

Why do we celebrate Thanksgiving?

It may be a holiday all Americans know and love, but the true origins of the food-filled celebration remain slightly mysterious—even to those of us who were taught the basic details in grade school. The events that precipitated our modern day celebrations occurred long ago, before photos (and *way* before Instagram captions and Emojis), and very little of what actually went down at that first Thanksgiving table was codified in writing.

So, how are we to answer our most pressing questions about the holiday?

Interestingly, most of what we do know about the first Thanksgiving comes from the diary of Plymouth, Massachusetts, Governor William Bradford. His manuscript, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, details his voyage to the new world, his efforts to settle in Plymouth, and many important events thereafter, including one particularly fateful dinner that took place in the fall of 1621.

We're sharing some of his stories with you in the hopes that they'll add a little more meaning to each and every one of the Thanksgiving recipes, Thanksgiving desserts, Thanksgiving crafts, and even leftover sandwiches you whip up this year. Most of all, we hope this newfound knowledge amplifies your gratitude and makes you appreciate all that you have—because that's what's really at the heart of Thanksgiving.

What is the real story behind Thanksgiving?

Bradford noted in his manuscript that the pilgrims of Plymouth had enjoyed an especially good harvest in the fall of 1621. In honor of their good fortune, they planned a meal to celebrate and give thanks for the abundance of food. The local Wampanoag natives had worked along with the pilgrims to hunt, fish, and gather much of that food—and they'd even taught the pilgrims about many of those hunting and farming tactics in the first place. For that reason, they joined in to give thanks for it all (and yes, there was a cooked fowl dish, noted Bradford, but no mention of pie! Pumpkin or otherwise— even though they probably did have some sort of squash).

This peaceful dinner between natives and settlers may seem a bit dubious to some, given the tensions between the two groups. But it's exactly that concept of two cultures coming together that made the dinner so memorable and important to our country's history. In that same spirit of joining together to give thanks, the tradition of "thanksgiving" would eventually continue in the U.S.

By 1789, the "thanksgiving" tradition was still *not* a holiday. Bradford's manuscript with the actual accounts of that first Thanksgiving had yet to be published, so there was little public interest in the entire thing. And while it's reported that George Washington called for a "national thanksgiving" on the last Thursday of November that year, a declaration like that essentially amounted to a nice, thoughtful idea.

Things still weren't official.

It wasn't until the diary made its way to the hands of magazine editor Sarah Josepha Hale in the 1800s that things began to take shape. Passed down through generations and across centuries, it finally landed in her lap...and Hale was allegedly so moved after reading about the first Thanksgiving dinner that she began a serious letter-writing campaign, urging not one, not two, but *five* American presidents to make Thanksgiving a national holiday. She never gave up, and eventually lucked out with none other than Abraham Lincoln.

As the Civil War raged on, Lincoln believed that Thanksgiving might help to unite the divided country. He declared it a national holiday in 1863 and kept Thanksgiving as the last Thursday in November. Washington's idea was finally brought to life, and it was at this time that Thanksgiving became a bona fide, official holiday on the American calendar.

But is that why Thanksgiving is on the fourth Thursday of November? Not quite. The story doesn't end there.

On December 26, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided to change the date to the fourth Thursday in November instead of the last Thursday. The reasoning behind his decision? On most years, there are only four Thursdays in November in the first place, but on those years when there are five, Roosevelt felt that moving the celebration up a week would be beneficial to the economy. Whatever you say, Mr. President!

These days, the vast majority of Americans celebrate Thanksgiving with a delicious feast among friends and family on that fourth Thursday of November. As for benefitting the economy... well, if stocking up on mashed potato ingredients, cranberry sauce, and apple pie supplies doesn't do the trick, we definitely pull our weight on Black Friday and Cyber Monday.

HEY! We'll eat to that!