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Thanksgiving: Facts and Fantasies

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Thanksgiving: Facts and Fantasies

It is a New England Autumn in 1621. The beautiful gold and crimson leaves contribute to the festive atmosphere that blankets Plimoth village. The smell of roasting Turkeys adds to the ambience. The little village's fifty English settlers are preparing a harvest festival in celebration of having survived the previous year's great hardships and brought in their first crops in the New World. While their attitude is certainly happy and thankful, there is also wariness. Their Indian friends, the Pokanoket tribe under the leadership of the great Sachem or chief Massasoit has joined them for this celebration. Massasoit and his 90 warriors outnumber the able-bodied Pilgrims about four to one.¹

Nevertheless, the feast is a great success. And when it appeared the Indians might eat too much and thus place the Pilgrims in some degree of want for the coming winter, Massasoit sent several of his hunters into the forest where they quickly shot five deer. The venison was a great delicacy and added significantly to the table. The feast lasted three days. The men sportingly fired their weapons in contests of marksmanship and played other games.² The women worked at the meals, of course, but also found time to knit and chat, no doubt remarking as to how their men were wasting powder and shot in their attempts to impress the Indians – and each other.

¹Edward Winslow to probably George Morton, Dec., 11, 1621, in Alexander Young ed., *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth, From 1602-1625* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1844.

²ibid.

This then was the first thanksgiving in American memory. It was a happy time, a true festival, and one which commemorated the good relations between the Pilgrims and the Pokanokets. Pilgrim father Edward Winslow left us the only description of this now fabled event.

Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner, rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among 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 captain and others. And though it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet be the goodness of God that we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.³

But memory is an unreliable thing. And the memory of a people, especially of events 400 years in the past, is particularly prone to significant misconceptions. In the case of Thanksgiving, there is simply no historical line

³Edward Winslow to a Loving and Old Friend, Dec., 11, 1621, as found in Alexander Young, ed. *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth, 1602-1625* (Boston: ..., 231, 232.

of connection between the so-called “first Thanksgiving” just described, and our modern American holiday. For the modern Thanksgiving celebration became a national holiday before any historical knowledge of the Pilgrim Thanksgiving was recovered in the 1850s, 230 years after that first thanksgiving.⁴

The Origins of Thanksgiving

If our modern Thanksgiving may not properly be historically connected to the Pilgrim feast of 1621, where does it come from?

The modern American Thanksgiving finds its origin in England among the Puritans who celebrated special thanksgivings in both the spring and fall, and upon occasions in which the hand of God had been especially evident. Moreover, some of these observances involved fasting rather than gorging oneself on the plenty of a harvest.⁵ Puritans were also responding to the plethora of holidays in Catholicism and its far too similar offspring – at least in the minds of Puritans – Anglicanism. Moreover, these Anglican holidays had become injurious to the economy of England as no work was done on these many days; they were expensive in terms of decorations, food and liquor, and occasions for bawdy behavior rather than careful thanksgiving to an omnipotent and omniscient God. And so, Puritans discarded these seemingly

⁴James W. Baker, *Thanksgiving: The Biography of an American Holiday* (Lebanon New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2009), 8, 13.

⁵Baker, *Thanksgiving*, 17.;

incessant and frankly sinful holidays, including Christmas which was seen as unbiblical, for a streamlined set of holy days given over to worship, prayer, and giving thanks. The Puritans who settled in New England brought these beliefs with them.⁶

The three religious holidays of Puritan America were the weekly Sabbath, occasional days of fasting, and Thanksgiving.⁷ These holy days helped insure the community remain firmly in God's favor. The focal point of all three holidays was a church service, and in the tradition of Judaism, both work and play were as curtailed as humanly possible so as not to interfere with contemplation of one's place before God. The yearly observance of Thanksgiving did not begin in one Puritan colony and spread to the others, but, since all of these people shared the same faith and habits, evolved simultaneously in New England. According to Thanksgiving historian William Devoss Love, the fall observance of Thanksgiving first became standard practice, as opposed to intermittent, in Connecticut in 1650. And by the end of the century the other colonies had followed in annual observances of Thanksgiving.⁸ Each colony declared its own Thanksgiving Day, and it varied from year to year based on the harvest or the weather or other events such as Indian trouble.

