

THANKSGIVING

Folklore, Miscellany, and the Historical

Masonic Connections to the Holiday That You Probably Have Never Heard

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Tonight, we are going to explore the timely topic for this time of year: Thanksgiving.

I want to share with you a story you may not have heard about how the 4th Thursday in November became our traditional Thanksgiving Holiday.

What is the connection between the concern of parents that their children were being corrupted in the early 1600s by a government in which they had lost their faith to Thanksgiving Day?

How did an unworthy sea vessel, an unexpected ocean storm, a 1621 letter, and a part Cherokee Indian in 1789, lead us to our Thanksgiving Day?

What did a Boston Masonic Lodge in 1823 have to do with an anti-slavery book and the woman who wrote *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and an 1827 lady's magazine article with a recipe have to do with how our Thanksgiving Day came about?

What did Secretary of War and anti-Mason, William Steward in Lincoln's administration have to do with writing Lincoln's 1863 proclamation to celebrate a Day of Thanksgiving?

And why did President Franklin Roosevelt change Thanksgiving Day in 1939 from and how did Congress in 1941 permanently change the date by Resolution and inadvertently create another unofficial American holiday with its own history and legends that has become the springboard for Christmas?

In 1608, a group of men, women and their children left England for Holland, Europe's most tolerant nation and a haven for religious dissenters. They lived there until 1620, when their fear and dissatisfaction with the Church of England was replaced with a greater one that had **nothing to do with** religious persecution, but seduction – the troubling concern that their children were and would continue to be **corrupted by the materialistic Dutch culture**.¹

They sailed back to England on the *Speedwell*, and in mid-August 1620, the *Speedwell* another ship, the *Mayflower*, a cargo ship used to transport wine and dry goods, set sail with 102 passengers - all hoping to start a new life on the other side of the Atlantic. Nearly 40 of these passengers were Protestant Separatists—they called themselves "Saints"—who hoped to

¹ Michael Medved, *The First Thanksgiving ~ Pilgrims, Puritans, and the Founding of America*, 2017, Carole Johnson, *The Mayflower's History*, <http://mayflowerhistory.com/voyage>. Accessed September 2017.

establish a new church in the New World. Today, we often refer to the colonists who crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower as “Pilgrims.”

The *Speedwell* proved unseaworthy, and after traveling with the Mayflower for over 300 miles, was forced to return to England for repairs. The passengers were transferred to the Mayflower.

The group risked their dangerous 1620 voyage to a wilderness continent **not because they were running from oppression, but because they were running toward holiness—fulfilling a fateful mission to build an ideal Christian commonwealth.**²

They initially planned to **plant this model society** on the wild, wolf-infested island known to natives as Manhattan, but after 66 days of sailing, the winds and tides *blew them 250 miles off course*, dumping the Mayflower on the frozen coast of Massachusetts at the tip of Cape Cod.

It was there that an event is thought to have taken place that we have come to think of as Thanksgiving.

Since 1941, we've celebrated Thanksgiving Day *as we do today* - on the 4th Thursday of November. **But getting to this point required some complicated moves**, mostly by politicians, and influenced **(in one way) by men in the background** who happened to be Freemasons and one particular historic figure who was a staunch and lifelong anti-Mason.

To actually understand how we got to where we are with Thanksgiving, we have to look at a lot of information – not just the **quaint and cute summaries** found on the Internet today or the writings and screaming of those who oppose celebrating anything to do with the early days of America. The truth about it all is there and always will be. Just as in Freemasonry though, if we want the truth we have to search – especially in today's times.

No American holiday conjures up images and memories of food like Thanksgiving. Starting in preschool, most of us learned that Thanksgiving commemorates that moment in 1620 when Pilgrims sat down for a peaceful meal with their Indian friends.

Because of drawings and paintings, **we think of the Pilgrims wearing odd looking hats and buckle shoes. We think of them eating turkey, cranberry sauce, stuffing, and pumpkin pie** - just like most of us have eaten with our families every year after watching the Macey's Thanksgiving Day Parade or a football game on television.

There exists considerable controversy today as to whether *the story of Thanksgiving we've all been told* is accurate. And there are some who even believe the holiday should be abolished.

² Simon Targett, John Butman, *The New World, Inc. The Making of America by England's Merchant Adventurers*, Little, Brown and Company, 2018.

