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.

This engraving, based on a painting by T. H. Matteson and published around 1859, shows the Pilgrims below deck on the *Mayflower* signing the Mayflower Compact.

The Separatists complained that the Church placed too much emphasis on superficial displays and not enough on Christ's teachings. These reformers left the Church of England and formed their own congregations, which held solemn worship services in plain buildings and focused on doing God's work by helping the poor, sick, and elderly. In those days, however, the practice of other religions was banned in England, and opposition to the Church was considered an act of treason against the king. Faced with persecution in their home country, the Separatists decided to immigrate to Holland in hopes of finding an environment where they could practice their religion freely.

The Separatists left England in the spring of 1608, despite several attempts by the British government to stop them. After a brief stay in Amsterdam, they settled in the town of Leiden. The Separatists remained in Holland for twelve years, during which time the Dutch government did not interfere with their religious practices. After a while, though, the English immigrants noticed that their children were beginning to adopt the language and customs of their host country. They decided to seek a new home where they could enjoy religious freedom and still maintain their English identity.

By this time, European explorers had brought back many enticing descriptions of the bounties of the New World. A small group of Separatists made the bold decision to sail across the Atlantic Ocean and try to establish a colony in America. They found sponsors willing to loan them money for the journey, and they made arrangements to repay the loan with money earned from fishing and fur-trapping in the New World. The Separatists set sail from Holland to England on July 22, 1620, in two ships, the *Speedwell* and the *Mayflower.* Unfortunately, the *Speedwell* proved barely seaworthy enough to make the four-day trip to England, so only one ship remained to make the journey to America.

After being stocked with provisions, the *Mayflower* left England for America on September 6, 1620. A total of 102 passengers made the trip, including a group of Separatists and an assortment of others. They took only necessities with them, including warm clothes, furniture, food, cooking utensils, tools, guns, books, and such domestic animals as cats, dogs, pigs, goats, chickens, sheep, and rabbits. During the 66-day voyage they endured cold, wet, cramped, and unsanitary conditions, and both food and water were strictly rationed. One person died along the way, and one baby was born on board the ship.

The *Mayflower* arrived in North America on November 11, 1620, first making landfall near the tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The original charter that the passengers had received from their sponsors had granted them the right to settle on land further to the south, near the Hudson River in present-day New York City. With winter fast approaching, however, the passengers on the *Mayflower* felt that they had to find a place nearby to establish their colony. Since their charter did not cover their present location, they drew up a new charter before leaving the ship. This document, known as the Mayflower Compact, included provisions that allowed them to elect leaders and to make and enforce laws. Some historians consider it to be the first instance of a democratic government being established in America (*see the Primary Sources section for the text of the Mayflower Compact*). John Carver was elected to serve as the first governor of the new colony.

After the 41 adult male passengers had signed the Mayflower Compact, some of them went ashore and began exploring their surroundings under the guid-

Myths about the Pilgrims

A number of commonly held beliefs about the Pilgrims and the 1621 feast known as the "first Thanksgiving" have little basis in reality. Contemporary historians have traced the origin of many of these fictitious beliefs to the work of early authors and artists, who tended to use their imaginations to fill in gaps in the historical record. Here are the facts behind some popular myths about the Pilgrims:

The Pilgrims almost certainly did not land on Plymouth Rock. They never made reference to the rock in any of their writings, and it seems likely that they would have avoided it for fear that it would puncture the hull of the small wooden boat they took ashore. The 12-foot-wide boulder that once sat 40 feet from shore in Plymouth Harbor may have served as a landmark for early European explorers, but it was not anointed as the landing spot of the Pilgrims until a century later.

The Pilgrims did not really wear somber black clothing with white cuffs and square metal buckles. They used vegetable dyes to make clothing in a variety of colors—including red, yellow, purple, and green—and the buckles so often included in artistic renderings of the Pilgrims were not introduced until later in the 17th century.