Once the harvest was in, usually by the end of September, and the butchering and salting of livestock completed by the end of the cooler October

⁶Oliver Perry Chitwood, *A History of Colonial America* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1948), 489. Baker, Thanksgiving, 17, 18.

⁷Baker, Thanksgiving, 22.

⁸Baker, Thanksgiving, 6, 8, 31.

days, it was time for “summing up God’s mercies and judgments towards his people.”⁹ Now in the late fall was the time of plenty, the opportunity to relax and enjoy God’s bounty. The Puritans of New England used Thanksgiving to mark the end of the agricultural year. This did not occur in late September as did traditional harvest feasts. Thanksgiving was not a harvest feast; it was a time of refectation, of thanks, of prayers. Attending a special church service, followed by the Thanksgiving meal was the custom. And the church service was the focal point of the day. This Thanksgiving took place in late November, well past the end of harvest. It marked the beginning of winter and also took the place of Christmas which, as we have seen, the Puritans did not observe. In the Eighteenth century, this winterish Thanksgiving had become so entrenched in colonial society that the people of that time mistakenly believed that their custom had always been the custom of their Puritan fathers.¹⁰ They knew nothing of the Pilgrim harvest feast of 1621. It was in the eighteenth century that the non-Puritan colonies such as Rhode Island, New York, and Virginia began observing their own fasts or thanksgivings.¹¹

Then, in the midst of the American Revolution in the 1770s and 80s, fasts and thanksgivings became ever more significant as prayers were then offered for the success of American arms. John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, and bold signer of the Declaration of Independence,

⁹Baker, Thanksgiving, 32.

¹⁰Baker, Thanksgiving, 32.

¹¹Baker, Thanksgiving, 33.

declared the first pan-colonial fast day for June 12, 1775, shortly after the battles of Lexington and Concord; Henry Laurens, the new President of Congress declared the first national Thanksgiving for Thursday, December 18, 1777. This Thanksgiving was not to be a frivolous harvest festival. Rather, Laurens suggested:

...that servile labor, and such recreation, as, though at other times innocent, may be unbecoming the purpose of this appointment [declared holiday], be omitted on so solemn an occasion. ¹²

And twelve years later, the father of his country and now president of the United States George Washington announced another observance of a national Thanksgiving for Thursday, November 11, 1789. This thanksgiving marked the first year of government under the new Constitution. And so, subsequent presidents of the United States declared thanksgivings and fast days on an irregular and as seemingly needed basis. James Madison declared the last national thanksgiving before the Civil War of the 1860s for April 13, 1815. The purpose was to give thanks for the American victory over the British in the War of 1812.¹³

In the mid-Nineteenth century, the standard Thanksgiving holiday that would become the “national ideal, was an established fixture of New England

¹²Baker, Thanksgiving, 33.

¹³Baker, Thanksgiving, 33, 34.

life.”¹⁴ After 1815, this tradition was kept alive by the various states. And now the nature of the holiday began to change. It was no longer God-centered, did not necessarily recognize his providence; rather Americans observed a reverence for faith, if not Christian orthodoxy, and valued the time with friends and family and the opportunity to take a moment and appreciate a successful year no matter one’s occupation. Seldom now, was there any public discouragement of entertainment or other frivolous activities. Of course, some of the stricter and more traditional churches still frowned on such irreverence. But most of the American people combined their thanks to God with fun, friends, and the traditional feast.¹⁵

What did this classic New England Thanksgiving dinner consist of? The centerpiece, you will not be shocked to discover, was turkey. The turkey was so important it eventually came to symbolize the holiday. And Americans today who refuse to make turkey the main dish at Thanksgiving are simply rebellious rascals trying to undermine American culture. Next most important were pies, pies of every description, pumpkin, of course, and apple, cherry and the always popular, but never quite the same, mincemeat. The pies were so important that women began baking them days before the holiday. Potatoes were not a mainstay until much later, and vegetables, though present, were not thought significant enough to describe in detail in surviving menus. No, a New England Thanksgiving had turkey, along with other meats like chicken, and often

¹⁴Baker, Thanksgiving, 34.

