

THE THANKSGIVING BOOK

A Companion to the Holiday
Covering Its History, Lore, Traditions, Foods, and Symbols,
Including Primary Sources, Poems, Prayers, Songs,
Hymns, and Recipes, Supplemented by a Chronology,
Bibliography with Web Sites, and Index



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ANCIENT HARVEST FESTIVAL AND THANKSGIVING TRADITIONS

Thanksgiving has been described as “the quintessential American holiday,” yet it has its roots in other cultures. In fact, the tradition of giving thanks to a higher power for instances of good fortune has existed in various parts of the world since ancient times. People have long held celebrations, for example, to express their gratitude for successful harvests of food. The purpose of many of these early harvest festivals was to appease the gods or spirits that were believed to control the growth of corn and other crops. A number of early cultures believed that if the gods were happy, the harvest would be plentiful; but if the gods were angry, crop failure—and possibly starvation—would follow.

The ancient Egyptians celebrated a festival in April, the time of the grain harvest, to honor Min, the god of fertility. The festival began with a procession to Min’s shrine—in which the Pharaoh often took part—followed by religious ceremonies, music, dancing, and a feast.

Similarly, the ancient Greeks held the festival of Thesmophoria every autumn to honor Demeter, the goddess of corn. Married women built leafy shelters to begin the three-day event. People fasted on the second day, and then they feasted and made offerings to Demeter on the third day. The Greeks also held occasional days of thanksgiving to express their appreciation to the gods for specific positive events, such as a successful battle or journey.

The ancient Romans honored Ceres, the goddess of cereal crops, on April 19, with games in the Circus Maxima. They also observed the Consualia each August 21 in honor of Consus, the god who protected the grain harvest. The Consualia was a harvest festival celebrated with horse and chariot races.

The Chinese celebrate Chung Ch’ui—also known as the Mid-Autumn Festival—during the full moon that occurs in the eighth month of the year, according to the Chinese lunar calendar. The feast associated with this festival features specially baked moon cakes. According to one legend, the baking of moon cakes began during a time when China had been conquered by the Mongols. The Chinese made secret plans to attack the invaders and spread the news among the people by distributing moon cakes with messages hidden inside. The element of surprise helped the Chinese defeat the invaders and regain control of their country.

The Cornucopia



One of the most recognizable symbols of Thanksgiving is the cornucopia—a horn or basket filled to overflowing with fruits, vegetables, grains, and sometimes flowers. It is an ancient symbol of the harvest or of general abundance that dates back to Greek and Roman mythology. Its name comes from the Latin term *cornu copiae*, meaning “horn of plenty.”

The ancient Romans believed that the cornucopia originated with Achelous, a river god who took the form of a bull to do battle with Heracles. When Achelous lost a horn in the fight, female water spirits filled it with fruit and flowers. The Romans also associated the cornucopia with Flora, the goddess of plants and flowers, and Fortuna, the goddess of good fortune.

According to Greek mythology, the horn of plenty originated with Amalthea, a nymph who took the form of a goat to nurse the infant Zeus. She may have broken off one of her horns to give Zeus, or he may have presented a cornucopia to her as a token of his appreciation. In both the Greek and Roman versions of the myth, the horn provided an endless supply of food.

The cornucopia later became a symbol of America, which many hopeful immigrants viewed as a land of plenty. A common feature of Thanksgiving decorations in modern times, it often serves as the centerpiece of tables set for the holiday meal.

The Jewish holiday of Sukkot—also known as the Feast of the Tabernacles (or Booths) and the Feast of the Ingathering—is a thanksgiving harvest festival celebrated since ancient times. It also commemorates the 40 years during which Moses and the Israelites wandered in the desert after leaving Egypt. During this period, they built temporary huts, or sukkah, out of branches to provide shelter at night. The modern holiday begins five days after Yom Kippur and lasts for eight days. Many Jews observe Sukkot by building small huts out of branches and hanging fruits and vegetables inside them.

