

Thanksgiving in suffering

*The
First Thanksgiving
of the
UNITED STATES*

The first national Thanksgiving was written by the "Father of the Revolution" at its turning point, translating an ancient regional custom into America's most beloved tradition — sanctified by the sufferings of Washington's army outside Valley Forge.



**"Mankind is never truly thankful
for the benefits of life
until they have experienced
the want of them."**

*—An Army surgeon near Valley Forge
on the first national Thanksgiving Day*

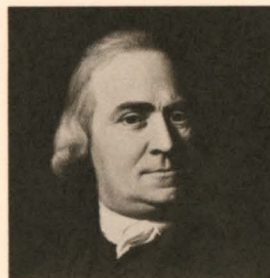
A final roar from the old lion, Samuel Adams, — not raging against tyranny this time, but praising God — crowns the career of the “Father of the Revolution.” At the moment of the “Turning Point of the Revolution” he translated an ancient New England custom (by a Proclamation written with his own hand) into the most universal and beloved of all American traditions — Thanksgiving. On the bitter December day Thanksgiving was celebrated, the emerging giant George Washington with his army sanctified by their suffering this first national Thanksgiving in the bitter cold outside Valley Forge.

From this time on, Thanksgiving became the property of all Americans, instinctively rooted in all cultures and religions, vitally expressing in humility and gratitude what one President has called, “The story of the American spirit.” At a tumultuous moment in world history, this universal spirit began to saturate the soul of America — gratitude to God for life itself.

Prayer Unites People

From the earliest days, the English colonies proclaimed fasts or thanksgivings to mark a time of great crisis or rejoicing. In New England they became regular, fasts in the spring and thanksgivings in the fall. Sometimes a town would proclaim one of these days of prayer in sympathy with another town’s need or joy — Salem reached out to Plymouth and in 1774 Williamsburg in Virginia reached out to Boston. It united them in spirit. Because of the Williamsburg Proclamation, the Virginia Royal Governor dissolved the House of Burgesses. The “rump session” then promptly issued the call to the other colonies for the First Continental Congress. Proclamations of special days of prayer are based on the oldest principle in American or perhaps any society — prayer unites people.

The first issue of the first day of the First Continental Congress in 1774 was — can we open the business with prayer? Can we pray together? Despite their diversity of religions, inspired by Samuel Adams, they decided that they could — unanimously. From that first day miraculous unity seemed to hold the far flung colonies together. Nearly a year later in June of 1775 the Second Continental Congress dared to ask a whole continent to pray and fast together.



It had an electric effect, uniting the American people in spirit a year before the Declaration of Independence.

1777 began with a third call to national prayer and fasting by the Continental Congress saying, “the war . . . is likely to be carried to the greatest extremity . . . it becomes all public bodies, as well as private persons, to reverence the Providence of God, and look up to Him as the Supreme Disposer of all events and the arbitor of the fate of nations . . .” Washington observed it with his army near Morristown, New Jersey. Though weeks apart by fast post rider, the states felt together in spirit — united in the worship of God.

1777 Unfolds

In England John Burgoyne had convinced Lord North and George III that the only way to halt the revolution was to split New England from the Southern states. On June 18th he found himself at the head of the British expedition starting southward from Canada to join up with the British force who were to proceed northward from New York City in a classic pincers movement.

But, instead British General Howe in New York sailed southward to capture the American capital of Philadelphia on September 26th just behind the Continental Congress who fled westward to York, Pennsylvania. By October 17th after several days of battle near Saratoga, New York — with winter coming on and with no assistance from New York — Burgoyne surrendered his army of 5,728 officers and men to American General Horatio Gates. It was the “Turning Point of the Revolution.”

General Gates dispatched his adjutant, an improbable 21 year old Colonel with a genius for trouble, James Wilkinson, to present his official report to the Congress at York. Then, with the



nation waiting for the official account of the greatest news of the war, Wilkinson unaccountably took 12 days to cover the 285 miles between Saratoga and York . . . saying he was hampered by



heavy rains and swollen rivers. Actually, he went by to see Ann Biddle (later his wife) at Easton and at Reading he let slip the hottest conspiracy of the Revolution, "The Conway Cabal" (later he challenged General Gates to a duel and became a

co-conspirator with Aaron Burr). By the 21st of October the Continental Congress had unofficially received the news of Saratoga through General Washington although there was still no official news from Gates. State capitals meanwhile were unofficially receiving the news and proclaiming Thanksgiving each, of course, at different times.

Still waiting at York, Samuel Adams on Sunday, October 26th wrote a friend, "The Express (Gates' official account) is expected every Hour." Then this master strategist and mover of men wrote what was in the back of his mind – a vision many others shared, "I hope our Countrymen will render the just Tribute of Praise to the Supreme Ruler for . . . His Interposition in favor of a People struggling for their Liberties." Then, came his own inspiration and design, "Congress will, I suppose, recommend the setting apart *one Day of publick Thanksgiving* to be observed throughout the United States."