¹⁵Baker, Thanksgiving, 34, 35.

oysters, all of it washed down with copious quantities of hard apple cider.¹⁶ Hard apple cider was more popular than beer, wine, or whiskey, and most of the substantial apple crop was devoted to hard cider.

As we have seen, the Thanksgiving holiday had become entrenched in American culture, if not established as a national holiday, by the end of the 17th century. Then, in 1820 Pilgrim father Edward Winslow's 1621 letter describing the first Pilgrim thanksgiving was rediscovered, but to little notice. It was finally published in 1841 in Alexander Young's *Chronicle of the Pilgrim Fathers*. Still, there was no great move to assert the Pilgrim festival as the first Thanksgiving, nor would there be until the Twentieth century.¹⁷ Young himself, however, recognized the parallels between that Pilgrim Thanksgiving of 1621 and what Thanksgiving had become by the 19th century. The similar focus on family, feasting, and festivities was undeniable, the de-emphasis of worship and thanksgiving from the Puritan ideal of the seventeenth century was also clear.¹⁸

Meanwhile the establishment of Thanksgiving as a national holiday gradually took place as new Englanders moved across the country taking their holiday with them.¹⁹ Then in the 1830s, Sarah Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, began a campaign to have Thanksgiving declared a national holiday and to have it placed on the last Thursday of November. She had achieved

¹⁶Baker, Thanksgiving, 49-57

¹⁷Baker, Thanksgiving, 11-13, 15.

¹⁸Baker, Thanksgiving, 13.

¹⁹Baker, Thanksgiving, 69.

considerable success in the various states, but the Civil War propelled her campaign to success.²⁰ In July of 1861, Confederate President Jefferson Davis declared a national day of Thanksgiving after the South's victory at First Bull Run Creek. President of the United States Abraham Lincoln - in a bit of presidential trash-talking - declared a national Thanksgiving in April of 1862 after a Union victory, engineered by Ulysses S. Grant, at Shiloh. Then in August of 1863, about a month after the titanic struggle at Gettysburg, Lincoln declared a Thanksgiving for the last Thursday of November.²¹ It is this Thanksgiving, celebrating the victory at Gettysburg, the survival of the Union, and the New Birth of Freedom that Lincoln spoke of in his great address, that became the first of an as yet unbroken line of Thanksgivings.

Still, Sarah Godey died without having achieved her goal of making Thanksgiving a permanent national holiday. Thanksgiving was observed as a national holiday by the custom of presidential decree, but not law.

As the Nineteenth century passed into the Twentieth, America profoundly changed. Great cities and factories now dominated the economy and the culture; farms gave way in importance to a commercial society. And Thanksgiving changed as well. This new culture of commerce, of business, touched everything in America. Then too, college football was very popular by

²⁰Baker, Thanksgiving, 70.

²¹Baker, Thanksgiving, 70, 71.

the turn of the century. Gradually, attending a college football game became an important part of Thanksgiving.²²

In 1924, Macy's Department Store sponsored a parade of costumed characters on Thanksgiving Day. The holiday would never be the same. The advent of Thanksgiving Day parades marked the turning point in the meaning of the holiday for many Americans. For these parades were not about Thanksgiving. They were literally vehicles to kick off the Christmas shopping season. The first Macy's parade coursed six miles through Manhattan and featured Santa Claus, Mother Goose, thirty-five clowns, and sundry zoo animals. It ended at Macy's department store where a fire truck hoisted Santa on its ladder and deposited him through a second story window. These parades grew ever more fabulous and fantastic finally finding their way to television in the mid-Twentieth century.

Just as the Civil War had made Thanksgiving a consistent national holiday, the Second World War impacted Thanksgiving as well. In November 1941, just days before the Japanese attack on Pearl harbor, but with the clouds of war clearly on the horizon, Congress gave Thanksgiving its permanent and official home on the fourth Thursday in November.²³ Indeed, that war, taken with the Great Depression, profoundly shaped two generations of Americans. In the midst of a war for our very existence, it seemed appropriate to focus on the God who had given this nation its birth, preserved

²²Baker, Thanksgiving, 75, 76.

