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Fraunce's Tavern in New York City was the scene of the first—and almost the last—Thanksgiving Day banquet.

Thanksgiving Day, 1789

Here's how Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson celebrated—or ignored—America's first official day of thanks.

by Kevin V. Brown
Art by Elmer Smith

GEORGE WASHINGTON and his wife, Martha, marked the historic occasion by welcoming guests in typically dignified, colonial fashion at the executive mansion on Franklin Square. Alexander Hamilton, who initiated the

national celebration (and insisted on turkey as the main course at his own dinner), spent a disturbing portion of the day separating participants in a tavern brawl.

And Thomas Jefferson, worried about the political implications involved, did his gentlemanly best to ignore the event altogether.

This, according to some accounts, was the way our founding fathers solemnized the first official Thanksgiving Day. The origins of Thanksgiving, of course, go farther back to the New England Pilgrims, but nothing formal was done about it nationally until 1789 when Washington, in his first year as President, proclaimed a universal day of gratitude



A bunch of the boys were overflowing with gratitude.

to be held throughout the new nation.

The fact that Thanksgiving survived the diverse, even antagonistic, activities that followed is a tribute to its deep roots in American tradition and conscience. Thanksgiving Day is truly one American holiday that was not imposed from above, but rather grew among a grateful people until it reached such proportions that, when the Federal Government finally acted, it was merely recognizing an existing custom.

Its existence, however, was almost shattered by that first official observance in 1789. Hamilton, then secretary of the treasury, suggested it and proposed a huge parade of dignitaries and military units for the occasion. His ambitious suggestion for universal thanks, however, met with anything but universal approval.

Cries of "mimicking the monarchy" arose, fist fights broke out on the streets of New York (then capital of the country), and one Southern congressman was moved to remark that perhaps we had nothing at all to be thankful for in "our present government" (then dominated by Northerners). Southern opposition also was based on the fact that Thanksgiving was a well-entrenched New England custom.



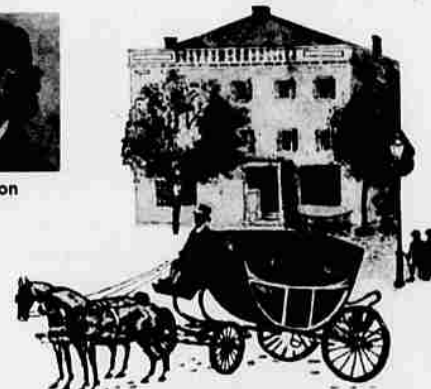
Hamilton



Washington



Jefferson



While Hamilton celebrated and Washington entertained at home, Jefferson ignored it all.

Jefferson's opposition was most potent of all. The author of the Declaration of Independence argued that Thanksgiving was a religious matter and the Government had no right to interfere. To do so, he said, would be to violate the division only recently set up between church and state.

WASHINGTON's dignified middle ground—to keep the observance within the family and the home—prevailed, and it generally reflected the custom as observed until then, and since. His proclamation became an interesting test of Jefferson's constitutional argument.

Our first President asked that Thursday, November 26, "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." He cited Divine care and protection before and during the Revolutionary War, the peace and plenty that followed, the fruits of civil and religious liberty, and the opportunity to establish a form of government for the safety and happiness of the people.

Meanwhile, back at the tavern... It should be mentioned hurriedly, and with due respect to all concerned, that taverns then were not what they are now. They were respected meeting places for gentlemen, and Fraunce's Tavern, the case in point, was once used by Washington as his headquarters and was also the scene of his farewell to his officers. It is now, in fact, a tourist attraction in New York City.

any proclamation in any of his eight years as chief executive. Although his decision was made in good faith, it was not an entirely popular one, especially among New England clergy. At least one prayed, "O Lord, endow the President with a goodly portion of Thy grace, for Thou, O Lord, knowest how much he needs it."

Yet Jefferson's official attitude prevailed for more than 60 years, because it was not until 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, that Abraham Lincoln, persuaded by Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, issued the first Thanksgiving Day proclamation since Adams. And Thanksgiving, as we know it, dates directly from those troubled times.

The Autumn custom, however, had not died out in the interim, because it had never depended on official proclamations. It grew, not only in New England, but throughout the country—even in the South where, prior to the Civil War, the governors of Georgia, Texas, and Jefferson's own Virginia had issued proclamations of their own.

By the time Lincoln made his request for a nation-wide day of thanks, 30 of the 34 states were already observing it. Gratitude, it seems, has always been a part of American tradition and heritage.

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