Western Europeans also have traditions of giving thanks for a successful harvest. Since medieval times, people in rural England have celebrated an annual rite of autumn known as Harvest Home. When the last load of grain had been placed on a wagon and was ready to be brought in from the field, local villagers decorated the wagon with ribbons and flowers, danced around it, and



A traditional cornucopia.

sang songs of thanks. After the grain had been put away and all of the season's work completed, many villages held a feast.

EARLY CELEBRATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

Long before European explorers, fishermen, and traders began arriving in North America in the 1500s, Native American peoples established their own thanksgiving and harvest festival traditions. Many Native cultures made it a regular part of daily life to express gratitude for such necessities as food and shelter (*see the Primary Sources section for the text of a Native American Thanksgiving address*). "We have lived with this land for thousands of generations, fishing in the waters, planting and harvesting crops, hunting the four-legged and winged beings and giving respect and thanks for each and every thing taken for our use," explained Nanepashemet, former director of the Wampanoag Indian Program at Plimoth Plantation, in *1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving*.

The Wampanoags, whose name means “People of the Light” or “People of the First Light,” have inhabited the area comprising present-day southeastern Massachusetts and eastern Rhode Island for 12,000 years. They have traditionally offered thanks not only to the Creator, but also to the spirits of all the animals killed and plants harvested to provide food and clothing for their people. Expressing gratitude and humility also forms the basis of the festival known as Nickommo, which is still celebrated by the Wampanoags in the 21st century. Nickommo observances include giving away material possessions, feasting, dancing, and playing games.

Early European explorers and settlers carried their traditions of giving thanks with them to the New World. For instance, historical evidence suggests that an exploring party led by Juan Ponce de León held a special mass to give thanks upon reaching North America in 1521. Similarly, a group of 1,500 Spaniards, led by explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, held a service of thanksgiving in the area of the present-day Texas Panhandle on May 23, 1541. A small settlement of French Huguenots held a thanksgiving service on June 30, 1564, near present-day Jacksonville, Florida. Unfortunately, the French settlement was wiped out a decade later by Spanish raiders.

Most of these early thanksgivings tended to be prayerful occasions, but a few European settlers in the New World also included a feast as part of the observance. On September 8, 1565, for instance, a group of about 800 Spanish colonists led by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés shared a feast of thanksgiving in St. Augustine, Florida, with the local Seloy Indians. Historians of the American Southwest also claim that explorer Juan de Oñate and 400 colonists celebrated thanksgiving along the Rio Grande in April 1598. The Oñate Thanksgiving, which is marked by a festival and reenactment in modern-day El Paso, Texas, included a mass and a feast of goat, fish, corn, and cactus.

A few groups of English colonists also observed thanksgiving in America. One group of settlers held a service to express their gratitude upon reaching the coast of Maine on August 9, 1607. The Berkeley Hundred settlement in Virginia, founded by John Woodleaf, held a thanksgiving service upon reaching the James River on December 4, 1619. The colonists made plans to turn it into an annual event, as their proclamation makes clear: “Wee ordaine that the day of our ships arrival at the place assigned for plantacon in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God.” The custom ended abruptly, however, when the settlement was

destroyed by Indians in 1622. The founders of the first permanent English colony in America, at Jamestown, Virginia, suffered through a terrible famine during the winter in 1609. When a ship arrived carrying supplies from England in the spring of 1610, they celebrated with a feast of thanksgiving.

Some historians question why one of these occasions has not been recognized as the “First Thanksgiving” celebrated by European immigrants to America, since they occurred before the much more famous harvest feast that was shared between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621. Residents of Virginia, especially, claim that their state should be honored as the site of the historic event. But many experts argue that none of these occasions—the Pilgrims’ feast included—can claim a direct connection with the national Thanksgiving holiday that is celebrated today. “However satisfying it would be to point to a particular day and say, ‘This was the first Thanksgiving,’ it would not be accurate,” Diana Karter Appelbaum wrote in *Thanksgiving: An American Holiday, An American History*. “Thanksgiving was not a New England Athena, springing full grown and completely armed with roast turkey and cranberry sauce from the head of a Pilgrim Father.”

