

Thanksgiving

For other uses, see [Thanksgiving \(disambiguation\)](#).

Thanksgiving Day is a national holiday celebrated in Canada and the United States as a day of giving thanks for the blessing of the harvest and of the preceding year. It is celebrated on the [second Monday of October](#) in Canada and on the [fourth Thursday of November](#) in the United States. Several other places around the world observe similar celebrations. Thanksgiving has its historical roots in religious and cultural traditions and has long been celebrated in a secular manner as well.

1 History

Prayers of thanks and special thanksgiving ceremonies are common among almost all religions after harvests and at other times.^[1] The Thanksgiving holiday's history in North America is rooted in English traditions dating from the Protestant Reformation. It also has aspects of a harvest festival, even though the harvest in New England occurs well before the late-November date on which the modern Thanksgiving holiday is celebrated.^{[1][2]}

In the English tradition, days of thanksgiving and special thanksgiving religious services became important during the English Reformation in the reign of Henry VIII and in reaction to the large number of religious holidays on the Catholic calendar. Before 1536 there were 95 Church holidays, plus 52 Sundays, when people were required to attend church and forego work and sometimes pay for expensive celebrations. The 1536 reforms reduced the number of Church holidays to 27, but some Puritans wished to completely eliminate all Church holidays, including Christmas and Easter. The holidays were to be replaced by specially called Days of Fasting or Days of Thanksgiving, in response to events that the Puritans viewed as acts of special providence. Unexpected disasters or threats of judgement from on high called for Days of Fasting. Special blessings, viewed as coming from God, called for Days of Thanksgiving. For example, Days of Fasting were called on account of drought in 1611, floods in 1613, and plagues in 1604 and 1622. Days of Thanksgiving were called following the victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 and following the deliverance of Queen Anne in 1705. An unusual annual Day of Thanksgiving began in 1606 following the failure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 and developed into Guy Fawkes Day.^[3]

1.1 In Canada

Main article: [Thanksgiving \(Canada\)](#)

While some researchers state that “there is no compelling narrative of the origins of the Canadian Thanksgiving day”,^[4] the first Canadian Thanksgiving is often traced back to 1578 and the explorer Martin Frobisher. Frobisher, who had been trying to find a northern passage to the Pacific Ocean, held his Thanksgiving celebration not for harvest but in thanks for surviving the long journey from England through the perils of storms and icebergs. On his third and final voyage to the far north, Frobisher held a formal ceremony in Frobisher Bay in Baffin Island (present-day Nunavut) to give thanks to God and in a service ministered by the preacher Robert Wollfall they celebrated Communion.^[5]



Oven-roasted turkey

The origins of Canadian Thanksgiving are also sometimes traced to the French settlers who came to New France with explorer Samuel de Champlain in the early 17th century, who celebrated their successful harvests. The French settlers in the area typically had feasts at the end of the harvest season and continued throughout the winter season, even sharing food with the indigenous peoples of the area.^[6]

As settlers arrived in Canada from New England, late autumn Thanksgiving celebrations became common. New immigrants into the country—such as the Irish, Scottish, and Germans—also added their own traditions to the harvest celebrations. Most of the US aspects of Thanksgiving (such as the turkey), were incorporated when United Empire Loyalists began to flee from the United States during the American Revolution and settled in Canada.^[6]

Thanksgiving is now a statutory holiday in most jurisdictions of Canada, with the exception of the Atlantic provinces of Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia.*[7]

1.2 In the United States

Main article: Thanksgiving (United States)

In the United States, the modern Thanksgiving holi-



Jennie Augusta Brownscombe, The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth, 1914, Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plymouth, Massachusetts

day tradition is commonly, but not universally, traced to a sparsely documented 1621 celebration at Plymouth in present-day Massachusetts. The 1621 Plymouth feast and thanksgiving was prompted by a good harvest. Pilgrims and Puritans who began emigrating from England in the 1620s and 1630s carried the tradition of Days of Fasting and Days of Thanksgiving with them to New England. Several days of Thanksgiving were held in early New England history that have been identified as the “First Thanksgiving”, including Pilgrim holidays in Plymouth in 1621 and 1623, and a Puritan holiday in Boston in 1631.*[8]*[9] According to historian Jeremy Bangs, director of the Leiden American Pilgrim Museum, the Pilgrims may have been influenced by watching the annual services of Thanksgiving for the relief of the siege of Leiden in 1574, while they were staying in Leiden.*[10] Now called *Oktober Feest*, Leiden's autumn thanksgiving celebration in 1617 was the occasion for sectarian disturbance that appears to have accelerated the pilgrims plans to emigrate to America.*[11] In later years, religious thanksgiving services were declared by civil leaders such as Governor Bradford, who planned the colony's thanksgiving celebration and fast in 1623.*[12]*[13]*[14] The practice of holding an annual harvest festival did not become a regular affair in New England until the late 1660s.*[15]