BUT THEN AGAIN, some people are always out of touch with the present because they entirely out touch with the past.³ Sort of sounds like many in our fraternity too, doesn't it??

Alexander Young, author of an 1841 book about the Pilgrims is our first clue as to what actually happened in 1621.

In his book, he references a letter by a man named **Edward Winslow** who was at a harvest feast.

That event is but a mere annotation in Winslow's letter, but he described that event as "the first Thanksgiving." That idea clearly began to resonate with Americans of the 1840s.

Since the mid-20th century, historians have gone to great lengths, however, to prove how little of the traditional story of Thanksgiving actually happened. *Nonetheless*, the Thanksgiving meal as we know it today is a cornerstone of our national identity. But why pie? And turkey? And that inescapable canned cranberry sauce?

What we choose to remember about the past often says more about America than what actually happened because too often we choose to remember things because we think that is the way we've always done it.

Thanksgiving portrays a need — a need we see throughout American history — **a need to create a shared national identity.** And, in this case, the way we have addressed that hunger has been primarily by creating shared food traditions – much like what we have done tonight here at our Rubicon meeting.

Because **little is known** about what happened at the "first Thanksgiving," **aside from what we know from Winslow's letter**, we've been free to commemorate it as we wish.

Now, what was prepared and eaten at that first Thanksgiving event is a good example.

Most of what is known about the foods of the "first Thanksgiving" is based on what foods were common at that time in the region and in **that letter, written by Edward Winslow to a friend in England, he described the feast in 1621.** We know it's most likely the truth, **because we also know Edward Winslow was one of the original pilgrims and was there,** and that letter has survived the ages.⁴

³ Dale Ahlquist, *Common Sense 101, Lessons from G.K. Chesterton*, Ignatius Press San Francisco, 2006.

⁴Edward Winslow's account appears in: Heath, Dwight, *A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth: Mourt's Relation* (1963); *Eyewitness to America* (1997); Morrison, Samuel Eliot, *Builders of the Bay Colony* (1930). "The First Thanksgiving, 1621," *Eyewitness to History*, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2010) <http://mayflowerhistory.com/letter-winslow-1621>, Edward Winslow: <https://www.mayflower400uk.org/education/who-were-the-pilgrims/2019/june/edward-winslow/>

WINSLOW wrote that Governor Bradford of the Plymouth Colony sent men out to hunt wildfowl (most likely goose or duck) while Wampanoag Indians brought deer to the feast.

Although turkeys were plentiful in New England in the 1620s, *it is unlikely that* they were the centerpiece of the “first Thanksgiving.” Turkeys were hard to catch, and the meat was tough and lean. Fish, however, would have been plentiful and almost certainly part of any harvest celebration.

Cranberries were native to New England and would have been in the native diet in the 1620s, so they could have been part of the Thanksgiving meal, too. It is true pumpkins were eaten in the 1620s in New England, but there was no flour and therefore no pies.

In fact, the feasters probably sat or squatted on the ground instead of at tables with white linen tablecloths as depicted in later Victorian-era paintings. Also, they ate the food with their fingers or crude spoons - because we know forks didn't arrive in Plymouth until late in the 1600s.⁵

Research of known documents tell us that there was no formal declaration of a "Thanksgiving Day" in 1622, a year after the first one, but in 1623 the Plymouth colony *did* repeat the 1621 gathering and *thanksgiving feasting* spread through other colonies over the next few decades. It was never a formal, united, celebration but varied by location. A few celebrated nearly every year, some only occasionally, **but it was spreading.**

With very little historical basis on which to create a shared national holiday, America needed someone to tell them how the holiday should be celebrated. And **Sarah Josepha Hale** was just the woman for the job.

Hale, based in Boston, and later Philadelphia, was the editor of *Godey's Ladies Book*, a very popular women's magazine of the mid-19th century. She wanted to create an American tradition that brought people together and hearkened back to the rural, Protestant foundations of the country.

Hale first wrote about the Thanksgiving meal in her novel *Northwood: A Tale of New England*, published in 1827. She wrote - “*The roasted turkey took precedence on this occasion, being placed at the head of the table; and well did it become its lordly station, sending forth the rich odor of its savory stuffing, and finely covered with the frost of the basting.*”

Her meal included not only turkey, but also “a sirloin of beef, flanked on either side by a leg of pork and a joint of mutton,” along with, “innumerable bowls of gravy and plates of vegetables” and “a huge plum pudding, custards, and pies of every description known in Yankee land.”

