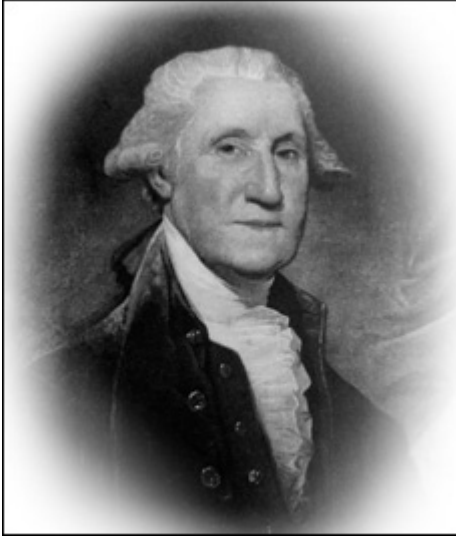


How a lobbying campaign helped make Thanksgiving a national holiday



George Washington was the first president to proclaim Thanksgiving a national holiday. (AP photo/painting by Gilbert Stuart)

By Sarah Lovenheim

Once upon a time, Americans gave thanks for the bounty of the land with celebrations that involved fasting, rather than feasting. Some presidents refused to issue Thanksgiving proclamations. And, if it weren't for the roughly two-decade lobbying crusade of a female Thanksgiving advocate, the annual ritual might never have gained its national sanction.

A look at the past reveals how the holiday unfolded, and how various presidents -- particularly in selecting religious rhetoric -- have changed the tone.

We all know the basic history: The first Thanksgiving, as we observe it today, was practiced in Plymouth, Mass, in 1621. Scholars now dispute that date because earlier festivals near Charles City, Va., and St. Augustine, Fla., also involved a day of thanksgiving to God.

Over time, formal proclamations changed the informal practices surrounding the holiday. In Plymouth, a ritual of fasting was observed on days surrounding a Thanksgiving feast. Then, on Oct. 3, 1789, George Washington issued a proclamation declaring Nov. 26, 1789, a feast day for "the people of these States." Soon, the practice of fasting was lost.

A national Thanksgiving day held by each state on the same day, the last Thursday of November, however, wasn't declared until Abraham Lincoln's presidency. And the idea of issuing such a proclamation wasn't even Lincoln's initially. It was Sarah Josepha Hale's.

A New Hampshire native and renowned fashion magazine editor, Hale was dismayed that presidents would not declare Thanksgiving a national annual holiday and began letter-writing campaigns to presidents, lawmakers and governors starting in the early 1840s. "Our Thanksgiving Day," she insisted, "should be hallowed and exalted and made the day of generous deeds and innocent enjoyments," according to Carl Sferrazza Anthony, author of a two-volume history of the first ladies and their power. Today, he suggests, we'd call Hale's efforts a lobbying campaign.

Lincoln, buying Hale's additional pitch that such a day would serve as one more way to hold the Union together during the Civil War, heeded her 1863 call that the "day of our annual Thanksgiving made a National and fixed Union Festival."

Before Lincoln's time, some presidents refused to declare Thanksgiving a national holiday, arguing that it was not the government's role to endorse "a day of public thanksgiving and prayer," as Washington had described it. Thomas Jefferson, who once called for a "separation of church and state," said it was against his principles. He linked his mantra to the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Andrew Jackson agreed and also chose not to declare Thanksgiving a national holiday.

John Adams, who proclaimed himself a Christian in his inaugural address, blamed his defeat for re-election on his calling for a day of fasting, humiliation and prayers to Christ.

Therefore, his son, John Quincy Adams, took the advice of his Cabinet not to proclaim a day of thanksgiving that the preachers of the District of Columbia were requesting.

Yet other presidents have echoed Washington's call, invoking religious rhetoric in nearly every proclamation. As Dorthea Wolfson, associate program chair of the Johns Hopkins University Zanvyl Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, points out though, "What's interesting about these early presidential proclamations, especially Washington's, is that the rhetoric was not based narrowly on the revealed religion of the bible, but a more deistic, inclusive God -- the Divine Almighty, 'the great and glorious Being, beneficent Author, Providence, Divine purpose, etc.'"

Michael Novak, the George Frederick Jewett Scholar in religion, philosophy and public policy at the American Enterprise Institute, agreed. Lincoln and Washington "were expressing the beliefs of the country and Congress," he said.

In other words, past presidents tried to reach all Americans who believed in a greater spirit, rather than believers of one particular faith. Still, some proclamations invoked religion more than others. Generally, Bill Clinton's proclamations "were much more expressive about this than Bush, although people think the reverse is true," said Novak. And Franklin Delano Roosevelt's rhetoric might surprise some people for its religious tone. As Novak put it, "We don't usually think of FDR as that religious but he was and Eleanor was even more so."

Below are some proclamations that give you a flavor of this variable religious rhetoric. The Clinton and Bush excerpts may be the exceptions to Novak's assessment.

George Washington, Oct. 3, 1789: Thanksgiving is a day to revere "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.... It is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor."

Abraham Lincoln, Oct. 3, 1863: "The laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theater of military conflict." Subsequently, Lincoln asked for God's help to "heal the wounds of the nation and restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Nov. 9, 1940: "Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage; We humbly beseech Thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of Thy favor and glad to do Thy will. Bless our land with honourable industry, sound learning, and pure manners... Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in Thy Name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to Thy law, we may show forth Thy praise among the nations of the earth... suffer not our trust in Thee to fail; Amen."

Ronald Reagan, Nov. 26, 1987: Thanksgiving is "an occasion set aside by Americans from earliest times to thank our Maker prayerfully and humbly for the blessings and the care He bestows on us and on our beautiful, bountiful land.... When the delegates to the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in 1774 ... they found common votes in the 35th Psalm.... 'And my tongue shall speak of thy righteousness and of thy praise all the day long.'"

Bill Clinton, Nov. 27, 1997: "Once again, millions of us will gather with family and friends to give thanks to God for the many blessings that He has bestowed upon us ... like the Pilgrims who celebrated Thanksgiving more than 300 years ago, we thank God for bringing us safely to the threshold of a new world, full of exhilarating challenge and promise."

George W. Bush, Nov. 24, 2008: "Thanksgiving is a time for families and friends to gather together and express gratitude for all that we have been given, the freedoms we enjoy, and the loved ones who enrich our lives. We recognize that all of these blessings, and life itself, come not from the hand of man but from Almighty God. Our Nation's first President, George Washington, stated in the first Thanksgiving proclamation that 'It is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor.'"

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