitution were massive undertakings and to celebrate their successful outcome, **Washington**, who by then had become the first President of the United States, proclaimed **Thursday, November 26, 1789, a day of National Thanksgiving**. At the request of the President, citizens assembled in churches that day, and thanked God for His beneficence. **In 1795**, once again, **Washington** proclaimed another **National day of Thanksgiving**, excerpted as follows:

“When we review the calamities which afflict so many other nations, the present condition of the United States affords much matter of consolation and satisfaction...Deeply penetrated with this sentiment I, George Washington, President of the United States, do recommend to all religious societies and denominations, and to all persons whomsoever, within the United States, to set apart and observe Thursday, the 19th day of February next, as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer...”

Meanwhile, shortly before gaining statehood, **California** observed a **day of Thanksgiving and praise to Almighty God on October 24, 1849**. We thus see that on both the East and West Coasts of America, the Pilgrims gave thanks to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The establishment of a **national Thanksgiving Day on a permanent basis**, can be traced to **the year 1827**– to a Christian woman of caliber, by the name of **Sarah Josepha Hale**. As editor of the *Ladies’ Magazine* in Boston, she began to urge the observance of a uniform day throughout the country to express thanks to Almighty God for the blessings of the year. After the consolidation of the *Ladies’ Magazine* with **Godey’s Ladies Book** a magazine of 150,000 circulation – the largest in the country at the time, she wrote editorial after editorial in support of the annual Thanksgiving Day. She also wrote personal letters to the successive U.S. Presidents and governors of all the states, persuading many of the latter to fix **the last Thursday in November as the National Day of Thanksgiving**. In September 1863, her last editorial reads:

“Would it not be a great advantage, socially, nationally, religiously, to have the day of our American Thanksgiving positively settled? Putting aside the sectional feelings and local incidents that might be urged by any single State or isolated territory that desired to choose its own time, would it not be more noble, more truly American, to become national in unity when we offer to God our tribute of joy and gratitude for the blessings of the year?”

This was a time of turmoil, bloodshed and strife for “this nation under God” as **Abraham Lincoln** so appropriately called America in his Gettysburg Address. The following month, on **October 3, 1863**, Abraham Lincoln, who himself frequently used Scriptures in his political speeches, established a **national Day of Thanksgiving** in the following Proclamation:

“...It has seemed to me fit and proper that our blessings from Almighty God 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.”

Ever since 1863, therefore, Thanksgiving has been observed annually. For 127 years it has been scheduled for **the last Thursday in November**, with only two exceptions: President Andrew Johnson designated the first Thursday in December as Thanksgiving Day in 1865; and President Ulysses Grant selected the third Thursday in November for the observance in 1869.

One of the most impressive Thanksgiving services took place in 1942 at Westminster Abbey in London. More than 3,500 American troops who were stationed in England during WWII jammed into that historic church and participated in services which included the singing of “the Star-Spangled Banner” and “America the Beautiful.” This special Thanksgiving service was the first service other than a church of England ritual to be held at the Abbey’s altar in nine centuries.

On November 24, 1983, *Voice of America* broadcast its first worldwide English language **Thanksgiving Day Service** from Boston’s historic church, the Old South Meeting House.

A frequently cited **Scripture at Thanksgiving** is from the **8th Chapter of Deuteronomy** in the Old Testament, verses 2; 18-20:

And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, to humble you, and to prove you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or no...But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He that gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore unto your fathers, as it is this day. And it shall be if you do at all forget the LORD your God, and walk after other gods and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. As the nations which the Lord destroys before your face, so you shall perish; because you would not be obedient unto the voice of the LORD your God.

Thanksgiving is a time of great rejoicing for the bountiful mercies of Almighty God upon this land. As the Pilgrims in Plymouth enjoyed “a great store of wild turkeys,” most Americans feast on the descendants of these birds. Dressings, sweet potatoes, squash, creamed onions and cranberries are the condiments used with the turkey, together with a vast array of other delicious foods. Pumpkin and mincemeat pies are the

traditionally-favored desserts of the day with plum puddings following close behind.

Today in America, history has been rewritten. The famed Patriot's Window depicting the 1607 Settlers in Jamestown celebrating the Lord's Supper in thanksgiving to Almighty God has been removed from Christ Church, "the nation's church" in Philadelphia, and placed in storage in the Fall of 1986. Literary pieces, such as "No Thanksgiving in Williamsburg," written by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in November 1989; and "no Thanksgiving tradition in Jamestown," put out by the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation in November, 1990; are now being promoted at the very historic sites where God's men and women prostrated themselves in thanksgiving before our God and Father!

The original documents of America's history, however, testify to an unbroken American Christian tradition of thanksgiving to Almighty God, from 1607 to the present time. Let us remember the first Thanksgiving by the Pilgrims on American soil, when fasting, praying and true thankfulness to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens preceded the enjoyment and feasting on His bounty – the fruits of the harvest.