THE PILGRIMS

Even if the Pilgrims did not intend to launch a national holiday, there is no doubt that their story—the perilous journey to North America in 1620, the hardships suffered during the first year in the New World, and the feast held in 1621—has contributed a great deal to the modern understanding of Thanksgiving. For many Americans, the connection between Thanksgiving and the Pilgrims has added to the holiday’s historic importance and meaning, lending it associations with the values of perseverance, freedom, and democracy.

The English men and women that history remembers as the Pilgrims, because they made a journey for religious reasons, were known during their own time as Separatists. They acquired this name because of their brave decision to separate from the Church of England. During the early 1600s, the Church was the official religion of England and thus had a great deal of control over people’s daily lives. The king or queen of England ruled the Church as well as the country, and top Church officials held positions of influence in politics. Although this arrangement added to the Church’s wealth and power—allowing Church leaders to build beautiful cathedrals, wear ornate robes, and fill worship services with organ music—some people felt that it also detracted from the Church’s mission of serving God.

Alex Haley Discovers the Power of Gratitude (1943)

*Long before he won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1976 historical novel *Roots*, African-American author Alex Haley spent 20 years in the U.S. Coast Guard. He enlisted in 1939, at the beginning of World War II, and served as a cook onboard a transport ship that operated in the Pacific for the duration of that conflict. Haley looks back upon his wartime service in a 1982 article for *Parade* magazine entitled “Thank You: What’s Most Important Is Often Too Easily Forgotten.” He shares the valuable insights he gained on Thanksgiving Day 1943, by writing letters of gratitude to people back home who had influenced his life.*

It was 1943, during World War II, and I was a young U.S. coastguardsman, serial number 212-548, a number we never seem to forget. My ship, the *USS Murzim*, had been under way for several days. Most of her holds contained thousands of cartons of canned or dried foods. The other holds were loaded with 500-pound bombs packed delicately in padded racks. Our destination was a big base on the Island of Tulagi in the South Pacific.

I was one of the *Murzim*'s several cooks and, quite the same as for folks ashore, this Thanksgiving morning had seen us busily preparing a traditional dinner featuring roast turkey.

Well, as any cook knows, it's a lot of hard work to cook and serve a big meal, and clean up and put everything away. But finally, around sundown, with our whole galley crew just bushed, we finished at last and were free to go flop into our bunks in the fo'c'sle [forecastle].

But I decided first to go out on the *Murzim*'s afterdeck for a breath of open air. I made my way out there, breathing in great, deep draughts while walking slowly about, still wearing my white cook's hat and the long apron, my feet sensing the big ship's vibrations from the deep-set, turbine diesel and my ears hearing the slightly hissing sound the sea makes in resisting the skin of the ship.

I got to thinking about Thanksgiving. In reflex, my thoughts registered the historic imagery of the Pilgrims, Indians, wild turkeys, pumpkins, corn on the cob and the rest.

Yet my mind seemed to be questing for something else—some way that I could personally apply to the waning Thanksgiving. It must have taken me a half-hour to sense that maybe some key to an answer could result from reversing the word “Thanksgiving”—at least that suggested a verbal direction, “Giving Thanks.”

Giving thanks—as in praying, thanking God, I thought. Yes, of course. Certainly.

Yet my mind continued nagging me. Fine. But something else.

After a while, like a dawn’s brightening, a further answer did come—that there were *people* to thank, people who had done so much for me that I could never possibly repay them. The embarrassing truth was that I’d always just accepted what they’d done, taken all of it for granted. Not one time had I ever bothered to express to any of them so much as a simple, sincere “Thank you.”