The 1621 feast did not take place with all participants sitting around a groaning board, or a long wooden table draped in a white linen tablecloth. "Even if all the Pilgrims' furniture was brought out into the sunshine, most of the celebrants stood, squatted, or sat on the ground as they clustered around outdoor fires," historian Nathaniel Philbrick wrote in his book *Mayflower.*

There is no record of what foods were served at the 1621 feast, but the Pilgrims' meal certainly lacked several of the mainstays of modern Thanksgiving dinners. They may have eaten turkey, but they did not have access to the materials needed to make mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, or pumpkin pie.

The Pilgrims are often depicted as male-female couples, perhaps reflecting the popular view of them as "parents" of the nation. But the reality was far different than this romantic image at the time of the 1621 feast. Of the 54 *Mayflower* passengers who survived the first year in America, only four were adult women, and nearly half were children under the age of 16.

ance of Captain Miles Standish. One of the passengers, William Bradford, described the area in his diary as "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." Although the explorers found many signs of Native American inhabitants—including an abandoned village, tilled fields, and stockpiles of food and seeds—they did not make contact with many people. They searched the area for a month before finding a suitable site for their settlement, which they named Plymouth. They rushed to build a common house and several sod-covered dugout shelters and then hunkered down to try to survive the winter.

The "First Thanksgiving"

The Pilgrims endured a very harsh first winter in the New World, and 46 colonists died from disease or starvation. Yet when the *Mayflower* returned to England that April, all of the surviving settlers decided to remain in America.

The Pilgrims' first formal introduction to the Native American peoples who lived in the region occurred in the early spring of 1621. On March 16, an Abenaki Indian named Samoset came to visit the Plymouth settlement. Samoset, who had learned the English language from visiting fishermen, arrived carrying two arrows—one pointed and the other blunt—to symbolize the choice his people and the newcomers faced between war and peace.

Samoset and some other Native American leaders of the region felt a strong inclination to make peace with the Pilgrims. Beginning in 1617, a plague had swept through the Native American communities of southern New England, wiping out around 90 percent of the population. Never having been exposed to European diseases like smallpox and chicken pox, the Indians had no natural immunity to them. Their diminished numbers put the tribes of southern New England in a relatively weak position compared to their neighbors, and thus increased their willingness to welcome the English settlers to their territory. The Pilgrims also benefited from the situation by locating their settlement on the site of the former Wampanoag village of Patuxet, which had been abandoned during the plague.

Shortly after his first visit, Samoset returned with Massasoit, the sachem or leader of the Wampanoag tribe. Massasoit and John Carver signed a peace treaty in which they agreed to come to each other's defense if they were attacked by the Narragansett Indians or other powerful rivals (*see the Primary Sources section for the text of the peace treaty*). Massasoit also left one of his people behind to keep an eye on the newcomers. Tisquantum, known to the Pilgrims as Squanto, knew how to speak English and served as the Pilgrims' interpreter and guide. He showed them how to plant corn, identify edible plants, and find and catch fish. Squanto's assistance proved invaluable to the colonists. According to William Bradford's *History of Plimoth Plantation,* the Pilgrims considered Squanto to be "a spetiall [special] instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation."

By the end of the summer of 1621—thanks in part to Squanto's assistance—the Pilgrims had built eleven strong houses and collected plenty of food to last through the winter. They had harvested such crops as corn, squash, beans, barley, and peas, and they had also caught good quantities of fish and shellfish. William Bradford, who had been elected governor of Plymouth Colony in April upon the death of John Carver, suggested that they celebrate their good fortune. He sent four men out "fowling," or hunting the ducks and geese that were then migrating through New England, and within a few hours

Wampanoag Indian leader Massasoit met with the Pilgrims in March 1621 and signed a peace treaty with them. This 1877 engraving, depicting a gathering of the two groups, was produced by Alfred Bobbett, based on a painting by Felix O. C. Darley.

Squanto (c. 1590-1622)

Tisquantum, more commonly known as Squanto, was born around 1590 in Patuxet, the Wampanoag Indian village that later became Plymouth, Massachusetts. In 1614 he and at least 28 other Wampanoag men were kidnapped and taken to Europe by the famous English explorer and trader Captain John Smith. Squanto was sold into slavery in Malaga, Spain, but he soon escaped and made his way to England.