Thanksgiving proclamations were made mostly by church leaders in New England up until 1682, and then by both state and church leaders until after the American Revolution. During the revolutionary period, political influences affected the issuance of Thanksgiving proclamations. Various proclamations were made by royal

governors, John Hancock, General George Washington, and the Continental Congress,*[16] each giving thanks to God for events favorable to their causes.*[17] As President of the United States, George Washington proclaimed the first nationwide thanksgiving celebration in America marking November 26, 1789, “as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favours of Almighty God”.*[18]

In modern times the President of the United States, in addition to issuing a proclamation, will “pardon” a turkey, which spares the bird's life and ensures that it will spend the duration of its life roaming freely on farmland.*[19]

1.2.1 Debate about first celebrations in the United States

The traditional representation of where the first Thanksgiving was held in the United States has often been a subject of boosterism and debate, though the debate is often confused by mixing up the ideas of a Thanksgiving holiday celebration and a Thanksgiving religious service. According to author James Baker, this debate is a “tempest in a beanpot” and “marvelous nonsense”.*[8]

Local boosters in Virginia, Florida, and Texas promote their own colonists, who (like many people getting off a boat) gave thanks for setting foot again on dry land.(Jeremy Bangs*[10])

These claims include an earlier religious service by Spanish explorers in Texas at San Elizario in 1598, as well as thanksgiving feasts in the Virginia Colony.*[20] Robyn Gioia and Michael Gannon of the University of Florida argue that the earliest Thanksgiving service in what is now the United States was celebrated by the Spanish on September 8, 1565, in what is now Saint Augustine, Florida.*[21]*[22] A day for Thanksgiving services was codified in the founding charter of Berkeley Hundred in Charles City County, Virginia in 1619.*[23]

According to Baker, “Historically, none of these had any influence over the evolution of the modern United States holiday. The American holiday's true origin was the New England Calvinist Thanksgiving. Never coupled with a Sabbath meeting, the Puritan observances were special days set aside during the week for thanksgiving and praise in response to God's providence.”*[8]

1.3 Fixing the date of the holiday

The reason for the earlier Thanksgiving celebrations in Canada has often been attributed to the earlier onset of winter in the north, thus ending the harvest season earlier.*[24] Thanksgiving in Canada did not have a fixed

date until the late 19th century. Prior to Canadian Confederation, many of the individual colonial governors of the Canadian provinces had declared their own days of Thanksgiving. The first official Canadian Thanksgiving occurred on April 15, 1872,*[25] when the nation was celebrating the Prince of Wales' recovery from a serious illness.*[24] By the end of the 19th century, Thanksgiving Day was normally celebrated on November 6. However, when World War I ended, the Armistice Day holiday was usually held during the same week. To prevent the two holidays from clashing with one another, in 1957 the Canadian Parliament proclaimed Thanksgiving to be observed on its present date on the second Monday of October.*[6] Since 1971, when the American Uniform Monday Holiday Act took effect, the American observance of Columbus Day has coincided with the Canadian observance of Thanksgiving.*[26]*[27]

Much as in Canada, Thanksgiving in the United States was observed on various dates throughout history. From the time of the Founding Fathers until the time of Lincoln, the date Thanksgiving was observed varied from state to state. The final Thursday in November had become the customary date in most U.S. states by the beginning of the 19th century. Thanksgiving was first celebrated on the same date by all states in 1863 by a presidential proclamation of Abraham Lincoln. Influenced by the campaigning of author Sarah Josepha Hale, who wrote letters to politicians for around 40 years trying to make it an official holiday, Lincoln proclaimed the date to be the final Thursday in November in an attempt to foster a sense of American unity between the Northern and Southern states.*[28] Because of the ongoing Civil War and the Confederate States of America's refusal to recognize Lincoln's authority, a nationwide Thanksgiving date was not realized until Reconstruction was completed in the 1870s.

On December 26, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a joint resolution of Congress changing the national Thanksgiving Day from the last Thursday in November to the fourth Thursday. Two years earlier, Roosevelt had used a presidential proclamation to try to achieve this change, reasoning that earlier celebration of the holiday would give the country an economic boost.

2 Observance

2.1 Canada

Main article: Thanksgiving (Canada)

Thanksgiving (French: *l'Action de grâce*), occurring on the second Monday in October, is an annual Canadian holiday to give thanks at the close of the harvest season. Although the original act of Parliament references God and the holiday is celebrated in churches, the holiday is mostly celebrated in a secular manner. Thanksgiving is a statutory holiday in all provinces in Canada,



Pumpkin pie is commonly served on and around Thanksgiving in North America.

except for New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. While businesses may remain open in these provinces, the holiday is nonetheless recognized and celebrated regardless of its status.*[29]*[30]*[31]*[32]*[33]

2.2 Grenada

In the West Indian island of Grenada, there is a national holiday known as Thanksgiving Day which is celebrated on October 25. Even though it bears the same name, and is celebrated at roughly the same time as the American and Canadian versions of Thanksgiving, this holiday is unrelated to either of those celebrations. Instead the holiday marks the anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of the island in 1983, in response to the deposition and execution of Grenadian Prime Minister Maurice Bishop.*[34]

