

The First Thanksgiving Day

The first Thanksgiving in those British colonies that became the United States of America, was held, on December 4, 1619, at Harrison's Landing, at the Berkeley Plantation, in the Virginia colony, two years before Puritans arrived in Massachusetts.

It was a religious observance in which God was thanked for protecting the settlers and ensuring their safe arrival in Virginia.

The Berkeley Hundred consisted of 8,000 acres of meadowland and virgin forests, with three miles of river frontage. It lay fewer than 50 miles from Jamestown, Virginia, and 83 miles, by road, from Fredericksburg, Virginia. It was called a "Hundred" because 10 families, or 100 people, were expected to live there and earn livings from it.

When the settlers, aboard the sailing vessel Margaret, reached their destination, west of Jamestown, 38 men were put ashore. Then, at the order of Capt. John Woodlief, the Margaret's master, the men gathered and thanked God for their safe arrival, after a long and dangerous sea voyage, from England. It was further ordered that the day be observed every year, "as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God".

That first thanksgiving, and its observance yearly thereafter, was a requirement stated in the charter given the settlers when they left England for Virginia. The charter stated,

"Wee ordaine that the day of our ships arrival at the place assigned for plantacon in the land of Virginia, shall be yearly perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God."

Opportunity not hate

The Virginia settlers differed psychologically from the Puritans that settled Massachusetts. They came for economic opportunity. They were members of the Church of England and, compared with other European religious groups, in the early 1600s, very tolerant. For example, they did not physically harm people that held different religious beliefs than theirs. The Pilgrims were Puritans, the religious group that colonized Massachusetts. They created a religious state there, for their own religion only, and persecuted, injured, and killed people with whose religious beliefs they disagreed.

From what we know about the Puritans, the three-day-long feast they held in 1621 was not a religious harvest celebration. It was held to thank local Indians that had helped the Pilgrims to survive a hard first year in the colony. A thanksgiving day, in a Puritan community, would not have included three days of eating and drinking, including wine. It would have been a very solemn religious event that focused on prayer. By comparison, the thanksgiving observance, in Virginia, was strictly religious.

Ended by a massacre

Virginia's Thanksgiving Day observances ceased, after Indians massacred most settlers there, in 1622. That first Thanksgiving Day, in 1619, was completely forgotten, until the mid 20th century, when long-forgotten documentation of the event was found. It was replaced by a mythical story about the three-day-long party held by Puritans and Indians, in Massachusetts, in 1621.

Long before 1619, a day of religious thanksgiving for a good harvest, was observed in the English-speaking world, and continues to be observed, other than in the U.S.

The creation of the Pilgrims' Thanksgiving myth was part of an attempt, in the 1890s and early 1900s, to create a common, nationwide holiday, in the aftermath of Lincoln's War (1861-1865) and the Military Occupation and plundering of the former Confederate states, which followed (referred to in U.S. history books as "Reconstruction").

In the 1890s and early 1900s, Southerners remembered vividly the way the U.S. military had been used by Lincoln to deliberately destroy southern civil society, so as to deny its resources to Confederate armies the U.S. could not defeat in battle. Total war against civilians and enemy military forces had been rejected in Western Europe since the Thirty Years War (1616-1648), and West Pointers were taught, in the years before Lincoln's War, that it was not allowed. As a result, Southern dislike, and even hatred, of U.S. government remained very high.

In 1789, President George Washington, a Virginian, as recommended by the U.S. Congress, designated November 25, as a day of thanksgiving and called on all Americans to unite in rendering unto almighty God their sincere and humble thanks for His kind care, protection and, many benefits. It was on a later declaration of this holiday, which is now a civil holiday, that the myth of the Pilgrims' Thanksgiving was superimposed.

Definitions: Settlers leave an existing society with the collective purpose of recreating their society in a new and often distant place. The place they settle is a colony and settlers and their descendants are colonists, for as long as their society remains connected to the parent country. The people that settled Britain's American colonies moved from Britain and northwestern Europe to Britain's American territory, in the 1600s and 1700s, and recreated their society here. Immigrants, in contrast, move from one society to another. They do not create a new society.