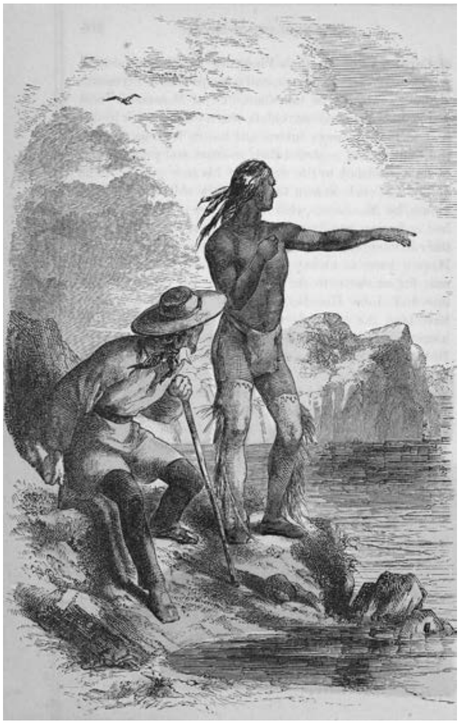
After living in London for several years and learning the English language, Squanto agreed to serve as an interpreter and guide for Captain Thomas Dermer on an expedition to New England. Upon returning to his homeland in 1619, Squanto found Patuxet—once a thriving village of 2,000 people—abandoned due to a plague that had wiped out 90 percent of the Native American inhabitants of the region.

The following year, a small group of English men, women, and children arrived and began building a settlement on the site of Squanto's former village. Squanto served as a diplomat and interpreter during negotiations between the Wampanoag leader Massasoit and the newcomers. Once the two groups signed a peace treaty, Squanto agreed to remain with the Pilgrims to help them learn to plant crops and live off the land. His assistance proved crucial in ensuring the survival of the colony.

In the late summer of 1621, Squanto was taken prisoner by a rival tribe that hoped to disrupt the friendly relations between the Wampanoags and the Pilgrims. The Englishmen launched a successful armed rescue, demonstrating the strength of their alliance with Massasoit. Over the next year, Squanto used his influence with the colonists to increase his own power among the Wampanoags and neighboring tribes. By the time he died of disease in November 1622, however, his scheming had caused him to become estranged from his people.

they had killed enough birds to feed the settlement for a week. Then the Pilgrims began preparing a feast.

The Pilgrims had brought two separate traditions with them from England: the secular Harvest Home festival and the religious holy day of thanksgiving. The former was an annual celebration of a successful harvest that usually featured singing, dancing, games, and a hearty feast. The latter was an occasional solemn day of prayer and religious devotion that was intended to express gratitude for God's providence. The Pilgrims also recognized a related holy day of fasting and humiliation, which they viewed as a way to regain God's favor and obtain relief from misfortunes.



This illustration depicts Squanto guiding one of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Colony.

The exact date of the Pilgrims' feast is not known. It almost certainly took place sometime between September 21 and November 9, 1621, and most likely in early October. In many ways, the celebration that has been immortalized as the "First Thanksgiving" marked a new kind of holiday that departed from their earlier traditions. The Pilgrims never used the word "thanksgiving" to describe the event; since it included non-Christian guests and secular forms of recreation, it did not meet their definition of the term. It was not exactly a harvest festival, either, because the Pilgrims did not intend to make it an annual event. Although they gave thanks to God, it was mostly a joyous celebration of the survival of their colony against long odds.

The only information available to historians regarding the Pilgrims' 1621 feast comes from two surviving accounts of the event. Governor William Bradford described the celebration in his journal, and Edward Winslow, the colony's Indian ambassador, mentioned it in a letter to a friend back in England. Winslow's letter appeared in a collection of writings about the founding of Plymouth Colony called *Mourt's Relation,* which was published in London in 1622. Bradford eventually published his journal as a book called *Of Plimoth Plantation, 1620-1647* (*see the Primary Sources section for Bradford and Winslow's recollections*).