At least seven people had been particularly and indelibly helpful to me. I realized, with a gulp, that about half of them had since died—so they were forever beyond any possible expression of gratitude from me. The more I thought about it, the more ashamed I became. Then I pictured the three who were still alive and, within minutes, I was down in the fo’c’sle.

Sitting at a mess table with writing paper and memories of things each had done, I tried composing genuine statements of heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to my dad, Simon A. Haley, a professor at the old AMNC (Agricultural Mechanical Normal College) in Pine Bluff, Ark., now a branch of the University of Arkansas; to my grandma, Cynthia Palmer, back in our little hometown of Henning, Tenn.; and to the Rev. Lonual Nelson, my grammar school principal, retired and living in Ripley, six miles north of Henning.

I couldn’t even be certain if they would recall some of their acts of years past, acts that I vividly remembered and saw now as having given me vital training, or inspiration, or directions, if not all of these desirables rolled into one.

The texts of my letters began something like, “Here, this Thanksgiving at sea, I find my thoughts upon how much you have done for me, but I have never stopped and said to you how much I feel the need to thank you—” And briefly I recalled for each of them specific acts performed on my behalf.

For instance, something uppermost about my father was how he had impressed upon me from boyhood to love books and reading. In fact, this graduated into a family habit of after-dinner quizzes at the table about books

read most recently and new words learned. My love of books never diminished and later led me toward writing books myself. So many times I have felt a sadness when exposed to modern children so immersed in the electronic media that they have little to no awareness of the wondrous world to be discovered in books.

I reminded the Reverend Nelson how each morning he would open our little country town's grammar school with a prayer over his assembled students. I told him that whatever positive things I had done since had been influenced at least in part by his morning school prayers.

In the letter to my grandmother, I reminded her of a dozen ways she used to teach me how to tell the truth, to be thrifty, to share, and to be forgiving and considerate of others. (My reminders included how she'd make me pull switches from a peach tree for my needed lesson.) I thanked her for the years of eating her good cooking, the equal of which I had not found since. (By now, though, I've reflected that those peerless dishes are most gloriously flavored with a pinch of nostalgia.) Finally, I thanked her simply for having sprinkled my life with stardust.

Before I slept, my three letters went into our ship's office mail sack. They got mailed when we reached Tulagi Island.

We unloaded cargo, reloaded with something else, then again we put to sea in the routine familiar to us, and as the days became weeks, my little personal experience receded. Sometimes, when we were at sea, a mail ship would rendezvous and bring us mail from home, which, of course, we accorded topmost priority.

Every time the ship's loudspeaker rasped, "Attention! Mail call!" 200-odd shipmates came pounding up on deck and clustered about the raised hatch atop which two yeomen, standing by those precious bulging gray sacks, were alternately pulling out fistfuls of letters and barking successive names of sailors who were, in turn, hollering "Here! Here!" amid the jostling.

One "Mail Call" brought me responses from Grandma, Dad and the Reverend Nelson—and my reading of their letters left me not only astounded, but more humbled than before.

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Rather than saying they would forgive that I hadn't previously thanked them, instead, for Pete's sake, they were thanking *me*—for having remembered, for having considered they had done anything so exceptional.

Always the college professor, my dad had carefully avoided anything he considered too sentimental, so I knew how moved he was to write me that, after having helped educate many young people, he now felt that his best results included his own son.

The Reverend Nelson wrote that his decades as a “simple, old-fashioned principal” had ended with grammar schools undergoing such swift changes that he had retired in self-doubt. “I heard more of what I had done wrong than what I did right,” he said, adding that my letter had brought him welcome reassurance that his career had been appreciated.

A glance at Grandma's familiar handwriting brought back in a flash memories of standing alongside her white wicker rocking chair, watching her “settin' down” some letter to relatives. Frequently touching her pencil's tip to pursed lips, character by character, each between a short, soft grunt, Grandma would slowly accomplish one word, then the next, so that a finished single page would consume hours. I wept over the page representing my Grandma's recent hours invested in expressing her loving gratefulness to *me*—whom she used to diaper!