This vision of the overflowing plentiful feast table represented mid-19th-century ideas of the woman's role in creating a perfect home, a vision that Hale spread through her

⁵ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War*, Penguin Audio Books, 2006.

editorials each November in Godey's detailing how women should prepare and celebrate the Thanksgiving feast in the home. *Featuring recipes for turkey, stuffing, and pie, her writings created the "classic" American Thanksgiving ideal.*

Hale may justifiably be called the *Mother of Thanksgiving*. I'll tell you why later in the story.

But to understand the sequence of how the Thanksgiving Day we celebrate in November, we have to look farther back in American history for accurate context.

On September 25, 1789, as the momentous first Federal Congress drew to its close in New York, the new national capital, Representative **Elias Boudinot**, who was part Cherokee Indian, introduced a resolution calling on President Washington to "recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer. A part of the resolution read: *"acknowledging, with grateful hearts, the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness."*

The Senate concurred three days later, and a delegation was sent to meet the President with the resolution. George Washington, who had in fact anticipated the question in a letter to James Madison a month earlier, readily agreed to meet.

So, on October 3, 1789, George Washington signed the document which **became America's first Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation**. Washington employed the exact language of the resolution to begin his proclamation, then added himself that we should give thanks for *"tranquility, union, and plenty"* and asking the Almighty to guide the new nation's leaders and government.

Washington's proclamation made Thursday, Nov. **26th**, a Thanksgiving holiday, but **only** for that year.

The American public enthusiastically accepted Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation. Newspapers printed it, citizens celebrated across the country, and churches used the occasion to solicit donations for the poor. George Washington personally responded, contributing \$25 (a value of about \$640 in today's money).

Presidents, John Adams, and James Madison would also issue Thanksgiving Proclamations, but Thanksgiving Day typically remained state holidays, if that. **Founding Father Thomas Jefferson was against such practice** and felt the religious connotations surrounding the event were out of place in a nation founded on the separation of church and state, so no other formal declarations were issued after 1815.

So – to see clearly how our National Day of Thanksgiving later came about, **we must start with Elias Boudinot's** idea, and the resolution it led that was signed by the first American President.

BOUDINOT, a lawyer from NJ was **the man who introduced Washington at the first Inauguration and was involved in obtaining the Masonic Bible from St. John's lodge on which Washington took his oath of office in New York to become our first President.** He

was later Director of the U.S. Mint and put the image of Columbus on the nation's first coins. **He is thought to be a Freemason, but the evidence to support the contention is lacking.**

Slowly, because of the proclamations by Washington, Adams, and Madison, the country began to embrace a day of national Thanksgiving and churches around the young nation spread that support, **but the day was still not what we see today.**

To understand what led us closer to today we must look again at was 19th-century author, poet and magazine editor, **Sarah Josepha Hale.**

Interestingly, that title as The Mother of Thanksgiving would not likely have happened if it had not been for Hale's husband, David, an attorney in Boston who, in 1823, arranged for his Masonic lodge to underwrite the cost of publishing Hale's first bestselling book: a writing against the practice of slavery.⁶

The popularity of this book led to a celebrity status for Hale and set the course for her to later become the editor of the popular and influential *Godey's Lady's Book* for 40 years, from 1837 to 1877. That status gave her the opportunity **to push the idea of a National Day of Thanksgiving.**

Washington Irving Jr., Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Oliver Wendell Holmes were among the authors who published work in her magazine. **HALE was also a prolific author, writing dozens of novels and books of poetry, and penned the tune and lyrics of a song everyone in this room knows - the famous, *Mary Had a Little Lamb.***

Hale, who was highly patriotic, read about the 1621 feast of the Pilgrims and was captivated with the idea of turning it into a national holiday, thus publishing in the *Godey's Lady's Book* recipes for turkey and stuffing and pumpkin pie and started traditions that had nothing to do with the 1621 feasts by the colonists.

With dogged persistence, she'd lobbied Presidents Zachary Taylor, Buchanan, Franklin Pierce, and Millard Fillmore to formalize a day of Thanksgiving.