Winslow's account makes it clear that Massasoit and about 90 other Wampanoag Indians attended the feast. Some historians claim that the Pilgrims invited the local tribe to share in their celebration, as a way of expressing gratitude for the Indians' assistance to the colony. Other scholars, though, believe that the Wampanoags came to investigate when they heard the Pilgrims shooting their guns while "fowling." Upon learning that the colonists planned to host a celebration, Massasoit sent out a hunting party that soon returned with five deer to contribute to the feast.

The celebration lasted for three days. The Pilgrims and Wampanoags feasted on venison, wild fowl (possibly turkey, but more likely ducks, geese, and other migratory birds), fish and shellfish, wild berries, boiled pumpkins, corn cakes and puddings, and stews consisting of meat and vegetables. Their meal did not include potatoes, which had not yet been introduced to New England, or cranberry sauce, because they did not have any sugar to sweeten the tart berries. The celebrants also played games and engaged in diplomacy. The Englishmen performed military drills and showed off their marksmanship, while the Native Americans demonstrated traditional dances.

An Annual Holiday in New England

On November 10, 1621, shortly after the Pilgrims had held their famous harvest celebration, another ship arrived at Plymouth Colony. The *Fortune* brought 37 English passengers, nearly doubling the population of the settlement. Unfortunately, it did not bring many provisions, so the Pilgrims were forced to divide their hard-earned food stores in half in order to feed the newcomers.

The first recorded instance of the Pilgrims holding a religious thanksgiving, in accordance with their own definition of the term, took place on July 26, 1623. That summer had been hot and dry, and the near-drought conditions threatened to destroy the colonists' corn and other crops. Governor Bradford set aside a special day of fasting and prayer in hopes of gaining God's mercy. A short time later, as he recalled in his journal, it began "to rain with such sweet and gentle showers as gave them cause of rejoicing and blessing God's help; For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of thanksgiving." This thanksgiving was a solemn, religious occasion and did not involve a feast.

In the decades following the arrival of the Pilgrims, English settlements in the New World underwent a rapid increase in number and size. The population of Plymouth Colony, for instance, grew from 300 in 1630 to reach 2,000 a decade later. By 1675 there were more than 100 English towns and villages in New England. During these years, the thanksgiving tradition spread beyond Plymouth and was adapted to local conditions. The colonies held public thanksgiving days for many different reasons at various times of the year. These occasions could be proclaimed by a colony's civil authorities or pro-

King Philip's War

The expansion of English settlements in New England created increased demand for land and other resources, which led to tension and armed conflict between the colonists and Native American peoples of the region. The 54-year peace between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians was but one casualty of these changing circumstances.