The Thanksgiving Resolution

Finally, Colonel Wilkinson arrived. The "Journals of Congress" for Friday, October 31st (the 13th day since the victory and the 10th day since Congress had first received the unofficial news) tells its own story:

A photograph of a piece of aged paper with handwritten text in cursive script. The text is a quote from the Thanksgiving Proclamation.

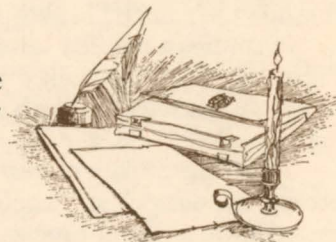
Forasmuch as it is the indispensable Duty of all Men, to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God: - To acknowledge - led on with Gratitude their Obligation

"Prayers. A letter of the 18th of October, from General Gates, with the copy of the convention at Saratoga . . . were read." The immediate reaction of Congress was a Thanksgiving resolution which carried out the intention of Adams' letter of the previous Sunday, "Resolved, that a committee of three be appointed to prepare a recommendation to the several states to set apart a day of thanksgiving . . ." (members chosen were S. Adams, R. H. Lee [Adams' usual ally from Virginia] and D. Roberdeau [Adams' landlord]).

So at sunset Friday, Samuel Adams, 55, had the authority to write the first Thanksgiving Proclamation, the gratitude of the people of an infant nation for the decisive turning point in the fight for independence to which for 29 years he had passionately devoted his life. For him it was a God-given victory in a righteous cause.

In the next few hours before midnight he must have scratched out by candlelight in his own deliberate hand (shown here) the three pages of the first national Thanksgiving Proclamation. That night he gave each of us the National thanksgiving tradition which every American has known since infancy.

Thanksgiving could have died out as a quaint New England custom, an accident of history, but Adams' determination started this – our most beautiful national tradition.



Next morning, Saturday, November 1st, the Journal reports – "The committee brought in a report; which was agreed to as follows: Forasmuch as it is the indispensable duty of all men to adore the superintending providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with gratitude their obligation to him . . ." (the Proclamation went in part) "It is

therefore recommended . . . to set apart Thursday the eighteenth day of December next, for solemn thanksgiving and praise, that with one heart and one voice the good people may express the grateful feelings of their hearts and consecrate themselves to the service of their divine benefactor . . ." (the Proclamation proper was a single sentence of more than 360 words – a real outpouring). On the same day Henry Laurens, President of the Congress, wrote a letter to each of the Governors of the 13 states enclosing the Thanksgiving Proclamation.

account of a remarkable chasm in the hills) . . . starvation here rioted in its glory," said Private Joseph Martin.

In Washington's general orders of the 17th of December (note the date) he explained why he intended to establish the army at Valley Forge (6 miles distant) with confidence that the army would "with one heart and one mind resolve to surmount every difficulty with a fortitude and a patience, becoming their profession, and the sacred cause in which we are engaged." Foreseeing the necessary



So for the first time it happened that a Thanksgiving was kept in the United States. The times before it had been dark. Many had become discouraged. In states in which the Thanksgiving custom was comparatively new there was much preaching and feasting. The army everywhere observed it with reverence.

Thanksgiving in suffering

But war was grim with Washington's army near Philadelphia. Countermarching and maneuvering in the face of Howe's occupation of Philadelphia – Washington and his army, tattered and hungry from months of constant marching and fighting, now had to take up winter quarters close enough to limit British foraging and supply. Crossing the Schuylkill River, "We at last settled down at a place called 'The Gulph' (so named on

sacrifice, he added that he himself would "share in the hardship and partake of every inconvenience." The army was preparing to fight for survival, not against bullets and cannon, but against snow and frost and hunger.

So as a grand paradox of history Washington added to his order – "Tomorrow being the day set apart by the Honorable Congress for public Thanksgiving and Praise; and duty calling us devoutly to express our grateful acknowledgements to God for the manifold blessings he has granted us, the General directs that the army remain in its present quarters, and that the Chaplains perform divine service with their several Corps and Brigades. And earnestly exhorts, all officers and soldiers, whose absence is not indispensibly necessary, to attend with reverence the solemnities of the day."

This first national Thanksgiving Day “was dark and misty, cold rain fell. Had not Congress long before this time appointed the day as a day of general thanksgiving, the celebration, because of the weather conditions, might not have been held.”

Thanksgiving in suffering. Here is repeated the classic pattern of great Thanksgivings of history, thanksgiving despite suffering seems to presage a growth of soul in individual or nation.

“This is Thanksgiving Day” Lt. Col. Henry Dearborn wrote in his diary on Thursday the 18th of December, “God knows we have very little to keep it with, this being the third day we have been without flour or bread, and are living on a high, uncultivated hill, in huts and tents, lying on the cold ground. Upon the whole I think all we have to be thankful for is that we are alive and not in the grave with many of our friends.”

The army was not only starved but naked . . . many shirtless and barefoot. “Hundreds of my companions . . . might be tracked by their blood on the rough, frozen ground . . . but hunger, nakedness and sore shins were not the only difficulties . . . we had hard duty to perform and little or no strength to perform it with.”

“Mankind is never truly thankful for the benefits of life,” philosophized Surgeon Albigeance Waldo that day, “until they have experienced the want of them.”