Much later, retired from the Coast Guard and trying to make a living as a writer, I never forgot how those three “thank you” letters gave me an insight into something nigh mystical in human beings, most of whom go about yearning in secret for more of their fellows to express appreciation for their efforts.

I discovered in time that, even in the business world, probably no two words are more valued than “thank you,” especially among people at stores, airlines, utilities and others that directly serve the public.

Late one night, I was one of a half-dozen passengers who straggled weary and grumbling off a plane that had been forced to land at the huge Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. Suddenly, a buoyant, cheerful, red-jacketed airline man waved us away from the regular waiting room seats, saying, “You sure looked bushed. I know a big empty office where you can stretch out while you wait.” And we surely did. When the weather improved enough for us to leave, “Gene Erickson” was in my notebook and, back home, I wrote the president of that airline describing his sensitivity and his courtesy. And I received a thank you!

I travel a good deal on lecture tours, and I urge students especially to tell their parents, grandparents, and other living elders simply “thank you” for all they have done to make possible the lives they now enjoy. Many students have told me they found themselves moved by the response. It is not really surprising, if one reflects how it must feel to be thanked after you have given for years.

Now, approaching Thanksgiving of 1982, I have asked myself what I will wish for all who are reading this, for our nation, indeed for our whole world—since, quoting a good and wise friend of mine, “In the end we are mightily and merely people, each with similar needs.” First, I wish for us, of course, the simple common sense to achieve world peace, that being paramount for the very survival of our kind.

And there is something else I wish—so strongly that I have had this line printed across the bottom of all my stationery: “*Find the good—and praise it.*”

Thanksgiving with Immigrant Parents (2000)

With its primary customs of gathering together and eating a good meal, Thanksgiving has been embraced by many immigrants, who add their own culinary traditions to the mix. Since early in the 20th century, when waves of immigrants began to move to the United States, the Thanksgiving holiday has served as an occasion to assist newcomers in becoming more familiar with American history and traditions. Still, as Samar Farah relates in the following article in Christian Science Monitor, the holiday can present challenges, particularly to a child with immigrant parents.

My mother had her first Thanksgiving in 1979, six weeks after she and my father arrived from Lebanon with their two small children. We were staying with my aunt in New Jersey while my father looked for work. My dad, who had gone to college in New York, was familiar with the annual rite of turkey. For my mother, it was an early lesson in American culture.

My aunt, who had immigrated from Lebanon about a decade before, prepared for the day with her usual busy anticipation: “Soon we’ll have Thanksgiving. In November, there’ll be Thanksgiving.” A native Arabic speaker, my mother immediately took to the word “Thanksgiving.” Its simple meaning warmed her to the holiday.

Years later, when my parents hosted their own Thanksgiving dinners, it continued to be her favorite holiday. She found it easy to adapt to—unlike the Fourth of July, which is pure patriotic romp, and Christmas, which featured a barrage of commercialism she wasn’t accustomed to.

Thanksgiving was more modest in its traditions and open to interpretation. It could be anything from a religious event to the *raison d’être* for Martha Stewart types. For my mother, it became a way for her to celebrate her new country without totally suppressing her heritage. This meant that we had turkey and mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce—with pita bread and spinach pies and rice stuffing.

As I was growing up, though, our Thanksgivings gave me the same sense of cultural crisis I felt when taking a seat next to my friends in the cafeteria and drawing from my lunch box a Capri Sun and a lebne sandwich.

The child of first-generation parents, I was greedy for evidence that we were just like every other American family. What I usually got was just the opposite.

I remember one of my first mornings away from home after sleeping over at a third-grade classmate's house. There were four kids in Laura Kelly's boisterous clan. Sitting at their breakfast table one morning, as the only person fate had cruelly failed to endow with freckles, I finally understood the deeper meaning of the Sesame Street jingle, "Which of these things is not like the other?"