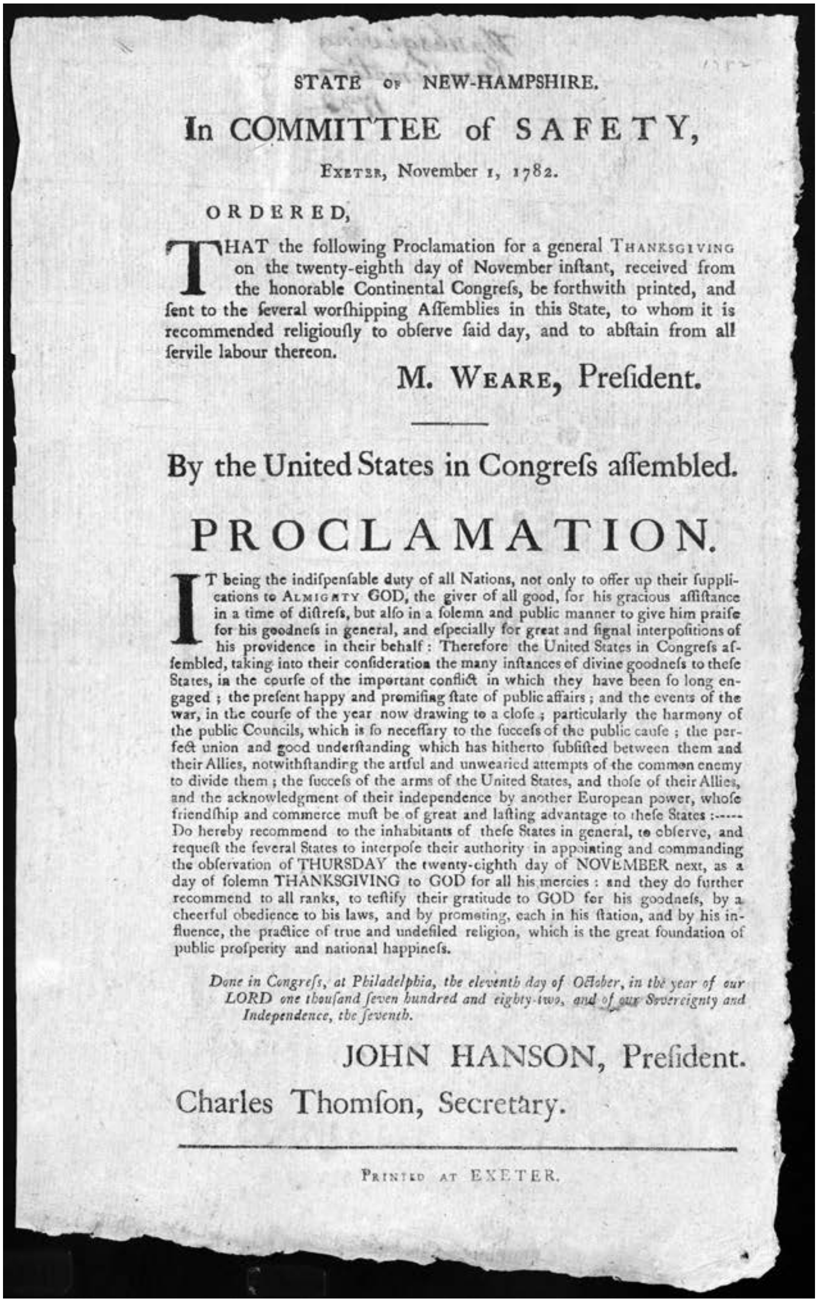
In June 1675 the Wampanoag leader Metacom, a son of Massasoit who was known to the colonists as Philip, led an alliance of Native American nations to war against the English. His goal was to drive the colonists out of his homeland. The bloody, 14-month-long conflict, which became known as King Philip's War, took the lives of an estimated 5,000 people, or about seven percent of the population of New England at that time. Native Americans accounted for up to three-quarters of those killed, and thousands more Indians were captured and sold into slavery in the West Indies.

During this violent struggle, the governor of Connecticut failed to proclaim an annual Thanksgiving Day for the first time in 25 years. When the colonial forces finally prevailed over the Indians, the white leaders of Connecticut declared August 12, 1676, a day of public thanksgiving to celebrate the end of the war. Connecticut has celebrated Thanksgiving without interruption every year since. A few days after the 1676 observance, colonial soldiers carried Philip's severed head into Plymouth and placed it on the palisades of the fort that had been built to protect the town; it remained on display in the town for more than 20 years. (*See the Primary Sources section for a proclamation in gratitude for the end of the war, issued by the governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts.*)

King Philip's War marked the first chapter in a long history of conflict between European settlers and Native American peoples. In fact, many contemporary Native Americans associate the arrival of the English colonists with violent conquest and genocide, rather than peaceful cooperation. As a result, the Thanksgiving holiday has taken on a different meaning for them. Beginning in 1970, hundreds of Native Americans have gathered at the statue of Massasoit in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on Thanksgiving Day each year to raise public awareness of their alternative interpretation of the holiday.

posed by a church leader to a local congregation. They usually recognized specific positive events rather than general good fortune.

Within a generation, however, the longstanding European harvest festival and thanksgiving traditions began to evolve into an annual American holiday that



STATE OF NEW-HAMPSHIRE.

In COMMITTEE of SAFETY,

EXETER, November 1, 1782.

ORDERED,

THAT the following Proclamation for a general THANKSGIVING on the twenty-eighth day of November inſtant, received from the honorable Continental Congreſs, be forthwith printed, and ſent to the ſeveral worſhipping Aſſemblies in this State, to whom it is recommended religiouſly to obſerve ſaid day, and to abſtain from all ſervile labour thereon.

M. WEARE, Preſident.

By the United States in Congreſs aſſembled.

