

The First Thanksgiving

The first Thanksgiving, in the autumn of 1621, was a recognition by the Pilgrim Fathers of the providence that had seen them through a hard winter, into a tense spring and then into a harvest season in which fortune smiles. The story of that first year is told, in part, by the old Pilgrims themselves. William Bradford, their governor, tells about the “new life” in his “History of Massachusetts”

The spring now approaching, it pleased God the mortalitie began to cease amongst them. And ye sick and lame recovered apace, which put, as it were, a new life into them, though they had borne their sad affliction with as much patience & contentedness as I think any people could do.

But it was ye Lord which upheld them and had beforehand prepared them, many having long borne ye yoake – yea, from their youth.

Afterwards, they (as many as were able) began to plant their come, in which service Squanto stood them in great stead showing them both ye manner how to set it and, after, how to dress & tend it. Also, he told them excepte they got fish & set with it (in these grounds), it would come to nothing.

And he showed them in ye middle of April they should have store enough (of fish) come up ye brooke ... and taught them how to take it, and where to get other provisions necessarie for them, all which they found true by trial & experience.

Some English seed they sowed as wheat and peas. But it came not to good.



Edward Winslow, whose wife died that first winter and who married again in the spring, was of stout heart. He wrote, as follows, to a friend in England, telling him of the efforts of the Pilgrims to raise food enough for the next winter.

You will understand that in this little time that a few of us have been here, we have builte seven dwelling houses, and four for the use of the plantation, and have made preparation for divers others.

We set last spring some twentie acres of Indian come and sowed some six acres of barley and peas. And according to ye manner of the Indians we manured our ground with herrings, or rather shads (or rather, alewives), which we have in great abundance and take with great ease to our door.



Governor Bradford, in his history, wrote as follows of the harvest:

They began to gather in ye small harvest they had, and fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health & strength, and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing aboute codd & bass & other fish, of which they tooke good store, of which every family had their portion.

All ye summer there was no want. And now began to come in store of foule, as winter approached. ... And besides waterfoule, there was a great store of wild Turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides they had about a peck of meal to a person or now, since harvest, Indian come to that proportion, which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not fained but true reports.



When the harvest was in, the Pilgrim Fathers could relax briefly to be thankful for what the first year in the new world had brought them. Winslow, again, writing to a friend in England, tells about it:

Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sente four men out fowling that so we might, after a more special manner, rejoyce together aher we had gathered the fruit of our labours. These four, in one day, killed as many fowl as, with a little help besides, served the company almost a week, at which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our armes, many of the Indians coming amongst us.

And amongst the rest, their greatest King, Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom, for three days, we entertained and feasted.

And they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governor and upon the Captaine and others.



Thereafter, through colonial days and in the early days of the Republic, Thanksgiving was observed in New England as a local holiday. Harriet Beecher Stowe (Uncle Tom's Cabin) wrote this description of the regional festival:

The king and high priest of all festivals was the autumn Thanksgiving. When the apples were all gathered and the cider was all made and the yellow pumpkins were rolled in from many a hill in billows of gold, and the corn was husked, and the labors of the season were done, and the warm late days of Indian Summer came in, dreamy, and calm, and still, with just enough frost to crisp the ground of a morning, but with warm trace of benignant, sunny hours at noon, there came over the community a sort of genial repose of spirit – a sense of something accomplished, and of a new golden mark made in advance, and the deacon began to say to the minister, of a Sunday, “I suppose it's about time for the Thanksgiving proclamation.”



Thanksgiving was not observed as a national holiday until 1863. And then the purpose of the observance was less to perpetuate the old New England custom than to observe the turning tide of the Civil War. Six weeks before he went to Gettysburg to deliver his famous address, President Lincoln issued a proclamation, and presidents ever since have followed his example. Few, however, could equal the style of Mr. Lincoln's designation of a day of Thanksgiving.

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 cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the everwatchful Providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unparalleled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to invite and provoke the aggressions of foreign states, 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 contracting by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and 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 in November next as a day of Thanksgiving and prayer 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 purposes, 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 third day of October, in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and sixty-three, and of the independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.



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