It got worse fast when Laura's mother passed around eggs cooked sunny-side up. Till then, I had only eaten eggs with pita bread, sponging the gooey yoke into li'mes—small bites. Now I had just a fork and a knife in front of me. I knew that if I poked the yoke with either, it would quickly spread like spilled paint over the entire plate. How would I possibly slop it up with these crude tools?

NO MATTER WHAT MY PARENTS DID, IT FELT AS IF WE WERE HOLIDAY IMPOSTORS. MY MOTHER'S RICE STUFFING WITH GROUND BEEF AND PINE NUTS FED MY INSECURITIES. THE INTRICATE PERSIAN RUGS THAT FILLED OUR HALL AND DINING ROOM WERE AT ODDS WITH THE APPLE PIE.

Experiences like this left me with an acute need to impose some sort of cultural order on my life. Never was this need more evident than on Thanksgiving, a holiday steeped in Norman Rockwell Americana. As a kid, I wanted to rewrite my parents' ways to the American Thanksgiving script.

I wanted to spell things out for them: Green beans are supposed to be bland and overcooked. You can't try to galvanize them with lemon juice and garlic.

I wanted to keep the story simple for my mother, who was piecing together the history of Pilgrims and Indians from cutouts I pasted together in school. But historians, with their penchant for murdering myth, complicated my mission. They introduced disputes over the Pilgrims' intentions, and the actual date and place the first Thanksgiving celebration occurred.

Tell immigrants that the Pilgrims probably didn't eat turkey, and there'll be a lot of second-generation kids staring at Thanksgiving duck curry.

No matter what my parents did, it felt as if we were holiday impostors. My mother's rice stuffing with ground beef and pine nuts fed my insecurities. The intricate Persian rugs that filled our hall and dining room were at odds with the apple pie, I felt. I wanted nothing more than my relatives in Indian feathers and Pilgrim hats.

It was not until college that I finally got over my childish craving for absolutes. If anything, college taught me that weird is relative. But I am not completely cured. This year, as I get ready to head home to New Jersey, I find myself longing for bread stuffing, preferably Stovetop. The difference is, I am also really looking forward to those spinach pies.

Source: Farah, Samar. "Growing Up a Thanksgiving Impostor." *Christian Science Monitor*, November 22, 2000.

CHRONOLOGY OF DATES RELATED TO THANKSGIVING

- 1521** Juan Ponce de León and his exploring party observe a mass of thanksgiving upon reaching North America.
- 1541** May 23 – Francisco Vasquez de Coronado and 1,500 other Spanish explorers hold a thanksgiving service in the Texas Panhandle.
- 1564** June 30 – A small settlement of French Huguenots hold a thanksgiving service near present-day Jacksonville, Florida.
- 1565** September 8 – Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and 800 other Spanish colonists share a thanksgiving feast with Seloy Indians in St. Augustine, Florida.
- 1598** April – Juan de Oñate and 400 other Spanish colonists are said to have held a thanksgiving feast along the Rio Grande in Texas.
- 1607** August 9 – English colonists hold a thanksgiving service upon reaching Maine.
- 1608** Spring – A group of English Separatists, better known as the Pilgrims, leaves England for Holland in search of religious freedom.
- 1610** Spring – English settlers at Jamestown celebrate a feast of thanksgiving when a supply ship arrives; they had suffered a famine over the winter.
- 1614** Tisquantum (better known as Squanto) is kidnapped from his village, Patuxet, Massachusetts, along with at least 28 other Wampanoag Indian men, and sold into slavery in Spain.
- 1619** Squanto, having escaped slavery, finds a return voyage from England to North America. Upon arrival, he finds a plague has taken the lives of 90 percent of the people in his village.

December 4 – The Berkeley Hundred settlement in Virginia observes a service of thanksgiving when they reach the James River. They

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