²³Baker, Thanksgiving, 153.

it in the crucible of Civil War, and now, it was hoped, would guide us to victory against enemies who seemed the definition of evil. In November of 1942 *Life Magazine* published an article entitled “The Puritan Spirit: It is the Faith that Victory Comes from God.” The article unabashedly described the Puritans as the founders of the American way of life and thought, and suggested “fun was OK in peacetime, but it was now time for America to get serious, and the Puritans had a natural corner on that market.”²⁴ As William Bradford wrote, “God sent you unto this world as unto a workhouse, not a playhouse.”²⁵ Then too, Thanksgiving, always the icon of family values, fit comfortably with the national move toward patriotism, self-sacrifice, and family.²⁶ There were many such articles, radio programs and sermons that strengthened this course toward reverence and faith.

In 1944, *Parade* published an article that featured a Plymouth, Massachusetts family observing Thanksgiving. Pilgrims soon became ubiquitous in ads and art of every kind.²⁷ By the time the war was over in 1945, Thanksgiving and Pilgrims were indistinguishable and almost everyone assumed that the American holiday could be traced directly back to our Pilgrim ancestors and their Autumn festival of 1621. In the postwar years, this myth was given the sanctity of learning in schools at every level. The Baby Boomers

²⁴Baker, Thanksgiving, 156.

²⁵Alan Taylor....162.

²⁶Baker, Thanksgiving, 157.

²⁷Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Pilgrim Fathers: Their Significance in History* (Plymouth: Plimoth Plantation Inc.), 8.

grew up believing that the Pilgrim Thanksgiving was the only Thanksgiving.²⁸ While the linking of Thanksgiving to the Pilgrims survived the revolutionary culture change of the 1960s, the wartime reverence did not.

Now long forgotten, just as the Pilgrim Thanksgiving had once been, was the true founding Thanksgiving of Puritan New England: a special holy day, usually a Thursday, set aside to thank the God of heaven for his great mercy and sustaining bounty, to seek forgiveness for sins and strength in the battle with evil. A special church service was the focal point of the day, and a church or family get together for the traditional meal followed. This Thanksgiving was not a festive occasion.

Now the modern Thanksgiving does indeed follow the Pilgrim model in many, but not all ways. As we have seen, there was no church service in 1621 and today few Americans attend a church on Thanksgiving Day, or on the eve before. There were three days of feasting with family and friends 400 years ago. Today we have a long weekend and leftovers sufficient to feed a small army. There were Indians in 1621, of course, and sports and no doubt wagering on the outcome of the contest of arms. Today, few of us invite Indians to our homes, but we do watch football incessantly, and perhaps the Redskins are playing the Cowboys. I am even told that there are wagers placed on the outcomes of these games, but I find this hard to believe. What there was not in either the New England Thanksgiving of the 17th and 18th centuries, or the

²⁸Morison, *The Pilgrim Fathers*, 8.

original Pilgrim feast was any sense of commerce, of a gateway to a vastly more important holiday – the Christmas shopping season.

Today, the Christmas shopping season, especially the so-called Black Friday, threatens to engulf Thanksgiving in an orgy of shopping. Recently, the major retailers have competed to see who could open earliest on Friday. Now, Thanksgiving evening has been sacrificed to the god of greed. It was with a great sense of pleasure and irony, for technology is no friend to tradition, that I observed last year that online sales cut substantially into the Black Friday crowds. Perhaps Thanksgiving can be saved after all - by Amazon.

So, what are we to make of Thanksgiving? For it is really up to the individual American Christian to determine what the holiday should be, and how to observe it. Understanding what it has been helps us in making these choices. Moreover, it is unreasonable to expect in post-Christian America that the Thanksgiving holiday be observed in the way Christians would desire. Indeed, I suspect the time is not far away when some extremely secular point of view, in control of our national government, does away with the title Thanksgiving in favor of a “harvest festival” ostensibly to separate church and state, and avoid giving offense to any anyone who does not identify with the original givers of thanks to the Christian God. Sadly, this the world in which we live.

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