Moved by a letter from Hale received during the dark days of the Civil War, Lincoln, in contrast to the previous presidents, took action. In 1863, he authorized and set the precedent that remains to this day: that the last Thursday in November should be "a day of humbleness, fasting, and prayer." Some historians believe the Union victory at Gettysburg that year also motivated Lincoln's action.⁷

There were many previous proclamations from which to draft the final one Lincoln issued. Secretary of State William Seward actually wrote the final version Lincoln's proclamation - although it is often credited to Lincoln as his own words.⁸

⁶ Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, *Northwood: Or Life North and South, Showing the True Character of Both*, H. Long & Brother. 1852.

⁷ Seth Kallar, Inc., <https://www.sethkallar.com/freedomdocuments/thanksgiving/>, accessed November 2020.

⁸ Lincoln and Thanksgiving, <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/lincoln-and-thanksgiving>, Appelbaum, Diana Karter, *Thanksgiving: An American Holiday, An American History*. New York: Facts On File, 1984. "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln." <http://www.quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln> (accessed August 18, 2008).

Seward took control of preparing the proclamation not only because he strongly supported Lincoln - but the worthiness of the idea of a National Day of Thanksgiving.

What he did not support was the wording used in previous proclamations by the four presidents who had issued them. While the wording of those previous proclamations may not be as conspicuous to us today as it was to Seward, each contained some Masonic language.

So, with all references Seward thought to be **“too Masonic,”** he removed and inserted new language he believed more suitable, then handed over the proclamation for Lincoln’s signature and the document passed into history.

Now, when we look at those previous proclamations it’s difficult to determine what Seward may have thought as “too Masonic” related, but again we find that many from the period of 1820-1860s continued to harbor anti-Masonic sentiments.

Over the next 76 years, Americans celebrated. In 1939 merchants, represented by powerful lobbyists, wanted more time for Christmas shopping and Franklin Roosevelt was happy to accommodate them since the country was still pulling itself out of The Great Depression.

Roosevelt, who, yes, was member of our fraternity, **although far from active and involved**, accommodated the merchants and business lobby by moving Thanksgiving for that year only, to November 23rd, which gave merchants and extra three days to promote their goods for Christmas. That move, however, was not well received throughout America.

In 1941 Congress acted and passed legislation that made **a national holiday and permanently set the date as the fourth Thursday of each November**. Roosevelt promptly signed the bill into law, but the date spawned another unofficial holiday of sorts: Black Friday, which has become a consumerism springboard for the Christmas shopping season.

As we come together for this Thanksgiving perhaps, we can do better at tossing aside the scurry to begin planning and shopping for Christmas - and in deflecting the incessant news cycles that technology has imposed on us – for at least one day.

Maybe we can turn aside tragedy, turmoil, combative politics, and the intolerance we see in the world today in favor of thankfulness, friendship, family, faith, hope, and in general, some unity. **Don’t be surprised if it occurs to you that doing so bears a resemblance to what Masonry is intended to convey in its teaching to take place every day of every year.**

This year may we celebrate in unity of our good fortune of being Americans and family men who are able to assemble and have a day to enjoy family and friendships and to express our thanks – our gratitude and appreciation to have and share a meal together. Perhaps we can also share some of that good fortune with those who are less fortunate.

Maybe we can be giving in another way too – by *sharing the knowledge* of what can make a man wiser, better, and consequently happier.

Thanks, are the highest form of thought because they put us in the frame of mind where we realize that literally everything we have, is indeed, a gift.

So, I encourage you to be mindful of a hard truth: *silent gratitude of any kind isn't much use to anyone.*⁹ Express your thanks through your words, actions, and deeds.

Brethren, I hope that we part this evening with a sense of thankfulness and a more conscious awareness of our rich history - and what you take away from our experience tonight is the living proof we find here tonight: we have much for which to be thankful.

My fraternal wishes to you and your family for a safe, warm, and pleasant Thanksgiving Holiday — **and may our sense of gratitude continue long after the turkey is gone.**

⁹ Gladys Bronwyn Stern or GB Stern (17 June 1890 – 20 September 1973), born Gladys Bertha Stern in London, England, wrote many novels, short stories, plays, memoirs, biographies, and literary criticism.



1608



1620



*Edward Winslow's
1621 Letter*



*Elias Boudinot
1789 Resolution*



*Sarah & David Hale
1823*



*Godey's Lady Book
1837-1877*



Sara Hale Wm. Seward

October 1863 Proclamation



Roosevelt 1939



*1941 Legislation Esatblishing the
4th Thursday of Novemeber*

NOVEMBER 2021						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	1	2	3	4	5

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