PROCLAMATION.

IT being the indiſpenſable duty of all Nations, not only to offer up their ſupplications to ALMIGHTY GOD, the giver of all good, for his gracious aſſiſtance in a time of diſtreſs, but alſo in a ſolemn and public manner to give him praiſe for his goodneſs in general, and eſpecially for great and ſignal interpoſitions of his providence in their behalf: Therefore the United States in Congreſs aſſembled, taking into their conſideration the many inſtances of divine goodneſs to theſe States, in the courſe of the important conflict in which they have been ſo long engaged; the preſent happy and promiſing ſtate of public affairs; and the events of the war, in the courſe of the year now drawing to a cloſe; particularly the harmony of the public Councils, which is ſo neceſſary to the ſucceſs of the public cauſe; the perfect union and good underſtanding which has hitherto ſubſiſted between them and their Allies, notwithſtanding the artful and unwearied attempts of the common enemy to divide them; the ſucceſs of the arms of the United States, and thoſe of their Allies, and the acknowledgment of their independence by another European power, whoſe friendſhip and commerce muſt be of great and laſting advantage to theſe States:----- Do hereby recommend to the inhabitants of theſe States in general, to obſerve, and requeſt the ſeveral States to interpoſe their authority in appointing and commanding the obſervation of THURSDAY the twenty-eighth day of NOVEMBER next, as a day of ſolemn THANKSGIVING to GOD for all his mercies: and they do further recommend to all ranks, to teſtify their gratitude to GOD for his goodneſs, by a cheerful obedience to his laws, and by promoting, each in his ſtation, and by his influence, the practice of true and undefiled religion, which is the great foundation of public proſperity and national happineſs.

Done in Congreſs, at Philadelphia, the eleventh day of October, in the year of our LORD one thouſand ſeven hundred and eighty-two, and of our Sovereignty and Independence, the ſeventh.

JOHN HANSON, Preſident.

Charles Thomſon, Secretary.

PRINTED AT EXETER.

In gratitude for the successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War,
the Continental Congress issued this proclamation on October 11, 1782.
It set aside the following November 28 as a day of thanksgiving for all the states.

included elements of both. Some historians claim that this change originated in Connecticut during the 1640s, when the colonial governor started proclaiming a day of thanksgiving every autumn in gratitude for all the blessings the colony had received throughout the year. "This was the crucial innovation," Appelbaum wrote in *Thanksgiving*. "When Connecticut made Thanksgiving Day an annual festival for general causes … a new holiday was born. Thanksgiving in Connecticut was held every autumn, not for special reasons, but in gratitude for the ordinary blessings of the 'year past' and for the 'fruits of the earth.' It was held whether the harvest was abundant or meager and regardless of events that had befallen the colony since the previous Thanksgiving Day."

By the 1680s Thanksgiving Day had evolved into an annual holiday throughout the English colonies in the New World. Most colonial governors proclaimed a special day every fall to thank God for the year's blessings. Since harvest time varied in different geographical areas, however, the colonies did not attempt to coordinate their celebrations. Thanksgiving Day observances generally began with a church service, during which the congregation would eagerly anticipate the reading of the governor's proclamation. Then everyone adjourned to their homes for a festive dinner with family and friends.

The Revolutionary Period

The colonies continued to observe an annual Thanksgiving Day into the 1700s. Among the earliest surviving printed proclamations dates back to 1723, when Governor William Dummer of Massachusetts Bay Colony set aside November 28 for residents to celebrate the holiday (*see the Primary Sources section for the text of Dummer's proclamation*). The colonies also continued to observe days of fasting during this period (*see the Primary Sources section for a proclamation of a fast issued by the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony*). Some governors proclaimed an annual day of fasting every spring, while others proclaimed special days of fasting in response to specific misfortunes. On October 30, 1727, for example, frightened residents of Massachusetts Bay Colony held a special day of fasting and prayer following an earthquake. In general, though, Thanksgiving gradually became less solemn and more celebratory during the 18th century, and feasting assumed a more prominent role in the observance.

As the American colonies moved toward seeking independence from England, the annual Thanksgiving proclamations took on political overtones.