2.3 Liberia

In the West African country of Liberia, which began in 1820 with the colonization of freed black slaves (Americo-Liberians) from the United States, Thanksgiving is celebrated on the first Thursday of November.*[35]

2.4 The Netherlands



Pieterskerk

Many of the Pilgrims who migrated to the Plymouth Plantation had resided in the city of Leiden from 1609–

1620, and had recorded their births, marriages and deaths at the *Pieterskerk* (St. Peter's church). To commemorate this, a non-denominational Thanksgiving Day service is held each year on the morning of the American Thanksgiving Day in the *Pieterskerk*, a Gothic church in Leiden, noting the hospitality the Pilgrims received in Leiden on their way to the *New World*.^[36]

2.5 Australia (Norfolk Island)

Thanksgiving is not celebrated on mainland Australia. However, on the Australian external territory of Norfolk Island, Thanksgiving is celebrated on the last Wednesday of November, similar to the pre-World War II American observance on the last Thursday of the month. This means the Norfolk Island observance is the day before or six days after the United States' observance. The holiday was brought to the island by visiting American whaling ships.^[37]

2.6 Saint Lucia

The nation of *Saint Lucia* celebrates Thanksgiving on the first Monday in October.^[38]

2.7 United States

Main article: Thanksgiving (United States)

Thanksgiving, currently celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November by federal legislation in 1941, has been an annual tradition in the United States by presidential proclamation since 1863 and by state legislation since the *Founding Fathers of the United States*. Historically, Thanksgiving has traditionally been a celebration of the blessings of the year, including the harvest.^[39] What Americans call the "Holiday Season" generally begins with Thanksgiving.^[40]

2.8 United Kingdom

The Harvest Festival of Thanksgiving does not have an official date in the United Kingdom, however it is traditionally held on or near the Sunday of the harvest moon that occurs closest to the autumnal equinox. Harvest Thanksgiving in Britain pre-dates Christianity when the Saxons would offer the first sheaf of corn to fertility gods. When the harvest was finally collected, communities would come together for a harvest supper.^[41] When Christianity arrived in Britain many traditions remained, and today Harvest Thanksgiving is marked by churches and schools in late September/early October (same as Canada) with singing, praying and decorating with baskets of food and fruit to celebrate a successful harvest and to give thanks.^[42] Collections of food are usually



Harvest Festival flowers at a church in Shrewsbury, England

held which are then given to local charities which help the homeless and those in need.

American-style Thanksgiving is currently on the rise in the United Kingdom, with 1 in 6 Britons now celebrating the holiday.^[43] This is believed to be a result of Britain's close connections with the US and Canada, as well as the influence of American culture on the UK. In 2014, it was reported that Turkey sales increased by 95% as a result of the rise in popularity of Thanksgiving in Britain.^[44]

2.9 Judaism

In Reform Judaism, there is no hindrance to celebrating Thanksgiving, since it is regarded as a secular celebration rather than religious or *gentile*.^[45]^[46] In *Orthodox Jewry* as well, many Rabbis permit or even encourage Thanksgiving celebration.^[47]

3 Similar holidays

See also: List of harvest festivals

3.1 Germany

The Harvest Thanksgiving Festival, *Erntedankfest*, is an early October, German Christian festival. The festival has a significant religious component to it, but also, like its North American counterpart, includes large harvest dinners (consisting mostly of autumn crops) and parades.^[48] The Bavarian beer festival *Oktoberfest* generally takes place within the vicinity of *Erntedankfest*.

3.2 Japan

Main article: Labor Thanksgiving Day



A food decoration for Erntedankfest, a Christian Thanksgiving harvest festival celebrated in Germany

Labor Thanksgiving Day (勤労感謝の日 *Kinrō Kansha no Hi*) is a national holiday in Japan. It takes place annually on November 23. The law establishing the holiday, which was adopted during the American occupation after World War II, cites it as an occasion for commemorating labor and production and giving one another thanks. It has roots in an ancient harvest ceremony (*Niname-sai* (新嘗祭)) celebrating hard work.

4 See also

- Black Friday
- Harvest festival
- List of harvest festivals
- Thanksgiving Parade

5 References

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- [4] Kaufman, Jason Andrew (2009). *The Origins of Canadian & American Political Differences*. Harvard University Press. p. 29. ISBN 9780674031364.
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- [9] Alvin J. Schmidt (2004). *How Christianity Changed the World*. Zondervan. Retrieved January 30, 2012. Their leader, Governor William Bradford, issued a formal proclamation commanding the people to give thanks to God for having received divine protection during a terrible winter and for having received their first harvest. It was also new that the Pilgrims celebrated their thanksgiving by eating wild turkey (an indigenous bird) and venison.
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7 External links

- Thanksgiving at DMOZ

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