The day after Thanksgiving, December 19th, “Was a day in history. Under the lash of stormy winds and piercing cold, ice formed on the roads . . . The little army of some 11,000 men, of whom

nearly 3,000 were incapacitated by sickness and nakedness, and which had so recently sustained a campaign with . . . unparalleled courage and bravery,” commenced the march west to Valley Forge, and started there a test of suffering which was to result in the strength that brought victory and a new nation.

Across the Atlantic in Paris, Benjamin Franklin, with news of the victory at Saratoga, had

In C O N G R E S S,

NOVEMBER 1, 1777.

FOR AS MUCH as it is the indispensable duty of all men to adore the superintending providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with gratitude their obligations to HIM for benefits received; and to implore such farther blessings as they stand in need of: And it having pleased him in his abundant mercy, not only to continue to us the *innumerable* bounties of his common providence; but also to smile upon us, in the prosecution of a just and necessary war for the defence and establishment of our unalienable rights and liberties: *Particularly* in that he hath been pleased in so great a measure, to prosper the means used for the support of our troops, and to crown our arms with most *signal* success:

It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive powers of these United States, to set apart **THURSDAY**, the eighteenth day of *December* next, for **SOLEMN THANKSGIVING and PRAISE**: That at one time and with one voice, the good people may express the grateful feelings of their hearts, and consecrate themselves to the service of their **DIVINE BENEFACITOR**: and that, together with their sincere acknowledgments and offerings, they may join the penitent confession of their sins, whereby they had forfeited every favor; and their humble and earnest supplications that it may please God through the merits of Jesus Christ, *mercisfully* to forgive and *blot* them out of remembrance. That it may please him graciously to afford his blessing on the Governments of these States respectively, and prosper the **PUBLIC COUNCIL** of the whole. To inspire our commanders both by land and sea, and all under them, with that wisdom and fortitude which may render them fit instruments, under the providence of Almighty God, to secure for these United States, the greatest of all human blessings, **INDEPENDENCE and PEACE**. That it may please him, to prosper the trade and manufactures of the people, and the labour of the husbandman, that our land may yet yield its increase. To take schools and seminaries of education, so necessary for cultivating the principles of true liberty, virtue and piety, under his *nurturing* hand: and to prosper the means of religion, for the promotion and enlargement of that kingdom which consisteth “**IN RIGHTEOUSNESS, PEACE AND JOY IN THE HOLY GHOST.**”

And it is further recommended, that servile labour, and such recreation as, though at other times innocent, may be unbecoming the purpose of this *appointment*, may be omitted on so solemn an occasion.

By order of **C O N G R E S S,**

HENRY LAURENS, President.

played on the fears of the French that the British might offer a treaty to the Americans. So, on that same December 17th that George Washington issued his poignant Thanksgiving order, the French Foreign Minister promised the American Commissioners in Paris that France would recognize American independence and make a treaty — thus insuring eventual American victory.

The army's terrible experience at Valley Forge became its emerging strength as the winter snows started melting. It showed the amazing rightness of a Thanksgiving in crisis and suffering — the assertion of faith that carries humans through terrible trials.

From this first Thanksgiving in December of 1777 the prayer proclamations of fasts and thanksgivings each year did not cease throughout the Revolution. From the local pulpit or as a broadside at the tavern door, these proclamations of prayer were the voice of the people's deepest sentiments in their free legislatures. They saw the religious and political convictions in the same document as merely the two sides of a life of action. They proved their sincerity by staking their lives on it. "The sacred cause" so often repeated by Washington and others, was certainly seen as freedom for America, but also God's plan for the freedom of humanity.

It was Washington who began the Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations in 1789 voicing his own conviction that, "it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God." Washington's final Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1795 captures a nobility never exceeded by any President, ". . . impart all the blessings we possess, or ask for ourselves to the whole family of mankind."

With the growth of peace, power and prosperity, outspoken reliance on God by a President in a prayer proclamation ceased after

John Adams and James Madison. But, in the 1840's a determined woman editor, Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, started a one woman campaign to restore this public expression of a nation's trust in God. Yet it was not until the nation was on the brink of civil war in December of 1860 that President Buchanan issued the first prayer and fasting proclamation in 44 years. He beseeched God, "to save us from the horrors of civil war . . . to remember us as he did our fathers in the darkest day of the Revolution." But it was not to be.

The new President, Abraham Lincoln, asked for days of fast and prayer in 1861, 1862 and 1863. Finally, on July 15, 1863 President Lincoln proclaimed the first Thanksgiving in 48 years and since then every American President has issued at least one Thanksgiving Proclamation every year. So another even more terrible struggle implanted firmly the ancient heritage.

Today, official Thanksgivings are observed in Japan, Switzerland, Canada and Liberia in addition to innumerable other ancient celebrations of gratitude around the world. In 1975 the United Nations Meditation Group celebrated the first "International Thanksgiving."

Thanksgiving unites people. the Continental Congress dared to ask for Thanksgiving on a national scale — declaring publicly their dependence upon God. Healing and harmony and growth have been the result. In gratitude we recognize our common dependence, and therefore, under God, our common humanity.

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